

## Camping in Florida: A Disney Alternative

by Michelle Kosloff, PassPorter Guest Contributor

This year, being new empty nesters, my husband and I were, for the first time ever, taking a significant vacation without kids.

In the last two years we had started a new business and worked non-stop to make it grow. We needed significant R&R. In the last year we had also purchased our first travel trailer. We loved it and had taken it for several weekend trips to the nearby Provincial parks. So this was to be a two-week long camping trip in Florida for us.

My first thought was -- there's a free dining plan at Disney for those weeks... But then I called and it was not available at Fort Wilderness Campground. Darn. I decided to veto Disney! Really! Seriously!

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□ We decided instead to try one week in a state park and one week in a private campground. The state parks have a great [reservation system](#) so, although we were so late in booking our trip, I kept checking and checking, and finally scored a reservation at [Jonathan Dickinson State Park](#). This park is near the Atlantic, just about an hour north of Miami. Be aware that there are not many walk-in sites at Florida state parks, so if you don't have a reservation you might not get a site. They accept reservations 11 months in advance, and if you want a South Florida park, you'd better book early or you might be out of luck.

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□ The second park I booked was [Rock Crusher Canyon RV Park](#) which is located further north, on the Central Florida Gulf coast south of Ocala, and so had lots of availability. They have information online and you can send in your reservation request, but it essentially is still a manual booking process.

[Jonathan Dickinson](#) state park has two campgrounds. One newer and one older. The new campground is a wide open space geared towards RV camping. The pads are all very nicely covered with gravel and there is no chance of getting muddy, no matter how much it rains. They are well angled, so you don't feel like you are looking directly into someone else's 'home.' The washrooms are all brand new and are in immaculate condition. In the old campground, the sites are all irregularly shaped, and bordered with vegetation on all sides. The pads are sand and scrubby grass. All the sites were different sizes and include water and electric hook-ups. The washrooms in this section are old but they are putting in new ones this year. Despite the age of the washrooms, they were always clean and well-maintained.

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□ This park has tons of hiking trails. There are also horse riding and mountain biking trails. You could spend a week or more exploring all the different trails. We had a good laugh about hiking Hobe Mountain, the highest point in South Florida, which would be considered an ant hill back home. You can kayak and canoe the Loxahatchee River and they also have river boat rides, but we couldn't go because we couldn't bring our dogs and you can't leave dogs alone at your site. You also can't leave them tied to a tree, as the trees there are very sensitive to damage that would allow bugs to penetrate and destroy the tree.

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□ This park is also nicely placed for going to the beach, although there is only a small river beach in the park, which didn't look that inviting. Further, the nearby beaches at [Jupiter](#) and [Hobe Sound](#) (10-15 minute drive) had the added bonus of allowing dogs on the beach. Normally we have to hunt all over to find a beach, since we travel with our dogs. You are supposed to leave the dogs on leashes but many didn't. We compromised and used a long rope tied to their leashes.

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□ The other good thing about this park is its location. You are in the wilderness one minute but drive 10 minutes outside the park in any direction and you hit a multitude of stores. That's good for us, since we couldn't bring all our groceries from Canada - you can't bring fresh meats, fruits, and vegetables across the U.S./Canada border.

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□ The second campground we visited was our first experience with a private campground. We are not big fans of RV parking lots, even though we do have a trailer. We'd prefer to give up amenities to have some nature and space around us. Rock Crusher Canyon offered the best of both worlds. They did have some wide-open sites, but they also had quite a few very private, nature-y sites.

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□ They too, had hiking trails, although not nearly as many. We did all of them in two fairly short hikes. But they also have a pool, hot tub, horsehoes, a fenced dog park, basketball court, playground, and much more. There is also electricity, sewer, and water at all the sites. But, the best perk is all the activities.

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□ Many seniors vacation for the winter at this campground. These wonderful seniors have banded together to form an association that puts on many activities each day. At the ripe old age of 40, we felt like we were kids crashing the activities, but boy oh boy, do those seniors love to have a good time! They were just like teenagers! We attended an ice cream social, a spaghetti dinner night, and a dance. We didn't take part in any of the other sessions because we were too busy exploring,

but some of the options were computer training, scrapbooking, poker night, bridge night, bingo, bike rides, and canoe trips. We loved it so much we extended our stay to just over a week and got charged not very much more, as they have reasonable longer-term rates.

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□ This is not a sandy-beach part of Florida -- the low tides create marshland rather than sandy beaches. However, this makes for fabulous hiking and nature sighting. And happily, within a 20-minute drive of Rock Crusher park there are state parks ([Crystal River](#) and [Crystal River Preserve](#)) with miles and miles of hiking trails.

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□ One of the most exciting things about this part of Florida is the manatees that live in the area rivers. We didn't have time to do a swim with the manatees, but others we met had and said it was a fabulous experience. There are several companies that offer guided tours. However, did go see manatees at [Hommosassa Springs Wildlife State Park](#). They are beautiful creatures! The park also showcases many other animals native to Florida. I usually dislike zoos, but I could tolerate this one because the animals had, for the most part, been rescued and for one reason or another could not be released to the wild. The manatees, unless they are injured, are free in the rivers throughout the park. You view them either from river viewing docks or a cool, underwater viewing tank. They put this tank in many years ago and to not affect the wildlife used bananas as 'grease' to slide it into place in the water. How cool is that?

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□ Did I miss going to Disney? Yes, but it's not what we needed this trip. We really needed to recharge our batteries and the camping, beach-going, and hiking did that. We saw so many different creatures and so much different plant life, I still go back and look at the pictures to gaze at the fabulous things we saw. We are planning another trip this February and I think I we will be again recharging our batteries with a big dose of Florida camping. Maybe we will get a chance to do some of that camping at my beloved Fort Wilderness (I just wish they offered the Free Disney Dining Plan to those of us who love to camp).

*About The Author:* Michelle previously contributed an article on [Prince Edward Island](#) to PassPorter News. She is a Computer Programmer from Woodstock, Ontario, Canada and is married with two children. □

Article last updated: 12-23-2011

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