

# CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE MANATEE KIND

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SPECIAL TO BLUFFTON TODAY

After moving to Bluffton, I fell in love with kayaking in general and with the Swamp Girls of Hardeeville in particular.

As I recently discovered, the only thing more fun than kayaking with these fabulous ladies is vacationing with them.

Last month I joined the Swamp Girls (including three intrepid Swamp Dudes) and their guests on their annual manatee trip to Homosassa Springs, Fla.

The constant water temperature makes the area an ideal winter refuge for manatees. We stayed at the Sea Grass Resort on the Homosassa River, where we were able to paddle out to visit the manatees anytime we liked.

These gentle giants are very playful and curious about humans. Of course, one surfaced right next to me and let me pet it on the nose just moments after I had drowned my camera in a quarter inch of water at the bottom of my kayak.

We even saw a mother manatee nursing her calf and another who was about to give birth.

Our trip began with a beautiful sunset paddle on the Homosassa River. At the Homosassa Springs National Wildlife Part, we enjoyed an incredible assortment of wildlife including many manatees that have been rescued and rehabilitated.

The highlight of our trip was paddling the gorgeous Weeki Wachee River with its incredibly crystal clear water, where we met two adult manatees and a baby and even went swimming.

In the evenings, we enjoyed amazing meals prepared by Mary Wheeler, Joann Hiemenz and Dennis Lollis (aka Chef Ptomaine of Tavern on the Swamp), all of Bluffton, and fine wines provided by John Hiemenz.

This was a magical vacation filled with scenic beauty, great food and wine, and lots of belly laughs – a dream come true for a nature lover.

Anyone interested in going on this trip or another adventure can reach the Swamp Girls at 784-2249 or visit [www.swampgirls.com](http://www.swampgirls.com).