

Swamp Girls Prowl

An all-woman crew revels in the wonders of the wild.

Kayaks skim the black waters of Ebenezer Creek. The soft dip and swish of the paddles fracture the stillness, making egrets turn to observe the latest excursion of the Swamp Girls.

Equipped with humor and a healthy respect for nature, this band of women sets out from their Hardeeville base west of Hilton Head about four times a week, prowling the waterways of the Savannah River basin with anyone who wants to come along.

Swamp Geeks and Gator Guides

Quite a few folks join them these days, exploring the stillness of Ebenezer Creek, the flowing Savannah River, or coastal salt marshes where dolphins play. These self-appointed “river guides with an attitude” introduce the Lowcountry wonders to everyone from Bluffton Girl Scouts and Jasper High teens to Hilton Head vacationers and Sun City retirees.

“Kayaking is a quiet way to sneak up on nature,” says Sue Chapman, whose title is “Swamp Boss.” People are looking for a sensory experience, and kayaking offers that”.

Sue and cofounder Linda Etchells lead the energetic team of Swamp Girls, one of the few expedition companies operated solely by women. The friends met a local paddling club and decided to go out on their own about seven years ago. With just a few signs and

newspaper ads, they had themselves a tour company.

The team initially trained novice kayakers from nearby Sun City, a community for seniors. Those who enthusiastically showed up for nearly every excursion soon became volunteer Swamp Girls. The roster of so-called Swamp Geeks and Gator Guides now numbers about 20 women, all certified to teach kayaking and canoeing. “Some are grandmothers, but none of us needs any help kayaking, even in difficult conditions,” says Sue.

Women in the Wild

These women don’t hesitate to flout convention, so they’re not afraid to take their other talents into the wild.

“When you put women in charge of an outdoor sport, attention to comfort comes first, then we add a touch of style,” says Sue. Among other things, comfort means plenty of good food. Swamp Girl Bonnie Gregory rules as queen of the sandbar picnic, providing skewered “alligator” (really grilled chicken) and homeade cookies for hungry paddlers.

Vi Rhoden, hailed for her peach-flavored “swamp salsa,” regularly paddles with a Pomeranian on board. And like smart women everywhere, Swamp Girls know a good man when they see one, playing matchmaker for Donna MacDonald.

Fashion counts with this crew too. The Swamp Girls are serious about guiding waterway sightseers, but they deck themselves out in zany gator sunglasses and matching Swamp Girl shirts. Even Vi’s dog, FiFi, sports a chic kayaking ensemble.

Under the Ancient Cypress

No novice ventures into the swamp unprepared. On a pebbly beach at the edge of Ebenezer Creek (a tributary of

the Savannah River), Sue and several Swamp Girls teach a group of rookies. “Paddle to the right to turn left, to the left to turn right, and backward to stop” Sue demonstrates as the group follows her lead. “Bend your knees like a frog, and touch your knees to the sides of the boat; it stabilizes the kayak.”

Sue and her team assign the beginners to boats, pass out water bottles, and gently push each kayak into the still waters of the creek.

The profound quiet that envelops the forest of moss-laden trees is broken by occasional birdcalls, serenading frogs, and the loud plop of a turtle sliding off a log. Kayakers weave between ancient cypress trees, under their clawing roots, and around their stubby knees. On warm days, kayakers steer clear of alligators sunning their scaly backs.

Sue points out eagles soaring above, explains why the water is so black, and identifies native plants. She tells tales of

this area’s settlers and the many who drowned here during the Civil War after the destruction of the swamp’s only bridge.

Routes Less Traveled

Whether the Swamp Girls visit Spring Island’s Chechessee Creek or the May River, no two expeditions are alike. They don’t adhere to strict schedules or calculated routes. Instead, they let each group of paddlers set its own pace and direction.

“These are trips for people who want something different,” says Sue. “We have water trails just about everywhere around here, and, selfishly, I’m interested in variety to keep things fresh.”

The freedom of going their own way appeals to Sue and Linda, who keep Swamp Girls on course. “We are going to keep it small,” says Sue. “We aren’t under the illusion that expanding this business would make it better.”