Into the Wild
Everglades guide offers once-in-a-lifetime experiences

Behind the Wheel
Mentor teaches women the craft of boating

The Sky’s the Limit
Kiteboarding is a breeze for Islamorada teen

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Paddleboarder on top of his game

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Taking part in long-distance paddleboard races, as seen in the 300-mile Everglades Challenge, feeds the competitive spirit of Upper Keys paddlesports operator Scott Baste.
Flamingoes are occasionally sighted during excursions off the aptly-named Flamingo Visitor Center in Everglades National Park.

INTO THE WILD

EVERGLADES GUIDE OFFERS ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME EXPERIENCES — DAILY

By Theresa Java
Photos by Gari’s Coastal Kayaking
A longtime paddling enthusiast and nature buff, Harrold guides visitors through the wonders of Everglades National Park as owner of Garl’s Coastal Kayaking.

Harrold’s guiding service takes guests off the park’s elevated boardwalks and immerses them in the less-traveled and more remote areas of the park, where alligators and roseate spoonbills outnumber humans.

The park encompasses 1.5 million acres of tropical and subtropical habitat and includes one of the world’s most diverse ecosystems — home to pinelands, freshwater cypress swamps, grassy prairies, marshlands, mangrove swamps and saltwater coves. Harrold provides a sampling of these locations during his daily excursions.

Weather and tide dictate where Harrold may lead his tours.

“I check the radar all day. It’s all about the weather. It predicts what I do first and last,” he said.

The only perils his guests face, he says, are low-hanging branches as they paddle serene waters. Harrold, who is intimately familiar with the Everglades, knows what pitfalls to avoid. No one has been hurt on any of his tours.

“The sunset paddle is usually the highlight. There are usually dolphins,” Harrold said of his tours, which regularly feature kayaking from the Flamingo Visitor Center to vast flats where thousands of birds — and yes, sometimes flamingoes — can be viewed. The bioluminescence of creatures in Florida Bay follows the sunset act.

“I’ve got this down as an art. Conditions permitting, I always go to where the best wildlife is. I’m there every day, so I know where to go,” he said.

When the Key Largo resident first started guiding, he was reluctant to take
locals because he didn’t want to reveal his favorite spots to those who might return to them later.

“But now I have so many different places to go, so I love hosting locals,” he said.

The whole idea behind Garl’s Coastal Kayaking is to avoid the throngs of sight-seers crowding the boardwalks and other accessible areas along the park’s main road, which runs from Homestead to Flamingo.

His tours often include sightings of sharks, manatees, bottlenose dolphins, the aforementioned alligators and crocodiles, and all varieties of birds. But an encounter with a reclusive Florida panther is highly unlikely. This subspecies of the cougar or mountain lion is endangered, and Harrold has only spotted one while guiding.

“It’s a matter of being really lucky,” he said. “It ran right through the Anhinga Trail. It was in the middle of the day.”

While Harrold has spied black bears, rattlesnakes and white-tailed deer, which are all native, he also sees plenty of invasive Burmese pythons. In fact, he has a permit to catch and hand them over to park rangers, which has become a byproduct of running his tours. He says he has lost track of his capture count.

Giant arm muscles aren’t required for the kayaking portion of his trips, according to Garl’s Coastal Kayaking office manager Suzette Truesdell.

“It’s not labor-intensive and our tours don’t confine people to the kayaks for hours,” she said.

“I take people slogging through cypress domes,” Harrold said. Guests wade through gin-clear bogs, miles away from the industrial world.

It breaks up the paddling, according to Truesdell.

Tours include fresh and saltwater paddles, slogs and even night walks, if participants desire. Garl’s Coastal Kayaking can also outfit customers for fishing, and he doesn’t short guests on time.

“He’ll stay as late as people want to stay. He’d probably sleep out there,” Truesdell said.

In the last two years, Garl’s Coastal Kayaking has faced some challenges. Hurricane Irma and a partial federal government shutdown hit him during normally busy months, and new park entry fees have cut into his earnings. Despite such curveballs, Garl’s Coastal Kayaking remains wildly popular, especially with families.

“We have the same guests come back. Guests’ kids who are now adults book tours with us,” Truesdell said. “It’s nice to have them come back again and again.”

Harrold’s eco-tours have garnered nearly 500 unsolicited TripAdvisor reviews, and every year since 2013 his business has been awarded the travel website’s “Certificate of Excellence.”

He’s also earned the respect of adventure travelers, researchers and cinematographers.
“I have spent my life fishing, birding and exploring the Everglades, and if I could only choose one trip to enjoy what the Glades have to offer, I would go paddling with Garl,” said Peter Frezza, an Islamorada fishing guide and former Audubon Florida researcher.

“His trips will get you into the most beautiful of Everglades landscapes with chances for once-in-a-lifetime encounters with the unique wildlife of the Everglades. This is a must-do trip for newcomers to the Glades or those wanting to get off the beaten path and learn more about the Everglades ecosystems.”

Harrold has guided scientists and filmmakers with National Geographic and PBS, and recently highlighted remote areas of Everglades National Park in the Coastal Seas episode on Netflix’s “Our Planet” documentary series, which is hosted by esteemed natural historian Sir David Attenborough.

Garl’s Coastal Kayaking offers a variety of tours daily and can customize trips for group or private outings. Full-day tours begin at noon and end after sunset. Half-day trips are also accommodated.

Garl’s Coastal Kayaking’s concession is located at the Robert Is Here fruit market at 19200 S.W. 344th St. in Homestead. Guests should bring water, sunblock, hat, glasses, a packed lunch and a camera.

For more information, visit garlscoastalkayaking.com, email garlscoastalkayaking@gmail.com or call 305-393-3223.
Kiteboarding is a breeze for Islamorada teen Logan Sena

By Theresa Java

Warm water and not-so-tranquil breezes beckon Logan Sena to fly high. For this 13-year-old competitive kiteboarder, a good gust of wind provides an opportunity to perform the tricks of his trade: S-bends, toesides, surface passes, and of course, the Raley — a Superman-esque flight above the surface.

“It depends on the wind, but I can jump more than 30 feet at about 30 knots,” the Upper Matecumbe Key resident said. “There are some kiteboarders out there who are jumping more than 100 feet.”

Kiteboarding, or kitesurfing, is still relatively new as an action sport. A mashup of wakeboarding, windsurfing, skateboarding and sailing, it started gaining notoriety in the late 1990s but didn’t really take off until about 10 years ago.
In simplest terms, the rider on a small board harnesses the wind with a large, inflatable kite that resembles a parachute, manipulating it with a control bar to skirt across the waves, performing tricks both on the water and in the air.

Sena started kiteboarding five years ago at age 8. He’s now a brand ambassador for Cabrinha Kites and being groomed as a teen rider in the sport. Kiteboarding will be included in the 2024 Paris Olympics for the first time. Sena is considering the prospect.

In April, he finished in second place as the youngest competitor at the Miami Kiteboarding Masters Freestyle Competition, mostly besting his way through three heats.

The confidence he gained through winning that competition has doubled down his efforts on learning new technical tricks to become a better freestyle competitor.

“It changed the way I look at the sport. Now, I want to try different tricks,” he said.

It was the idea of being able to fly through the air over the open ocean that initially attracted him to the sport.

Sena credits his father, Lou, who also kiteboards, for introducing him to the sport and Damien LeRoy, a professional kiteboarder, for taking him under his wing and serving as his mentor.

“LeRoy is just a great man,” the teen said. “He’s helped me along so much. He taught me how to fall and land. Otherwise, I would’ve gone straight down. There’s no way I would’ve gotten this far without him.”

LeRoy, who has been kiteboarding since 1998, says the sky’s the limit for Sena.

“I’m always excited to see kids getting into kiteboarding. It’s a healthy way to be active and enjoy nature rather than just be a gamer,” LeRoy said.

“Logan’s a good kid and he has the drive to take this sport as far as he wants to.”

The initial steps into kiteboarding aren’t daunting and the equipment doesn’t bog kiters down. The kite bag holds the kite, pump and control bar, leaving the board and harness to be carried.

Sena recommends prospective kiteboarders begin practicing on land with a trainer kit to get the feel for the wind, then applying that knowledge on wide-open water with a big kite that is either rented or purchased second-hand. A
beginner’s lesson is widely advocated among professionals, and Sena recommends locals arrange one with Otherside Boardsports in Islamorada.

The less wind, the bigger the kite, and vice versa. To have the option to kiteboard at any given wind speed, Sena has a wide selection of kites.

“I like to have as many kites as possible, so I have a 5 meter through a 13 meter,” he said. “Time goes fast when you’re out there kiting, and you always want to kite.”

Sena also frequently free dives, goes fishing and rides his onewheel around Islamorada to his favorite eateries. But he has integrated kiteboarding into his daily routine.

“If there’s good wind, I kite maybe two hours a day,” he said. Otherwise, he practices on land with a control bar and lines hung from the second-floor balcony of his home.

“Basically, I run like hell and then it rips me off my feet so I can do a spin and a handle pass,” Sena said. “Now I’m working on a Raley, where I throw my feet way behind my head and do a surface pass with the bar after I land. I want to throw a handle pass, mid-air.”

A handle pass is a 360-degree maneuver that requires the kiteboarder to change hands without losing the control bar. The Raley is an airborne trick where the kiteboarder soars parallel to the surface like Superman.

Sena’s father, Lou, encourages others to try their hand at kiteboarding.

“Kiting doesn’t require a lot of upper body strength, but there is a little bit of a learning curve. After learning, you don’t even look at the kite, you just know where it is,” Lou Sena said.

Left: To have the option to kiteboard at any given wind speed, Logan Sena has a wide selection of kites from which to choose. Photo by Greg Poland/@lisaandgregpolandphotography
Above: Logan Sena can practice on land with a control bar and lines connected to the balcony of his home. Lou Sena photo

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To learn more about Logan Sena, follow him on Instagram @kiteboardingkid.
Mentor teaches women the craft of boating

By Kevin Wadlow

Elizabeth Jolin, second from right, of the Bay and Reef Company in Islamorada offers boat-handling tips to, from left, Susan Hart, Margie Smith and Kathy Hart.

Bay and Reef Co. photo
Nearly two decades ago, Jolin launched the popular “She’s at Sea” program for women to demystify the skills of piloting a powerboat on Florida Keys waters.

“People kind of slip into roles on a boat. Boys usually take the wheel and women often wind up as passengers,” the Islamorada resident said. “Women may be amazing at what they do in their lives but think running a boat is hard to do. It may seem overwhelming.”

The two-day course created by the Bay and Reef Company, an Upper Keys charter and recreation firm owned by Jolin and husband Xavier Figueredo, aims to help women “who do want to become better boaters.”

“There’s a real value to spending time behind the wheel,” Jolin said. “We give them the tools to build confidence and make them feel capable. It can start with simple things. If you’re not sure about something, put the throttle in neutral and just stop the boat. Sometimes no one thinks about stopping while you take a minute to think about it. But that’s fine.”

On-the-water lessons aboard a 24-foot center console boat include basics on engine operation, safety, anchoring, navigation, weather and rules of the road — all of which may be more peacefully absorbed without the stress of a husband or domestic partner on board.

“We know how a woman likes to learn things, so we break it down in pieces,” Jolin said. “We assure everybody that, no, we’re not going to break down or get lost.

We’re going to go here, then come back. It’s going to be a lovely and fun experience.”

The Bay and Reef Company started “She’s at Sea” while the firm managed ecotours and watersports activities at Cheeca Lodge & Spa. Now working from Islamorada’s Angler House Marina at mile marker 80.5, bayside, Jolin and Figueredo offer smaller charter services that range from fishing trips and reef snorkeling to backcountry ecotours of Florida Bay. Trips and courses are capped at passengers to provide more personal attention.

An Ohio native, Jolin worked in Washington, D.C., after graduating from Boston University.
“My dad had a vacation houseboat in the Keys so I came down here a lot,” she said. “At a certain point, I knew I just needed to get the heck out of D.C., and I knew this place is heaven on earth. I bought a $500 houseboat and fell in love with our live aboard community.”

A leg injury required a move to shore. A friend was starting a class to earn a six-passenger captain’s license so Jolin decided to join him.

“I’m forever grateful that I’ve been able to work in and around the water,” she said.

With Islamorada councilman Mike Forster, Figueredo and Jolin four years ago incorporated Florida Bay Forever, a community nonprofit that works to keep Monroe County residents aware about the need to help the bay recover from decades of poor management and neglect that led to the massive destruction of seagrasses and fish-killing algae blooms.

“We all were working really hard at our jobs but came to realize the bay’s resources were in a slow but serious decline,” Jolin said. “We couldn’t stand to see Florida Bay ruined.”

Florida Bay Forever seeks to raise awareness of the precarious state of the bay’s environment and advocates for continued progress on the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

“We want to share what’s happening to our ocean and bay,” Jolin said.

To learn more about Florida Bay Forever and its Save the Water program, visit floridabayforever.org.

For information on “She’s at Sea” or other experiences with the Bay and Reef Company, call 305-393-0994 or email info@bayandreef.com.

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Elizabeth Jolin, center, and husband Xavier Figueredo, right, owners of Bay and Reef Company and founders of Florida Bay Forever, have hosted political leaders aboard their vessels to raise awareness about the importance of protecting Florida Bay. Also pictured is former U.S. Congressman Carlos Curbelo of Miami.

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Ranger Boats
The Bay Ranger series is perfect for the Florida Keys since it can take you to the reef comfortably and then back in Florida Bay with ease. It is heavy, so you wouldn’t poll it around, but you don’t feel every wave as you race over them either. With low gunwales, you are close to the water so you can feel a little salt spray, and the bow deck is perfect for sight fishing and casting, but is equally suited for reading a good book or getting a suntan.

Title Nine Swimsuits
This company offers an ocean of beautiful suits and rash guards for women that actually fit on a real body. They are great for swimming, cannonball contests, reeling in big fish, climbing boat ladders and pulling down sails.

SIC Maui Paddleboards
This series is tailor-made for stand-up paddleboarding in the islands. If you want to relax at the Whale Harbor sandbar, do a little fishing or practice your yoga down dog, the Sonic is a great recreational board. For the more adventurous who want to see the reef or camp in the backcountry, Okeanos will meet your needs. And if it’s all about being first across the finish line, then climb aboard the RS, short for “Rocket Ship.”
Cabrinha Kites
Based in Maui, Cabrinha has been the go-to manufacturer for kiteboarding equipment ridden to championships by some of the biggest names in adventure water sports. And they are perfect for catching big air in our own backyard.

Wilderness Systems Tarpon 100
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The Trading Post
81868 Overseas Highway, Islamorada

This Upper Matecumbe Key institution has been feeding fishing guides and their anglers since 1966. Their sandwiches are consistent. They have lots of mayo on them. They are shareable. You can order them the night before and grab them early in the morning. They taste like a boat ride. Open 24 hours a day.

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Family owned and operated since 1959, this landmark fruit and vegetable market specializes in rare and exotic fruits and milkshakes. It’s practically a required stop on the road to or from Everglades National Park. It’s also home to Garl’s Coastal Kayaking. Depending on the season, you’ll find pineapple, mamey, lychee, papaya, mango and other tropical treats here, as well as vegetables, flowers, jams and jellies, boiled peanuts and more. The Key lime and strawberry milkshake is a winner. Open daily from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Food and Drinks
The Mar Bar
90775 Old Highway, Plantation Key

This dockside hideaway at Casa Mar Village serves fresh seafood from the fish market next door and has a wide selection of brews and wine-based cocktails. It’s a perfect place to lounge after a day on a stand-up paddleboard rental from PADDLE! the Florida Keys, which is just a few steps down the boardwalk. Hours are 4:30 to 10 p.m.

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Scott Baste shrugs it off as something akin to a warm-up trot before a challenging cross-country run.

“I’ve done it dozens of times,” said Baste, owner of PADDLE! the Florida Keys. “It’s either 28 miles or 34 miles — depends on which way you go.”

At the time, Baste, 58, was bent over the counter of his Plantation Key shop, charting his route and waypoint plan for the Alabama 650, a 10-day race for paddleboards, canoes and kayaks.

“Ten days of glory paddling through the great state of Alabama,” Baste assessed the competition that starts in northeast Alabama and ends at Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. “It’s going to be tight.”

On the upside, the Alabama race in September would be 350 miles shorter — and a lot warmer — than Baste’s finish in the grueling Yukon 1000, billed as “the world’s longest paddle race,” through Alaska and Canada in July 2018.

“From Canada into the Arctic Circle, finishing in the Alaskan backcountry,” race organizers advise. “Pure isolation. Total exhaustion.”

“It’s a hard race to get into. They really check your credentials,” Baste said of the 15-team Yukon limit.
“They warn you that if something happens in Canadian waters, no one is coming to get you.”

The “Cocoplum Navy” team of Chip Walter and Baste finished the thousand-mile Yukon, held every two years.

“These two gentlemen were on fine form and had us laughing the entire time they were at the checkpoint,” race officials posted online. “High morale, great humor and total humility! Meeting people like these guys is what this race is about.”

Baste swapped out his regular 14-foot SIC paddleboard for a custom 16-footer in the Yukon “unsupported” race because there are almost no places to resupply.

“You have to take everything with you,” he said. “Certain races you can do about 18 hours a day [paddling]. In the Yukon, it was about 16.”

Baste slipped into icy water three times during the sojourn.

“I was able to jump back on the paddleboard pretty quickly,” he said. “One crew on a canoe capsized and it took them about 15 minutes to get out. The water was so cold they had to withdraw because of hypothermia.

“I’ve always been a distance athlete. I swam and biked. Now I’m a paddler.

“Most of the stand-up races are about 6 kilometers, which I usually can do in about an hour and 15 minutes. Not a lot of scheduled long-distance races are available in the U.S., maybe about 10 a year.

“You can only do about every six months because it takes that long to recover.”

In 2017, Baste entered the Missouri 340. “That was the first really super-long race, Kansas City to St. Charles. I came in third but what I remember most is that it was hot.”

During multi-day competitions, paddlers stop for about six hours of sleep at night.

“I try to bring all my food since you can usually get water refills,” said Baste, who studied backpacker videos to see what kinds of ultralight gear they carry.

In March 2020, Baste has his sights set on his third stand-up paddleboard appearance in the Everglades Challenge, a 300-mile competition that starts in St. Petersburg Beach and finishes in Key Largo after paddling along the southwest Florida coast and across the bay.

“The first time I did [the Everglades Challenge] in 2018, it took six days and five hours. This year, I got it down to five days, 12 hours. Only four stand-up paddleboarders finished,” he said.

“Paddleboarding is a sport with a lot of camaraderie,” he added. “It’s like a close-knit family. Others will teach you. You go to a race and you’ll already know 40 people, at least.”

A former building contractor in the Northeast, Baste and his wife moved to the Upper Keys and opened PADDLE! the Florida Keys in 2012.

“After living in the mountains for 25 years, we wanted to move closer to the ocean,” he said. “Then, I was an avid mountain biker and entered some professional races. I’ve always been racing something. Paddlesports have been part of my life since I started canoeing at age 6.”

Florida Keys native Seychelle Webster, a top-10 women’s world-ranked professional paddleboard racer and instructor, credits Baste with launching her racing career that spans the globe.

“Scott was the first person to put me on a racing board and I fell in love with the sport,” said Webster, now sponsored by SIC paddleboards and named the 2016 SUP Woman of the Year. “I pretty much owe everything to Scott.”

For relaxation, Baste likes to paddle out into the Lower Keys backcountry. “The Content Keys, the Snipe Keys. It’s just a gorgeous place that’s full of fish, turtles and lots of other stuff.”

“The Keys have wonderful water. It’s not crowded and you have the option of ocean or bay. You can go out for sunrise or sunset. Every day is different.”

He added, smiling, “And paddleboards can go where boats can.”

PADDLE! the Florida Keys, located in the Casa Mar Village at 90773 Old Highway, offers paddleboard sales and rentals, apparel, ecotours and SUP yoga. For more information, call 305-434-5930, email paddlethefloridakeys@gmail.com or visit paddlethefloridakeys.com.
Scuba divers visiting the Upper Keys soon learn about iconic locations like French Reef, Molasses Reef, Christ of the Deep, Conch Reef, Davis Reef and Crocker Reef. More experienced divers often include dives on famous purposely sunk ships like the USS Spiegel Grove and the USCGC Duane during their vacations. A lesser famous dive site is Hen and Chickens. It can be reached in a short boat ride, is in shallow water and offers aquarium-quality viewing for all levels of divers. This small group of patch reefs, which from above looks like a hen surrounded by her chicks, is home to fish from both the ocean and the bay. It is perfect for newer divers or families who want to take the kids out for a day of snorkeling to see marine life. – Don Rhodes

### Boating/Sightseeing

**Cape Sable, Everglades National Park**  
(25.2729° N, 81.1215° W)

It is a hike by boat to get to this western tip of Everglades National Park but so perfect. It is everchanging through the years depending on the storms, the tides and the weather. You can solve all the world’s problems or even better, ignore all the world’s problems from your perch in the sand at the Cape.

### Kiteboarding

**Curry Hammock State Park**  
(Mile Marker 56.2 Overseas Highway, Crawl Key)

**Anne’s Beach**  
(Mile Marker 73.5, Lower Matecumbe Key)

The knee-deep shallows surrounding the Keys are perfect for kiteboarding, where riders take to the water, and air, from October to April, when the winds are strongest. Two popular spots are Curry Hammock State Park and Anne’s Beach. Kiteboarding is also a spectator sport, and both locations have pavilions and picnic tables for viewing the action.

### Fishing

**Channel 2 Bridge (Mile Marker 73, Lower Matecumbe Key)**

In an island chain full of boats, fishing from the old bridge running parallel to the Channel 2 Bridge may sound counterintuitive, but dang, it’s good, old-fashioned fun. Shoot the breeze with other anglers while trying to land snapper, grouper, jacks, tarpon, barracuda or the occasional small shark traveling the tides between ocean and bay. Squid or live shrimp on circle hooks are recommended.

### Kayaking

**Dusenbury Creek, Key Largo**  
(25.139° N, 80.4248° W)

The calm saltwater creeks that feed this tributary connecting Blackwater Sound and Tarpon Basin are ideal for paddlers to explore. Ask permission to launch from Florida Bay Outfitters next to the Caribbean Club and paddle to the channel marker about 1.5 miles to the west to enter Dusenbury Creek. When you reach an intersection of creeks off the main channel, take a right, head to a small pond and take your pick of tunnels; or, go left from Dusenbury, and left again, to find a secluded saltwater lake perfect for relaxing fishing.

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**Sweet SPOTS**

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The Keys are full of sweet spots to max out your outdoor fun. All it takes is a little local knowledge.

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![Left: Colorful corals are among the attractions at the Hen and Chickens patch reef off Islamorada. Don Rhodes photo](image)

![Travelers stop at Anne’s Beach in Islamorada to watch kiteboarding action. Thomas C. Yaroch photo](image)
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