

Caleigh Russo

4 December 2024

The Dante Fascell Visitor Center is the Perfect Day Trip for Those Craving a Blend of Adventure and Education

HOMESTEAD, Fla. — Everyone needs an escape, and Biscayne National Park delivers with aquamarine waters, lush islands, and endless blue skies. Located between Key Biscayne and Key Largo, this 95% underwater park thrives under the protection of its rangers. At Convoy Point, the Dante Fascell Visitor Center offers snorkeling, a museum exploring the park's rich history, and tranquil views of the sea and sky, making it a perfect hub for adventure and relaxation. The park is also family-friendly, with activities suitable for visitors old and young.

"This park is off the beaten path; it's never super crowded here," said Kelly Gordon, sitting on a lawn chair beside his wife, Wilma Gordon. Gordon says that he and Wilma, who live in Kendall, Fla., enjoy relaxing at the park three or four times a year – usually on a Sunday.

"The public is out here every single day," said Elizabeth Bonnell, an interpretive park ranger who serves as a park guide. "Walking around here at Convoy Point, you can see people taking birthday or wedding photos. You can also see people getting baptized if you're here early enough on the weekend or just fishing with family and friends."

Jenn Coyne, a park ranger who serves as the park's education coordinator, says she loves coming to work and seeing the vast expanse of water.

"I mean, 95% of the park is water, and I'm coming from up North where the water is not crystal clear, and you can't see all the seagrasses down there, so it's just nice to be out here on the water every day with the sun shining," said Coyne.

The Dante Fascell Visitor Center has a lawn where visitors can sit on lawn chairs or picnic tables while taking in views of the bay, listening to the gentle lapping of waves. They even have barbeques where visitors can host picnics.

"You should walk on the trail – it goes out, and there's a little bridge, and there's a little walkway, and you can see the boats going in and out," said Gordon to prospective visitors. The trail Gordon referred to is a 1/4 mile walking trail which takes visitors along the bay, where they feel the gentle bay breeze and spot birds wading for fish.

"As we enter the busy season, we are engaging in more activities for the public," said Elizabeth Bonnell, an interpretive park ranger who serves as a park guide.

The visitor center offers many activities for parkgoers who wish to immerse themselves in nature. Boats dock next to the center, taking visitors snorkeling and scuba diving around the bay.

David McDonell says he has spent three years captaining boats at the visitor center, taking visitors on ocean tours, and leading paddleboard and snorkel excursions.

"I started working here because I didn't do well at real jobs... I've worked at other places, but this is my passion," said McDonell.

The captain says he enjoys frequent encounters with all the different animals on the water – from manatees to dolphins and sharks.

While snorkeling, scuba diving, and paddleboarding, visitors can view coral reefs containing mountains of coral and over 500 species of colorful fish. Like the most vibrant cities, coral reefs are a constant hive of activity, providing visitors with a kaleidoscope-like view as they watch the diverse array of brilliantly-colored fish and shell fish that grace through and acrosss the vibrant coral reefs.

"People come here from all over the world, and some of them have never swam in the ocean or even at all," said McDonell. "Taking that person that's brand new and has never done it before and watching them get turned on to the waters or getting someone in their 70s or 80s who has never swam before snorkeling around is really cool stuff."

Bonnell says part of her job includes leading the paddleboarding clinic hosted by the visitor center.

"We gear the participants up, demonstrate proper technique for canoeing, and then go out and paddle for about an hour to an hour and a half and see what we can see in the surrounding water out here," said Bonnell.

In addition to the paddleboarding clinics, visitors of all ages can partake in ranger-led fishing clinics amidst the backdrop of coral limestone and mangroves sheltering the bay.

"The park gets a bunch of grants, and one of our grants right now is focused on fishing through the National Park Foundation, so we are able to host all these fishing clinics," said Coyne.

"We own rods, and we can let visitors use them to learn how to fish," Coyne said. The education coordinator also said she helps attendees learn to fish during the clinics by guiding them through the steps.

"We are currently residing in Florida City and were looking for something fun to explore, and this place was highly recommended by everyone I spoke to," said Melissa Faulkner, who brought her two sons to a fishing clinic.

"As of right now, we have only gotten bites from the little fish who are looking for a meal but haven't gotten any of the larger fish to bite just yet," said Faulkner of her fishing experience so far.

"We also get many return visitors who have come to our programs before and are experienced," said Coyne. "As long as they know how, they are welcome to use our supplies, and there will always be a ranger out there to help if needed."

Henry Warren, a lifetime resident of Miami, says he has been fishing at Convoy Point since he was eight.

"Everyone that comes out here is basically about the fun, the friends, and the fellowship," said Warren of the culture among those who fish at Convoy Point.

Of the different types of fish, Warren says the species of fish are limitless, specifying that he has caught snook, barracuda and snapper, to name a few.

"My favorite memory here would be the day I caught two fish almost as big as I am... I'm five foot six, and I caught two fish that day as tall as me," said Warren.

"Knowing that this grant money is being used to help the youth and the people that want to learn about the habitat and fishing... it's just a win-win," said Faulkner of the program.

"Because they have really made it nice here, we get people from everywhere fishing here. Last week, a lady from Israel came. So, at this point, we have all different nationalities coming to fish," said Warren.

For those who appreciate a more traditional learning experience, the Dante Fascell Visitor Center's upper level contains a museum providing visitors with information about the park's rich history and ecosystem.

To appreciate the park in the present, visitors should look into its past; it has witnessed many consequential historical events and still holds artifacts telling its captivating tales.

"There are a lot of human stories that people don't realize unless they hear about it...you have stories that pre-date the park's protection," said Bonnell.

The park devotes much of its museum space to educating people about its history, detailing its original settlers and overlooked role in many historical events.

In 1862, the Homestead Act granted parcels of land to Americans willing to live on farmland for five years or more to encourage habitation in the subtropical wilderness. Despite the challenges posed by harsh heat and humidity, swarms of insects, and a lack of fresh water, migrants filled most of Elliot Key's available lots by the turn of the century.

The initial settlers of Elliot Key grew pineapples on the island, establishing communities and successful pineapple, lime, and tomato farms that brought much business to the Keys. However, in 1906, hurricanes salted the pineapple-growing soil, effectively ending Biscayne's pineapple-growing era.

"There are stories of the saltwater version of the underground railroad; people were escaping the United States during times when slavery was still legal, and they would head down through this area after leaving Key Biscayne and head off to the Bahamas to seek freedom," said Bonnell.

In addition to artifacts salvaged from shipwrecks on display, the museum also offers films chronicling the shipwrecks, including Slave Ship Guerrero's 1827 shipwreck and HMS Fowey's 1744 shipwreck.

"We have stories of wreckers – so people would rescue people from shipwrecks. There are stories of pirates that would roam these waters and pioneers that grew things like pineapples and key limes," said Bonnell.

Bonnell speaks of wreckers who salvaged goods from ships that had been smashed on the reef. Since each shipwreck is considered an archaeological site, stolen artifacts prevent archaeologists from fully uncovering each wreck's role in history.

Having grown up in the surrounding area, Bonnell spoke of a connection to two statues in the visitors center, which she believes came from a Spanish shipwreck. Resident Virginia Tanahoe later found the artifacts on the shoreline and donated them to the park.

"Growing up here, I volunteered a lot with the local community group, and one of my friends who was much older was friends with Virginia. She shared the story of walking the beach line

with her and finding pottery and other things that had washed up, so it's like a personal connection to me," said Bonnell.

A widowed artist, Bonnell says that Tanahoe was one of the last two residents of the National Park when it became protected by the National Park Service.

Understanding the park's history is imperative to appreciating why the National Park Service safeguards this nearly 180,000 acre-plot of land and sea. Ecolo

Spanning nearly

Exploring the park's history is critical to understanding its archeological and environmental significance that drives the National Park Service to protect this vast land and sea area. While the park educates visitors about the human stories that have taken place across its nearly 180,000 acres, it also sheds light on the land's intricate ecosystems which make it so unique.

The museum features several dioramas depicting the different species that inhabit the island—from the rare Sea Lavender plant species on Boca Chita Key to the four-eye butterflyfish that live in the reefs.

While highlighting the beauty created by the diverse array of life within the park, the museum also warns visitors about the devastating impacts interference can have on wildlife. Poorly navigated boats can leave propeller scars on the manatees, and divers can cause irreparable damage by simply touching the coral reefs.

The Dante Fascell Visitor Center also offers programs geared toward familiarizing visitors with the park's different species. In their 'Ranger's Choice' and 'Junior Ranger' programs, park rangers facilitate nature walks and science labs to help visitors familiarize themselves with the wildlife they encounter.

As the parks education coordinator, Coyne says she organizes school field trips and visits from local youth groups.

As part of the National Park Service's 'Every Kid Outdoors' initiative, Coyne says she coordinates field trips where local fourth-grade classes participate in plankton labs. During the labs, the fourth graders collect plankton and examine it under microscopes during the lab.

"They love to look at the plankton under the microscope," said Coyne of the fourth graders.

"They're always like, 'Oh my gosh, there's all these little things in here crawling around and moving...this is crazy that this one drop of water can live on your skin after you swim.'"

"I love seeing people's reactions and their joy when they visit for the first time, and they had no idea this was right down the street from their house," said Coyne.

Both undersea and ashore, Biscayne National Park brims with vivacity—it contains many stories of the past and houses the lives of the present. Whether you're paddleboarding over the seagrass, discovering the kaleidoscope of marine life through goggles, or watching a film uncovering the

rich archaeological history behind a shipwreck of centuries past, the Dante Fascell Visitor Center offers an escape for all.