

FLORIDA

Wilderness waterways offer a taste of Florida the way it used to be

Suwannee, Steinhatchee rivers shelter wealth of natural treasures

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

SUWANNEE, FLA.—Way down upon the Suwannee river, and its northerly neighbour, the Steinhatchee, times are changing.

Two mighty rivers, slicing across Florida to the Gulf of Mexico through thousands of hectares of untamed wilderness, were until recently best-kept secrets, harboured by hunters, fishermen, paddlers and birdwatchers.

In fact, the whole northwest coast from the Big Bend near Tallahassee down to Homosassa Springs, has languished in pristine perfection – until now.

"Tourists are starting to discover us," says Dean Fowler, who runs Steinhatchee Landing Resort. "We're seeing development along the coast although it's limited because so much of this area is reserved as wildlife refuges or state parks. Florida leads the nation in preserving and protecting wilderness and it's especially evident here."

There are few roads – Highway 19 connects Tampa with Tallahassee and a few secondary roads meander down to the Gulf. Towns are quaint, quiet and scarce.

Now the new Suwannee River Wilderness Trail is aiming to nurture the wilderness, while making it accessible.

The entire river, all 322 kilometres from the Georgia border to the Gulf, is now a state park, with camping facilities planned for every 16 kilometres.

The river welcomes paddlers and power boaters. Many hiking trails fringe its banks.

Back in 1851, Stephen Foster's plaintive Swanee River song, actually called *Old Folks at Home*, was so popular that it triggered the first big Florida tourist boom – though Foster misspelled the name and never set foot in the state. Today, it's Florida's official song.

Nobody wrote a song for the Steinhatchee but somebody should.

A paddler's dream, this multi-talented river delivers idyllic still waters, rapids and small waterfalls before sliding into the Gulf at Steinhatchee Village, just below Steinhatchee Landing Resort.

Fowler meandered down Steinhatchee way 25 years ago in search of good fishing. He found it, bought up a swath of riverfront land and proceeded to build an upscale cluster of "cracker" houses, named for the cracking whips of Florida's cowboys of old.

But those early crackers never enjoyed perks like these – 64 luxurious rental homes with screened porches and comfy rocking chairs, shaded by tall oaks, plus a swimming pool, fitness room, croquet court, kids' playground, petting zoo, canoes and the river.

A new chapel has become a favourite wedding venue. Horseback riding is available nearby and just downriver in Steinhatchee Village, there's fishing, boating, restaurants and services.

Fowler's affection for Steinhatchee and for "original Florida" has never cooled.

He's a walking encyclopedia of local lore, frequently pointing guests toward hidden places, interesting villages, fascinating locals and good food.

One of his favourites is Cedar Keys, a cluster of offshore islands, about 80 kilometres farther south, home to a carefully protected wildlife refuge, an 1850s lighthouse that's open only twice a year and a thriving business in farming (and eating) clams served in every possible style during ClamAmerica, every July 4.

October brings a seafood festival and an annual bird watching and wildlife event. February offers a weekend of astronomical study and stargazing, and in April, there's a celebration of the arts.

Farther inland, the land is dotted with mighty freshwater springs – 600 of them at last count, pumping millions of litres of 22C water daily. Some boast underwater caves that attract scuba divers, plus good snorkelling, tubing and swimming.

Wakulla in the north is one of the largest and deepest freshwater springs in the world.

Farther south, Homosassa Springs is a refuge for myriad species of wildlife, including manatee.

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FOR INFORMATION on Florida State Parks, call 1-850-245-2157, or see floridastateparks.org; the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, call 1-800-868-9914, Cedar Keys, 1-352-543-5600 or cedarkey.org; Steinhatchee Landing Resort, 1-352-498-3513 or SteinhatcheeLanding.com