

Paddling over muck and amid alligators

► **OKEFENOKEE**
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There are no flashy travel brochures advertising high-end trips to southeastern Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp, no snappy runs of text touting "molasses-colored waters teeming with large reptiles." After all, swamps aren't exactly the kind of tourist meccas that attract hordes of visitors each year. "Frightening no-man's-lands" is how the Environmental Protection Agency characterizes our traditional view of them, before going on to explain the gravity of their nationwide decline.

Still, it was precisely this ominous allure that brought me to the Okefenokee: the opportunity to paddle into the primeval.

In the elegant coffee-table book "Okefenokee" (University Press of Mississippi, 2002), George W. Folkerts writes eloquently of wading out with a net to "catch beetles, bugs, and tadpoles" while "cottonmouths, alligators, and other fabled dangers of the Swamp never cross [his] mind." In "Paddling Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge" (Falcon, 1998), authors David O'Neill and Elizabeth A. Domingue boldly posit that, "If you can't paddle around the alligator, you may be able to gently coax it out of your way. In many instances, diligent use of your paddle to lightly splash the alligator with water is sufficient."

Such statements didn't strike me as encouraging. But then a pamphlet published by the refuge, the government entity that manages most of this land on the Georgia-Florida border, grounded me: "There is no need to fear snakes or alligators as long as you take normal precautions and do not dis-

turb or feed the animals." The brochure went on to address some of the rules associated with a backcountry trip involving alligators: no dogs, no children, no dumping food, no swimming, no wading. After that, I spoke to a refuge employee and a local outfitter. Both assured me there had never been an unprovoked alligator attack in the swamp.

I began to feel confident that, with the right planning and research, we could pull this trip off. My paddling partner and I had both spent time in wilderness areas and we knew how to paddle pretty well. We wondered if this fear of alligators, like our collective perception of swamps, was askew, an irrational fear based on watching too many horror movies. We would find out soon.

We had been told the best time to paddle the Okefenokee was spring, during the height of alligator mating season. So it is a foggy spring morning along the northeastern edge of the swamp when we pull a rented, blood-red canoe from the roof of our car, strap down our gear, and push off into dark, mirror-calm water with a cooler containing our only source of drinking water for the trip. Over the next three days, we will paddle from one end of the swamp to the next... carefully.

Observing that the earth shook beneath them as they walked on its upland, early Native Americans named this area Okefenokee, "land of the trembling earth." The swamp covers close to a half-million acres, most of it in the 396,000-acre Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the third-largest wilderness area in the eastern United States. The swamp has an



GLOBE PHOTO/CHRISTOPHER PERCY COLLIER

Near the western end of Okefenokee Swamp, an area known as Big Water is flanked by pond cypresses dripping with moss.

average depth of only 6 inches, and its bottom is thick sludge, or peat, the same stuff that dyes Okefenokee water coffee-black.

Eons ago, this area was in a temperate climate zone. Cold winters slowed vegetative growth and plant matter had enough time to decompose. Now, it's in a subtropical zone, which means this decaying organic muck builds and builds until an occasional fire burns it out. Here's what this means for a paddler: Get out of your boat and you could find yourself chest-deep in mud.

About 110 miles of marked water trails snake through this swamp, and a series of primitive, open-air wooden platforms (some completely surrounded by water) are scattered throughout. In the 1960s, this area was a lesser-known fishing and hunting paradise. These days, more and more visitors come toting cameras and binoculars, with boats strapped to

the roofs of their cars and wildlife observation guides in tow.

A paddler can spend up to five days in here, following crude mile markers, steering through the labyrinth until it feels as if his or her arms will fall off, sleeping in the company of reptiles of all shapes and sizes in the middle of the swamp. Reserve a backcountry permit and it comes with a unique itinerary. Your group alone is assigned a specific trail to paddle during the day and a specific shelter to stay in at night. You're on your own, but where you are and where you'll be each day is clearly established up front. It's a system that keeps crowds at bay and safety in mind.

Sixty years ago, there was another, decidedly more aesthetically pleasing, way a human's presence was noted in the swamp.

Before the invention of cell phones and beepers, before the advent of global positioning tech-

If you go . . .

How to get there

The lowest round-trip air fare between Boston and Jacksonville, Fla., at press time is \$185 on United Airlines.

Okefenokee Adventures

Route 2, Folkston, Ga.
912-496-7156
www.okefenokeeadventures.com
E-mail: info@okefenokeeadventures.com

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

Folkston, Ga.
912-496-3331
http://okefenokee.fws.gov
Backcountry paddling the water trails along the Okefenokee Trail has become a hot ticket. To get a space out here you have to call no earlier than two months in advance and only 7-10 a.m. Monday-Friday. The reservation line is often busy. Only one group is allowed at each shelter. Weekend spaces fill fast, but last-minute cancellations offer potential options at peak times even a few days before your trip.

nology and the ubiquity of motorized fishing boats, enchanting sounds carried through the Okefenokee. It has been said that the yodel of a "swamper," as the first non-Native American settlers in the Okefenokee were called, calling home to his wife while he was out hunting or communicating with a hunting partner, could be heard for miles on a breezy night. Recordings of these intonations, developed over the course of about 90 years, make old-time snippets found on the "O Brother Where Art Thou" soundtrack seem like Britney Spears.

While the recordings are available on the Internet, these chants

are no longer heard in the swamp. Since the establishment of the refuge in 1936, which led to the relocation of all swampers, the only authentic hollering that takes place here is largely ceremonial, reenacted on special occasions.

Hollering is not the only distinctive sound here. In spring, birds are chirping, frogs are croaking, and — literally, above all — mating alligators are bellowing.

On our first night, we think we hear the many bellowing alligators that we had read so much about: deep, throaty sounds, one on top of the other, like the squawks of a reptilian cocktail party. But on the morning of day three, we realize we have been hearing croaking frogs all along: One hundred feet from our shelter, we hear a bellow straight out of "Alien," a jarring purr so deep you can almost feel it in your bones.

We pull our canoe from the black water at the other end of the swamp later that day. An alligator watches us from a nearby bank, not so much as flinching at the hull scraping along the concrete. After three days on a self-guided, 33-mile backcountry paddle, I feel invigorated, though a tinge of uneasiness about getting up close and personal with toothsome reptiles lingers. I try not to worry about it. In a few weeks, I'll be on a more mainstream summer vacation. The beaches will be sugar white. I'll sip water from the safety of my partially enclosed cabana, sleeping on a wooden chaise longue, all the while on the lookout for shark fins stealthily advancing through crystal clear water.

Christopher Percy Collier is a freelance writer in Georgia.

If you go . . .

How to get there

The lowest round-trip air fare between Boston and Kunming, China, at press time was \$2,514 on Air China International. Take a domestic flight to Dali.

Where to stay

Jim's Peace Guesthouse

Bo' Ai Lu
011-86-872-2671-822
Jim's is where many foreigners stay, as the thoroughly likable owner is fluent in English. Rooms about \$10 a night.

Tibetan Cafe and Guesthouse

Hugo Lu
Another guesthouse popular with foreigners. Spartan-but-decent rooms for about \$10.

Landscape Hotel

96 Yu'er Lu
011-86-872-2666-188
Upscale but very attractive, with traditional Chinese-style courtyards and decor. As with most hotels in China, room prices vary and depend mostly on what you negotiate. About \$30 would be reasonable.

Where to eat

Jim's Peace Cafe

Jim scores top marks for his food. The menu is small, but the quality top-notch. Especially good is the "Tibetan goulash," a stew of vegetables and yak beef. A meal is likely to be less than \$3.

Café du Jack

Bo' Ai Lu
Western food, from burgers to pasta. Sit upstairs as service downstairs is atrocious. Meals \$3-\$4.

Marley's

Bo' Ai Lu
Across the street from Café du Jack, Marley's — named for the reggae singer — also serves up good-quality Western food. Meals \$3-\$4.

Dali offers history, culture — and counterculture

► **CHINA**
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Chinese guide — confirms it: The bloodstains are from the spray of severed umbilical cords.

Li laughs as the look on my face — a blend of mild shock and surprised bemusement — indicates my understanding of his performance. What a lovely image.

Li has obviously taken a shine to me. He clutches at my hand and slaps me hard on the back while Jim explains the doctor's role here in the tiny village of Guangyi. Li has no formal training, but was appointed village doctor after displaying some aptitude in health matters. He is now responsible for all the medical needs in the village, including childbirth.

I ask if I can take a picture; he grabs his stethoscope, then poses proudly. When a group of children walk by his office, he runs out and forces them to pose for me as well.

As we say our goodbyes, it dawns on me that I've just had an extraordinary experience. As China hurls itself further into unabashed materialism, it's getting harder and harder to catch glimpses of simple life amid all the new shopping malls, freeways, and factories. It was refreshing that here in Li's grungy operating room, the simple life continues.

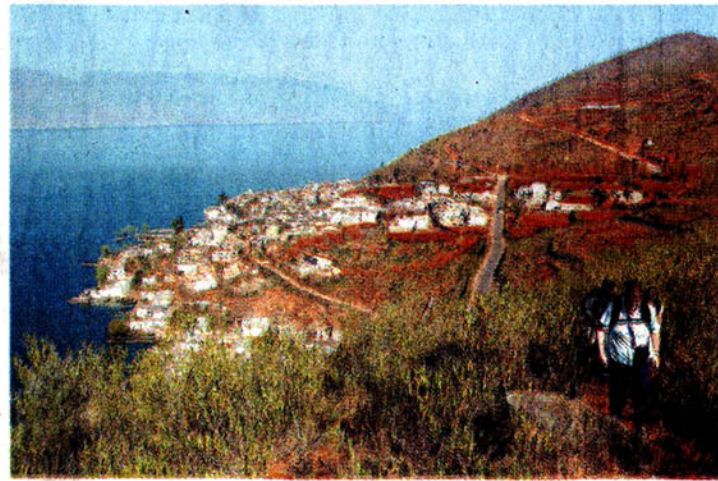
Finding simple life (or do I mean old-fashioned life?) in China, as it turns out, is not that difficult; you just have to know where to look. Nobody has ever heard of Guangyi and it's certainly not in any guidebook, but the village is

near a tourist hot spot: the town of Dali, in northern Yunnan province. Dali has an attractive old town of Ming dynasty buildings and cobblestone streets, still surrounded in part by a fortified wall. Old pagodas abound in and around town, with the most impressive — San Ta, or the Three Pagodas, the largest of which towers at 226 feet — a short walk north. The town is idyllically situated between the impressive Cang Shan Mountains and placid Er-Hai Lake, in this most southwestern province bordered by Burma, Laos, and Vietnam.

It is no surprise, then, that Dali is popular. Chinese tourists like it for its historical buildings and culture, aspects that are sorely lacking in many of the big cities. Foreigners, meanwhile, have made Dali their own hippie-esque backpacker haven. Dozens of cafes serve up Western food, from banana pancakes to burgers and burritos, as well as Western music. Reggae, in particular, is popular.

Perhaps the most famous establishment in town is Jim's Peace Cafe and Guesthouse. With budget rooms — nothing fancy, but entirely serviceable — and some of the best food in Dali, Jim also runs several day trips around town. The area around Dali is home to the Bai minority people, and the best of Jim's trips goes through their villages. Guangyi is one.

Jim is somewhat of an institution in Dali, and thoroughly an eccentric. His long hair, sideburns, and goatee are in stark contrast to



GLOBE PHOTO/PETER NOWAK

Wenbi is a Bai village on Er-Hai Lake, once rich in fish but now off limits in an attempt to let its dwindling stock recover.

his tailor-made suit. He has run his guesthouse for 25 years and usually sits in the cafe, drinking beer, and chain-smoking. He speaks impeccable English, punctuated by several catchphrases: "So far so good," "You must be joking," and, when exasperated, "Jesus Christ!"

Seeing an advertisement for the trip in his cafe — Jim would guide up to five people through the villages for about \$60 total — I asked him about it. At first, he seemed reluctant to do it as his birthday was only a day away; then, he caved in.

"For this kind of money, I'll do it," he said, "but don't ask me to do anything on my birthday!"

The next day, Jim met the four of us bright and early outside the cafe. I chatted with him as we

drove down to the lake. It turned out he is married to a Dutch photographer and has two children. The family was in the Netherlands, but was to return in a few weeks. Most of the customers at his guesthouse come from Europe, a result of his wife's marketing efforts. The couple also runs a tour company specializing in Yunnanese and Tibetan minority areas.

So how was business?

"So far so good," he replied with a grin.

Our boat crossed Er-Hai Lake, and Jim explained the area's dilemma. Dali and its environs once relied heavily on fishing, but the people had essentially bled the lake dry. Japanese demand for the prized silverfish, in particular, had fueled an overfishing frenzy, so much so that the government had

been forced to ban all fishing so the stocks could replenish.

"But the silverfish are valuable, so people still sneak out and fish for them at night," Jim said. "How can you stop them? Jesus Christ!"

The boat dropped us at the foot of the hillside village of Wenbi. We hiked up, admiring the small houses and huts, some made of stone, some of rammed earth. The smell of incense wafted through the air and the village was unnaturally quiet, almost eerily so. Where was everyone?

Jim stopped outside one house, announcing it was "story time." He pointed to a plaque with nine stars above the doorway. This, he explained, was a Chinese rating system and a mark of status. If the family inhabiting the establishment accumulated 10 stars, they could join the Communist Party. Stars were gained for a variety of things: maintaining good hygiene, following the one-child policy, showing an interest in politics, performing public acts, and so on.

So we were standing outside the residence of a perfect communist family?

"Nearly perfect," Jim said, peeking into the house and chuckling. "I don't think their hygiene is very good."

We continued on, and Jim drew our attention to the loudspeakers hanging from nearby poles: "Propaganda" was his simple explanation. Moving on, we discovered where all the people had gone: They were at the village temple, engaged in a prayer service. Well, the women were praying, anyway. The men sat around smoking cigarettes and playing mah-jongg.

Jim led us up and out into the sun-baked hills above Wenbi, where we hiked for an hour and admired the views of Er-Hai Lake. Then it was back down to a small, abandoned fishermen's temple, where his driver picked us up for the ride back to Guangyi.

After the meeting with Li, in which he demonstrated the finer points of delivering babies, we stumbled upon a parade. It was spring festival time in China, and the villagers were celebrating. A group of men led a dragon dance through town while women and children followed.

Jim was beaming. It was obvious he was having a good time.

"You've got to be joking!" he gasped as the parade approached.

But it was no joke. The day was fulfilling in a way that is increasingly rare in China. Or, as Jim would tell me later over beers at his birthday party, "This isn't tourist stuff. This is more interesting, because it's real life."

Peter Nowak is a freelance writer in Guangzhou.

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