



Photos courtesy of Aquavision Tours

**DAYCATION:** CRYSTAL RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

# 'An Unforgettable Experience'

By Barbara Weibel

I've seen manatees. I've come nose to nose with them through the window of an underwater observatory. I must admit to being just the tiniest bit obsessed with manatees at this point. So of course, the only logical next step was to swim with the manatees.

Although manatees have been known to range as far west as Texas and as far north as Virginia in the warmer summer months, most live in the coastal waters of Florida and nearby states. However in colder months, they retreat to the rivers and springs because they cannot tolerate water temperatures lower than 68 degrees. Florida springs are favorite wintering grounds for manatees because the water temperature is 72 degrees year-round, and since Florida's Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge supports the largest concentration of these gentle giants, the town of Crystal River was my destination.

I arranged for a half-day boat trip with Wayne White, a semi-retired captain and professional photographer

who still takes the occasional visitor in search of manatees. Captain White had everything I needed: goggles, a snorkel, fins, a wetsuit—even SPF 50 sunblock. The only thing I had to bring was a swimsuit and some money for his tour fee. After watching a mandatory video about the laws that have been enacted to protect manatees (“thou shalt not, at any time, intentionally or negligently, annoy, molest, harass or disturb any manatee”), I boarded Captain White's pontoon boat from a dock behind the King's Bay Lodge.

We motored slowly through the bay and turned left into Crystal River. A short distance upstream we tied up at the entrance to Three Sisters Springs, just a few feet away from a roped-off area where several manatees were rest-

ing on the bottom. I zipped up the wetsuit that was a size too large, pulled on my flippers, and slipped into the river. After recovering from the initial shock of the chilly water, I swam toward the concrete pillars at the mouth of the spring that keep boats out and lined up behind two kayakers and a gaggle of adolescent snorkelers.

As I waited my turn to enter, two enormous manatees suddenly decided to leave the restricted enclosure and swim into the spring. One of them passed to my right; the second swam directly beneath me and rose up, as if offering me a ride. Gently I stroked his leathery skin, surprised to discover it covered in short, spiky hairs. He looked at me curiously through my snorkel mask and then swam through the pillars and was gone. “Come,” motioned my captain—there are more inside.

**I SWAM THROUGH** the underwater rocks guarding the narrow entrance and into a magical blue wonderland where sunbeams pierced the azure water and rippled on the white sand bottom. Along the shoreline, submerged, gnarled tree roots created abstract landscapes. Schools of flashing silver fish, numbering in the thousands, hovered unconcernedly at the bottom. Strangely, they all faced the same direction and when they turned, it was done in unison, as if communicating telepathically. If not for the tap on my arm, I might still be there, mesmerized by the blueness and the exquisite beauty. Again my captain beckoned: “Follow me!”

Around a corner, the spring opened out into a large bowl where six manatees rested on the bottom among huge, moss-covered boulders. Like synchronized swimmers, they alternated between floating to the surface to grab a snoot-full of air and sinking back to the bottom where they curled up in a humpback resting posture. Although I tried to keep my distance, the flow of the springs pushed me ever closer to the herd. Their sheer size was intimidating—a manatee can reach up to 13 feet in length and weigh up to 3,000 pounds. Worried about being



caught between them as they surfaced for air, I was swimming toward the boulders for protection when one of the moss-covered stones began rising to the surface, revealing itself to be beast rather than boulder.

Amazed, I sought out Captain White for an explanation.

“Manatees are serviced by cleaner fish that eat the moss off their bodies,” he replied. “The ones still covered in moss just haven’t had their turn yet.”

He also insisted that I need not worry about being hit by a manatee, explaining that each of the stiff hairs I had felt on their body are connected to a nerve, allowing them to sense the slightest sound and movement in the water. However, this was not a theory I was prepared to test. Sitting on top of a single manatee was one thing; being surrounded by an entire herd was quite another. I kept my distance.

**AFTER THREE HOURS** in the 72-degree water, my teeth began to chatter and I started to shake uncontrollably. Oh, how I wanted to stay! But I knew it was time to leave. Captain White checked my lips and concurred—my upper lip was just beginning to turn purple. I dipped my mask underwater for one long last look just as the manatee nearest me floated up for air. Facing one another, we hovered beneath the surface, snout to nose, barely two feet between us. I swear he looked directly at me, knowingly. Then he tipped his nose up, filled his two gi-

ant nostrils with air, and plunked back down on the bottom, boulder-like. I’ll never know for sure, but I’d like to believe it was the same manatee that had offered me the piggyback ride.

Swimming with the manatees was an unforgettable experience, full of awe and wonder. I am extremely grateful that there are still places like this in the world, where humans can interact with wildlife in its natural habitat. ❁

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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*At the age of 54, Barbara Weibel realized she felt like the proverbial “hole in the donut,” solid on the outside but empty on the inside. Searching for meaning in her life, she walked away from corporate life and set out to see the world. Eight years later, she is still traveling, with no permanent home. Read her first-hand accounts of the places she visits and the people she meets on her blog, *Hole in the Donut Cultural Travels*, or follow her on Facebook or Twitter (@holeinthedonut).*

## DID YOU GO?

If you decide to take (or have already taken) the short trek to Crystal River, we’d love to hear about your experience. Send us a few sentences, along with photos if possible, and we’ll include it in a future issue. Email us at [dean@ocalasgoodlife.com](mailto:dean@ocalasgoodlife.com) or mail us: 4130 SW 13th Street, Ocala 34474.