



MARY LOU JOHNSON

# Going Green on the Gulf Coast

Immerse yourself in coastal beauty — plus (not boring!) education — with four-day ((ecko)) eco-tours.

A bike tour through Robinson Preserve is a leisurely part of the Manatee River of Time ecotour.

By Rona Gindin

It won't feel like school when you're pedaling a tangerine-colored cruiser bicycle around a nature preserve. Nor will you have flashbacks of preachy sixth-grade field trips as you hold a spear thrower just like those used by American Indians 12,000 years ago. That was way before Hernando de Soto's crew started traipsing around the Gulf shoreline in the 1500s.

In the Bradenton area, experts — and, by experts, we mean Ph.D., scientist-types who are passionate about nature — have put together ecotours that wrap fun and education together in a way that's appealing to both nature newbies and know-it-alls. Bid your car goodbye for four days and enter a world of marshes and farm-fresh foods, of mangroves and ancient burial mounds — all without holding

a map or swiping a MasterCard. Carbon footprint? There is none to speak of. Your only brush with the modern world will be at night when, with some itineraries, you'll dine on your own and sleep in a comfy, green-ish hotel. Opt for an alfresco trip and you'll dream under the stars instead, care of concierge camping. At the primitive campsites, you'll find your tent already pitched, your air mattress inflated, your chef-made meal simmering, and the "privacy toilets" set up.

This isn't a mere collection of nature adventures. Under the banner of ((ecko)) tours, these excursions through the Gulf Coast's natural wonders are part of a not-for-profit mission. They're a brand new offshoot of the Science and Environment Council of Southwest Florida. Essentially, 25 local nonprofits and

32 for-profit businesses teamed up to show off the Bradenton-Sarasota area's ecological and cultural highlights. Botanical gardens, a marine lab, state parks, conservation groups, Audubon chapters and universities are among the entities involved.

Participants don't just visit off-the-smartphone-grid destinations. They spend time with someone who's an expert about each one. For example, picture a solo trip to Robinson Preserve alone. You would likely walk around and think, "Hey, that's kind of pretty." Attend with an ((ecko)) professional who dedicates his or her 40-hour work week to the 487-acre coastal saltern, marsh and mangrove habitat. Then you'll learn how the spread was a fruit, vegetable and flower-bulb farm that was razed for condos and a golf course. You'll also discover that eco-minded folks

saved the land and, literally, scraped it so it would be the same level as the Gulf of Mexico, allowing water to flow in and restoring native coastal plants and animals.

## Planetarium Director Jeff Rodgers used the domed overhead screen to bring visitors across the universe.

The presentation won't be dry. The ((ecko)) team hand-picks guides who know how to make facts interesting. Still, these leaders are so learned in their specific field that even educated participants will be intrigued.

((ecko)) offers five itineraries. They have names like Urban Wildlife by Bike and Gulf Coast Florida Birding. Some involve kayaking or cycling. Teenagers and adults are welcome. Groups of up to 12 can book private excursions, too.

During an abbreviated, single-day excursion on the Manatee River of Time tour, travelers began their adventure in the comfy confines of the Bishop Planetarium. There, director Jeff Rodgers used the domed overhead screen to bring visitors across the universe, into North America, then, step by step, into Bradenton, where they could see the very same dome from the sky. Then the group walked to the nearby marina and took a water taxi to Emerson Point Preserve.

Master Naturalist Karen Willey shared the land's 4,500-year history. The "really ancient place" has the temple mound of a lost tribe that died out when the European explorers arrived, she explained. She showed where the shaman and chief lived, which



GLEN HASTING FOR BACAB

Guests learn all about Emerson Point Preserve's lost tribe and its customs.

plants the tribe ate, and where guests stayed for ceremonies — in areas shaped like animals that probably represented their totems. She also demonstrated how the Native Americans made tattoos, canoes and tools.

After a jaunt at nearby De Soto National Memorial, participants rode bicycles to the organic Geraldson Community Farm, where a tour was preceded by lunch. The foods had been grown on the farm, made into a salad and sandwiches by farm-to-table chef Derek Barnes of Derek's Rustic Coastal Cuisine, and bagged up for lunch mere feet from the field.

The shortened tour wrapped up after the Robinson Preserve bike tour, but the full four-day itinerary includes way more. The Cortez fishing village, the Florida Maritime Museum, the A.P. Bell Fish Company, the Star Fish Company restaurant, Anna Maria Island, and a three-hour kayak adventure are all on the itinerary.

If you want total immersion into Florida's green side, and to learn what it is you're looking at, ((ecko)) might be the way to go. **L**

Read more online at [j.mp/eckotours](http://j.mp/eckotours)



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Each ((ecko)) tour's itinerary brings travelers up close to native wildlife and gives a lesson about them, too.