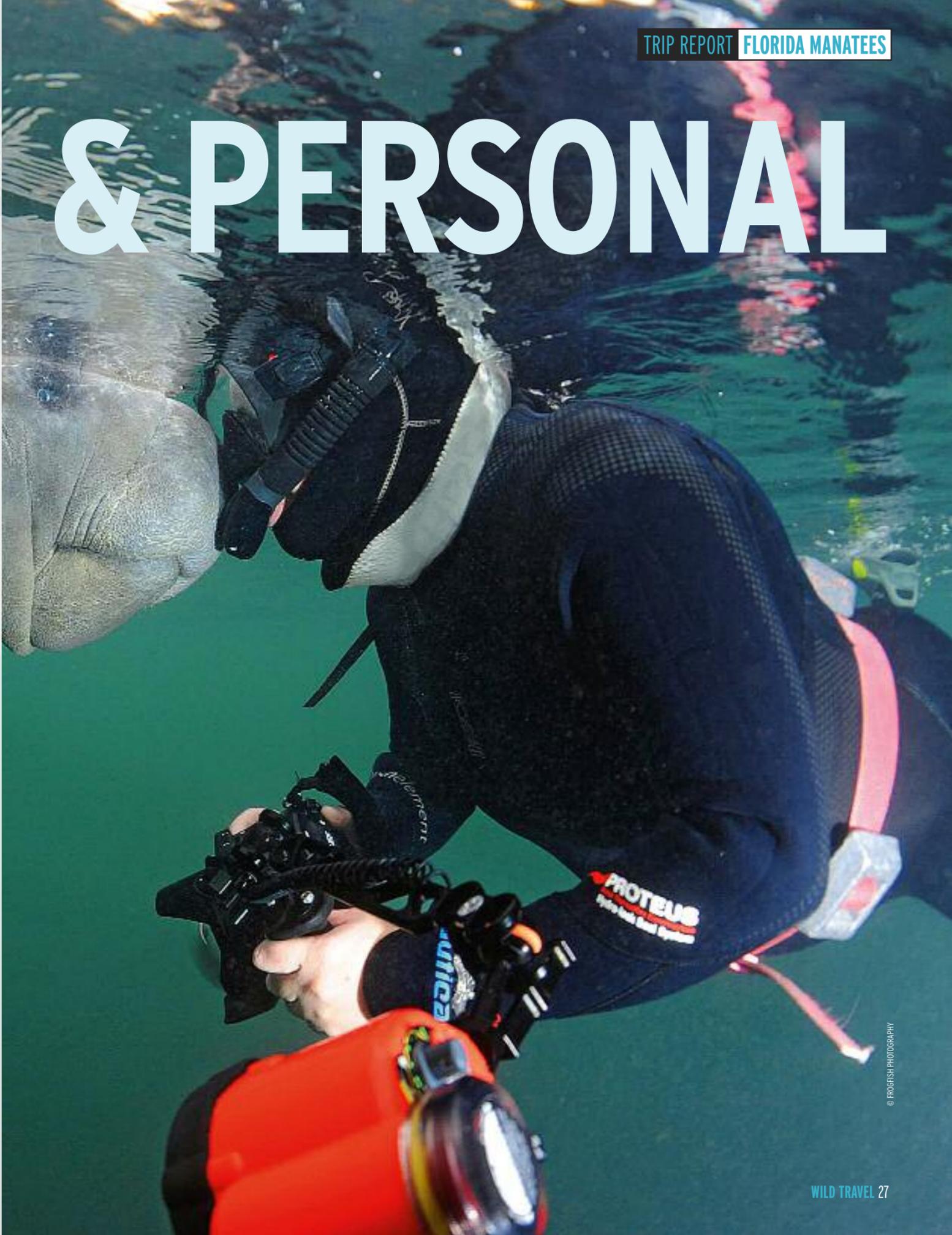


Just a few hours north west of the attractions of Orlando, Florida, is Crystal River, where **Nick and Caroline Robertson-Brown** headed to enjoy a close encounter of the manatee kind

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL



Here: Caroline rubs noses with a new friend. Huge and gentle creatures, manatees often seek out the attention of snorkelling visitors



It's 7am

and the pale Florida winter sun is peeping over the trees, as we kayak in silence along the misty surface of Homosassa springs

Gliding into a familiar section of the river, where dark silhouettes begin to shift beneath us, we lift our paddles into the boat, put on our masks and fins and slide into the cool water. No sooner have our eyes adjusted to the gloom, when a 10ft (3.4 metres) long, 400kg manatee swims into view. Slowly, but purposefully, it begins to move towards Caroline, until, suddenly, they are touching, face to face, nose to nose. Breathing deeply into my snorkel, I watch the whole event unfold and, as the viewfinder of my camera snaps into focus, I capture the moment.

The previous afternoon we had landed at Orlando airport and, with rising anticipation, collected the keys to our rental car. Just a few hours' drive away from the

These docile creatures rest in shallow water, surfacing every half hour or so for air, but between rests they also love to interact with visitors



man-made attractions of Disney World is a natural wonder: a unique network of freshwater springs, offering the possibility of enjoying a close encounter with a Florida manatee. This large, cow-like creature, spends most of its time out at sea, but when the winter draws in, it comes inland to seek the warm water of the Florida aquifers, which are dotted across the north west section of the county and bring a steady supply of fresh water to the surface of rivers, channels and sea-water inlets.

An adult manatee can weigh up to 600kgs, and the animals have a large boulder-shaped body, a flat paddle tail and flippers, black marbled eyes and a snub, bristled snout. These docile creatures rest in shallow water, surfacing every half hour or so for air, but between rests they also love to interact with visitors to their domain; it is this unique opportunity to swim with them that inspires us to return here year after year.

Before starting the three-hour drive north west to the small town of Crystal River, we packed all of our scuba-diving equipment, underwater photography gear and clothing for any weather, into the car. Over the years, we have encountered every type of weather. Some years we have seen snow on the ground and others we have only needed shorts and t-shirts. But regardless of the climate, the water is always 23 degrees celsius, which is what brings the manatees inland, as they abandon the chilly Gulf of Mexico waters for this natural sanctuary.



Clockwise from top far left: Crystal River is about a three-hour drive from Orlando airport; the dark silhouettes of docile manatees resting on the river bed; a heron stands sentry along the water's edge; weighing between 400-600kg and a host for algae, manatees like to relieve their itchy skin by scratching against a hard surface

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Travelling on the road from the airport, it is possible to catch the first glimpses of some of Florida's wildlife, and from the window of our car we spot wild hogs snuffling in the verges and even an elusive Florida puma, as it pads across the tarmac in the early evening light. On previous trips, we have also seen birds of prey feasting on road kill and some of Florida's famous alligators sunning themselves on a riverbank.

GENTLE GIANTS

Ever since we first read about the plight of the Florida manatees several years ago, we have been making this annual pilgrimage, fearful that one day it may no longer be possible. Environmental pressures from housing developers have squeezed the manatee into smaller and fewer winter-resting areas. However, there is a growing army of local volunteers prepared to guard these wonderful creatures. As Bill Bird, an instructor from a local dive centre told us: "We have to look after these critters – they bring tourists and the tourists keep the manatee from being driven to extinction."

When embarking on a trip to see manatees, an early start is essential – and we have rented a house right on the canal network, complete with a selection of kayaks, ready to launch into the river each morning. We rise before the sun has come up and silently pack our masks, fins and cameras onto the kayaks. Already dressed in our wetsuits, →

MANATEE CONSERVATION



The fight to protect Florida's friendliest marine life

The Florida manatee has no natural enemies; in fact, the largest cause of manatee deaths is by boat strike. At the last population count in 2011, there were as few as 5,000 spread across Florida and the Caribbean. They are now listed as endangered and are protected under several international and local laws.

The Florida locals are passionate about protecting these curious looking creatures and there are several charities dedicated to their protection. Save the Manatee (www.savethemanatee.org) was founded by American singer Jimmy Buffett. This charity spends its time educating people about manatees and trying to reduce the number of deaths caused by humans.

Before any tour, those getting in the water with a manatee must watch a video on etiquette, rules and how we can help with their conservation. On top of this, boating lanes now have strict speed limits, with manatee warning signs. Large areas are roped off to prevent boat and human access, offering a peaceful zone where the manatees can rest.

Wardens tour the area in boats and kayaks to assist in the education process and enforce the safe snorkelling rules. Fines are hefty for anyone who chooses to ignore these laws. Local groups are also raising money to buy land around the key manatee aggregation zones to prevent any further development in this fantastically wild area.



It's an unforgettable experience to have these huge, gentle and critically endangered creatures in such close proximity

we paddle for less than 10 minutes before reaching our first spring. It is only a few metres deep here and as we ease ourselves into the water, we are greeted by a huge female manatee and her calf. Wary of our presence, they call to each other in high pitched squeaks and the mother appears to reassure the little one that we are OK, before approaching us to welcome us into their domain.

Due to the algae that grows on their thick skin, Manatees are very itchy animals and they like nothing more than to rub up against a kayak, boat or even an unsuspecting snorkeller to get some relief! There are, however, strict rules to follow when interacting with these magnificent creatures and wardens are on hand to help you follow them. In particular, the Florida State Parks have set-up 'no go' zones, where humans and boats are forbidden, to ensure the manatees have certain areas where they will not be disturbed.

Visitors are expected to be respectful in the manatees' presence, with swimmers instructed not to grab hold of them, ride them, dive down to them, harass or chase them off. You are, however, allowed to use one hand to give them a welcome scratch. We opt to lie still on the surface and let them swim around us and it's an unforgettable experience to have these huge, gentle and critically endangered creatures in such close proximity.

We spend our first morning interacting with the manatees and taking photos until the first tour boats start to arrive. In just three hours, we have enjoyed a swim with as many as 10 individual manatees. The local wardens on duty that morning tell us that it is one of the best days they →

Clockwise from top left: there is much wildlife to enjoy around the area's fresh water caverns, springs and rivers, and around Homosassa Bay; there are strict rules to follow when interacting with this endangered species; who would not want to gaze into those enigmatic, cow-like faces?; manatees surface every half hour or so for air

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Clockwise from above left: Caroline swims quietly alongside a manatee; a wild hog that was spotted snuffing on the road to Crystal Springs; Nick sees another photo opportunity

have witnessed in years, and a sure sign that manatee numbers in the area are starting to recover.

After devoting our mornings to the manatees, we decide to spend the afternoons exploring the area's fresh water caverns, caves and rivers. There are many potential dive sites to visit, but we choose to focus our attention on Rainbow River and the caverns at Ginie Springs, where the underwater attractions include leopard-skinned gars and freshwater turtles, which we find peeking out of the lush riverbed grasses.

FACE TO FACE

On our final day we decide to take an organised tour to see the manatees at the Three Sisters Springs – probably the most famous place for seeing wild manatees in the world. Rising early again, we head to Bird's Underwater in Crystal River, where we board a flat, twin pontoon boat that takes us to the spring. The water is much clearer here and there are hundreds of manatees located in the three springs that feed the area. As we lower ourselves into the water, the scene is reminiscent of the daily morning commute, with manatees coming and going about their routines.

Occasionally, we are told, manatees will come here to convalesce from boat propeller injuries and we spot one with some particularly nasty scars, resting on the bottom as a 'cleaner' fish attends to its wounds. Some of the manatees ignore all the fuss and just snooze underwater, while others actively seek out attention.

After spending only a short time with them we start to recognise which manatees are approachable and which are happiest posing for photographs. Over four days we take hundreds of pictures, but it is that photo of Caroline, finding herself face to face with a 400kg manatee, that best encapsulates our experience of sharing Florida's springs with this enigmatic endangered species. 

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING: ★★☆☆☆ (if you book your own flights and car hire this is an inexpensive trip)

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Virgin Holidays offer fly/drive packages from the UK to Orlando for 7 nights from about £550. On the other side of the Atlantic, Bird's Underwater can organise your house rental, kayaks and manatee tours. House rental starts from about \$120 (£78) per night for a house that sleeps up to six people, including kayak hire. Guided tours to see the manatees cost about \$45 (£29) per person.

www.virginholidays.co.uk;
www.birdsunderwater.com

GETTING THERE: Orlando airport is easy to get to, with many options for flights from the UK. Some carriers, such as Virgin Atlantic, offer a large baggage allowance, so this is worth considering when pricing up the options – especially if you are planning on transporting diving

equipment. Upon arrival, the drive to Homosassa is about 2-3 hours from the airport and easy to navigate.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: You need to apply for an ESTA before departing for the USA. This can be done online and costs \$12. You will then be given a 30-day visa on entering the USA. An ESTA is valid for two years, as long as your passport remains valid.

TIPS & WARNINGS: Make sure your insurance will cover you for in-water activities like kayaking. Take a waterproof camera to bring home some great memories. The water is a cool(ish) 22 degrees celsius, so a wetsuit is a must. It is possible to hire one on arrival or bring your own.

WHEN TO GO: The manatees usually gather at the springs in the winter months, so the best time is between November and March, although you may see some manatees throughout the year.

TOUR OPERATORS:

- **BIRDS UNDERWATER**, Tel: +1 352 563 2763; www.birdsunderwater.com
- **RIVER VENTURES**, Tel: +1 352 564 8687; www.riverventures.com
- **SUNSHINE RIVER TOURS**, Tel: +1 352 628 3450; www.sunshinerivertours.com
- **FLORIDA MANATEE TOURS**, Tel: +1 352 795 7033; www.floridamanateetours.com