

# Splash

A publication of the Palatka Daily News



2023 Edition



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# SHAPING THE FUTURE!

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## Letter from the Editor



### Watery fun in Putnam County

**I**t is springtime in Florida (well, as close to spring as Florida's weather wackiness allows) and that means it is a great time of year to get out and enjoy some sunshine and waterway fun.

Some of the best places to do that are within these pages. Our reporters have sought out the details for several great Putnam County locations that feature our beautiful waterways. From the stunning St. Johns River to Welaka State Forest's Mud Springs, each of the articles within these pages give readers a taste of how to enjoy the natural beauty of our tributaries, creeks and lakes.

You'll get a peek at the wealth of places to launch a boat, cast a line or find out how to book a luxury cruise that explores the majestic St. Johns River in Palatka as well as other North Florida waterways. Wander the 152 acres of Ravine Gardens State Park and explore a spring-fed stream that empties into the mighty river. Catch a glimpse of otters playing in the Rodman Reservoir from the shore or rent a boat from a local fish camp or marina and get a closer look.

There's no better way to enjoy Putnam County's wealth of nature than from its waterways. Take a dip into these pages and find some fun, outdoor-friendly places to go.

**Casmira Harrison**  
Editor  
*Palatka Daily News*

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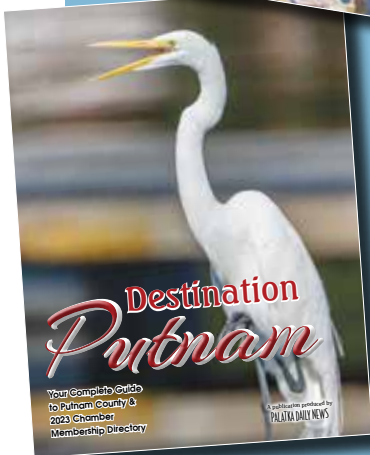
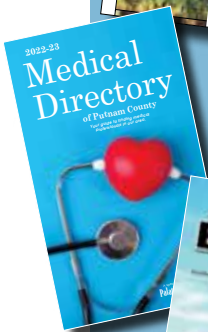




Photo by Greg Walker/*Palatka Daily News*

The public boat ramp is seen at Brown's Landing in Palatka recently. The ramp is one of many points of entry for boaters to the St. Johns River.

# Waterway access points abundant across Putnam

By Greg Walker  
Special to the *Palatka Daily News*

**P**utnam County citizens are fortunate to live just footsteps from the St. Johns River and all its tributaries. The river's shores are dotted with marinas, public and private ramps to enhance quality time on the water.

There are approximately 29 boat ramps across the entire county, which include clear, sand bottom lakes as well. The facilities are for all water sports, including fishing, swimming, boating, canoeing and kayaking.

Private marinas offer off-ramps, mooring docks, boat rentals, motel rooms, cabins and bait and tackle shops, as well as RV hook-ups and concession areas.

Public ramp facilities available are simply for launching and pulling out boats and other watercraft from our local water bodies. Parking space varies according to the site and some ramp areas also have ample dock space for fishing.

Palatka's Riverfront Park is able to accommodate major fishing events with its large ramps, docks and parking lot. Recent events include Wolfson Children's Hospital's Annual Bass Tournament, in which more than 400 boats have taken part. This year's event is slated for May 18-20, according to the tournament's website. More information about the tournament and how to register can be found at <https://giving.baptistjax.com/event/wolfson-childrens-bass-tournament-2023/e410375>.



The Palatka riverfront has also been host to the Bassmaster Elite Series kick-off for four-years running. In 2022, the AFTCO Bassmaster Elite at St. Johns River drew at least 100 boats. While this past February's kick-off was held in Lake Okeechobee, local anglers have said they anticipate the series' eventual return to Putnam County.

The Palatka City Dock also serves as home to other, locally organized bass tournaments and remains a destination point for American Cruise Lines' eastern U.S. river cruise ships.

Just north of Palatka off Hwy. 17, Crystal Cove Marina also hosts bass tournaments. The marina's wide ramps and long docks make for easy usage. The marina also offers boat rentals, moorings, boat storage, RV hook-ups, a tackle & bait shop, motel rooms and a bar and grill.

Heading south on Hwy. 17, Georgia Boys Fish Camp can be found along Dunns Creek. The spot is one of Putnam County's oldest and well-known fish camps. It offers a good ramp, fishing and pontoon boat rentals, cottages, a bait and tackle shop, snacks, cold drinks and ice.



Photo by Greg Walker/Palatka Daily News

Boaters launch into Dunns Creek at Georgia Boy's Fish Camp in Satsuma recently.

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Photo by Greg Walker/*Palatka Daily News*

Crystal Cove Marina's wide ramps and large boat docks, seen here in February, provide another easy access point to the St. Johns River.

Renegades on the River  
St. Johns River  
1171 County Road 309  
Crescent City.

Bass World  
209 Brown's Fish Camp Road  
St. Johns River  
Off County Rd. 309.

Crescent City Public Ramp  
St. Johns River  
1 Central Avenue.  
Crescent City

Lake Stella Public Ramp  
519 Central Ave.  
Crescent City

Shell Harbor Public Ramp  
St. Johns River  
162 Harbor Way  
Satsuma, Fl.

Welaka Public Ramp  
St. Johns River  
Elm Street  
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138 Magnolia Ave.  
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St. Johns River  
135 Pico Road  
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126 Boat Ramp Road  
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Brown's Landing Public Ramp  
St. John's River  
4065 Brown's Landing Road.  
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Photo by Greg Walker/*Palatka Daily News*

Left: Wolfson Children's Hospital's Annual Bass Tournament anglers wait at Palatka's city docks to launch into the St. Johns River waterway.

Below: Boaters head toward Memorial Bridge in Palatka on a recent sunny day on the St. Johns River.



Casmira Harrison/*Palatka Daily News*



Casmira Harrison/*Palatka Daily News*



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File photo/Palatka Daily News

People spend a day in the sun fishing at the Rodman Reservoir.

# Rodman Reservoir: Nearly 60 years of fishing and recreation

Palatka Daily News Staff

**L**ocated southwest of Palatka and near the Ocala National Forest, the Rodman Reservoir has evolved into a rich ecosystem and popular fishing location for local residents and visitors. The site is a sought-after spot for bass tournaments, offering trophy bass for pros and amateurs alike.

On Feb. 27, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson set off the explosion marking the beginning of the Cross Florida Barge Canal. President Richard Nixon halted the project in 1971 and it was officially decommissioned in 1990. Still, the remnants of the project still stand today. It's a place some people, like Putnam County Commissioner Larry Harvey, have visited since they were young.

Harvey said he's been fishing and boating there for 50 years and hopes other people will take advantage of the reservoir.

"It's such an environmental treasure we have out there," Harvey said.

When visiting, try to catch a glimpse of the otters that frolic in the waterbody or watch the cormorants hunt for their breakfast as a new day dawns over Putnam County.

The Rodman Reservoir is more formally known as the Kirkpatrick Dam. The dam was renamed in 2003 to honor the late Sen. George Kirkpatrick, a longtime ally of the Rodman Reservoir.

The area attracts more than anglers, with hikers, families and school groups using the facilities. The Rodman recreation area is free and open to the public. There is a boat ramp to the Ocklawaha River, fishing piers, picnic areas and restrooms.

There is also Rodman Campground, located near the reservoir with more than 60 camping sites that include primitive tent sites or 38 sites with power and water hookups, according to [floridastateparks.org](http://floridastateparks.org). A two-lane boat ramp is located in the campground for campers to use. To make reservations, contact the campground at 386-326-2846 or visit [reserve.floridastateparks.org/Web/#!park/57](http://reserve.floridastateparks.org/Web/#!park/57).



For more information about the Rodman campgrounds, visit [floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/rodman-campground](http://floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/rodman-campground).

For more information about the Rodman Recreation Area, visit [floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/rodman-recreation-area](http://floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/rodman-recreation-area).



Fishing, boating and sightseeing - there's plenty of relaxing ways to enjoy the Rodman Recreation Area and the waterbodies that surround it.

File photos/Palatka Daily News

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*File photo/Palatka Daily News*

Sunrise on the St. Johns River in Palatka.

# The St. Johns River

**A place to play and a place to preserve**

**Sarah Cavacini**  
Palatka Daily News  
[scavacini@palatkadailynews.com](mailto:scavacini@palatkadailynews.com)

The St. Johns River offers 310 miles of recreational opportunities and there's no shortage of fun in Putnam County.

Dock in Palatka to stop by Ravine Gardens State Park, or hike your way through the Welaka State Forest in the south end of the county.

These two stops sit along the St. Johns River but people don't even need to get out of the river to make memories.

There are plenty of boat ramps and marinas to start kayaking, canoeing or boating along the St. Johns River.

These locations include:

Anderson's Lodge, 10 Boston St. in Welaka.

3 Bananas, 11 S. Lake St. in Crescent City.  
Welaka Lodge & Resort, 1001 Front St. in Welaka.  
Renegade's on the River, 1171 County Road 309 in Crescent City.

Bass World Lodge & Marina, 209 Browns Fish Camp Road in Crescent City.

Crystal Cove Riverfront Resort, 133 Crystal Cove Dr. in Palatka.

Jessica Finch, community engagement coordinator for the St. Johns Riverkeeper, said the St. Johns River is Putnam County's largest economic drive. The St. Johns Riverkeeper is a privately-funded organization chartered in 1999 to be a watchdog and advocate for the river.



Finch, a Welaka Town Council member, formerly owned the Welaka Lodge & Resort and works to keep the community engaged.

“And with what we have in Putnam, the natural beauty and the recreational opportunities, I think we have a chance to define our future with the river as our centerpiece,” she said.

The river flows north starting at Blue Cypress Lake in Indian County and it empties into the Atlantic Ocean east of Jacksonville, according to the Riverkeeper’s website. The massive waterway touches 12 counties and covers an area about 9,000 square miles, the agency states.

If the weather permits, there isn’t a day in Putnam County where someone isn’t kayaking, fishing or boating along the river. The river is populated with bluegill, catfish, largemouth bass and striped bass, which is why south Putnam’s Crescent City is known as the “Bass Capital of the World.”

While Finch said it’s great that people take advantage of the river’s recreational opportunities, people can also help keep the river clean. She encouraged people to visit [stjohnsriverkeeper.com](http://stjohnsriverkeeper.com) to learn more about the river and become an advocate for its health.



File photo/Palatka Daily News

Fog rests on the St. Johns River early one morning in Palatka.

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*Courtesy of Skydive Palatka*

Skydive Palatka gives a new skydiver a few of the St. Johns River from above in 2021.

“It’s a whole ecosystem that you’re putting yourself in the middle of, which is great,” Finch said. “I mean, I want people to enjoy the river – it’s absolutely the best thing we have here – but to be mindful of the environment and the surroundings that we’re in.”

People don’t even have to live near the river to help keep it clean, she said, because runoff that comes from yards finds its way back into Florida’s aquifers. Putnam County residents can create a river-friendly yard by planting native plants.

Finch also recommended people report blue-green algae outbreaks or instances of illegal dumping and try to cut back on water usage.

“(It) sounds kind of simple,” she said, “but it actually would be an impactful thing for the river.”

To learn more about preserving the St. Johns River visit [stjohnsriverkeeper.org](http://stjohnsriverkeeper.org).



*File photo/Palatka Daily News*

Boaters relax on the St. Johns River for a day of fishing.



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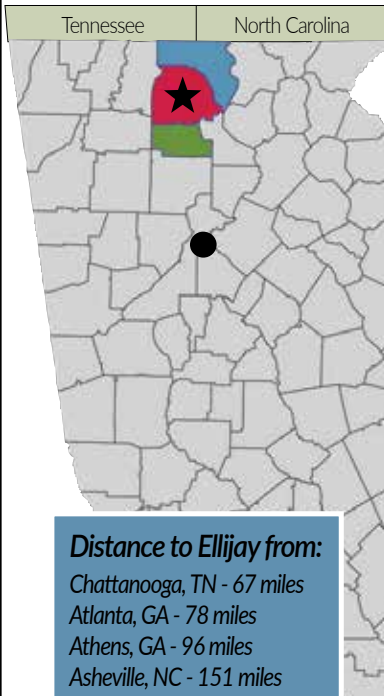


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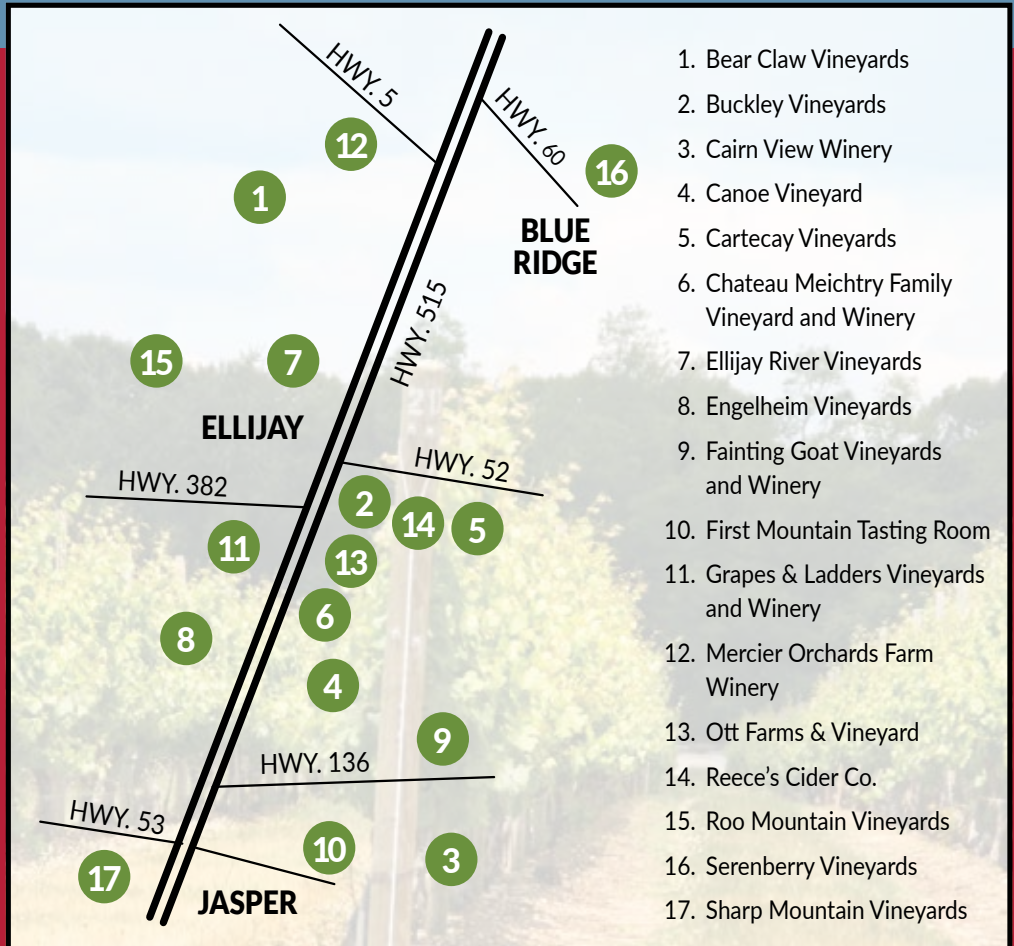
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# Meander Putnam's main waterway in style

Major domestic cruise line includes stop in Palatka

Casmira Harrison

Palatka Daily News

[charrison@palatkadailynews.com](mailto:charrison@palatkadailynews.com)

**F**olks strolling Palatka's riverfront may occasionally notice a rather large vessel moored near Riverfront Park and wonder to themselves, "What is this big ship and what's it doing in Palatka?"

American Cruise Lines, which bills itself as the largest domestic cruise line in the U.S., has a fleet of 17 riverboats and small cruise ships. Several of the vessels are small enough to navigate Florida's



inland waterways, yet large enough to support anywhere between 90 and 180 passengers, according to the company's website.

One of the tours available to American Cruise Line customers is called the Great Rivers of Florida tour. The 8-day/7-night tour features eight Florida stops, including Palatka. It begins in Jacksonville and travels along the St. Johns River south to Green Cove Springs and Palatka, back north to Amelia Island and then south along the Tolomato River to St. Augustine. It then returns to Jacksonville.

Two of the line's Southeastern U.S. vessels are listed on the company's website for booking a local luxury cruise: The American Star, a Independence Class ship which can accommodate up to 90 passengers, originally set sail in 2007 and has often been the one visitors see moored in the river here. And new to the fleet, the American Eagle is expected to host St. Johns River tours next year, according to booking information on the company's website. The Coastal Cat Class ship can hold up to 100 passengers, the website

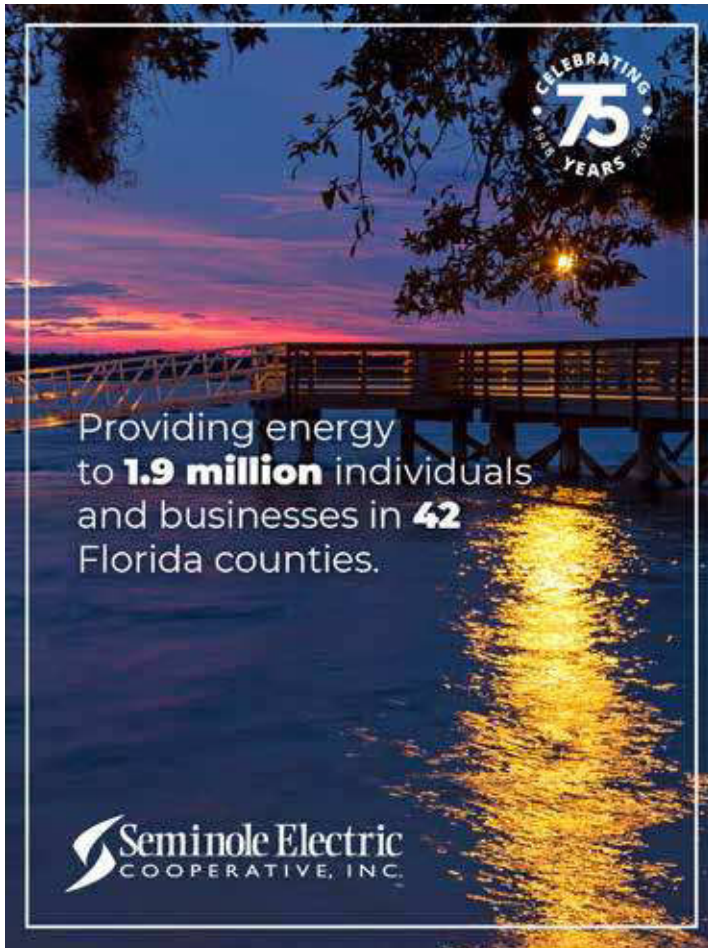
states, and was built with the intention of being nimble and stable enough for the sometimes shallow inland Florida waterways.

Alexa Paoella, public relations manager for the domestic line, said the company aims to launch two Coastal Cats able to navigate Southeast U.S. waterways later this year.

"American Eagle & American Glory... begin sailing in August and October 2023," Paoella said in an email. "These new Coastal Cats will also begin sailing many of our cruises to/from Florida, including the Great Rivers of Florida itinerary."

The American Eagle design boasts 56 "luxury staterooms," 85% of which include private balconies, is 241-feet long and 56-feet wide. American Cruise Lines states that all ships have elevators to each floor and are handicap accessible.

Fine dining and casual dining is offered, and the line states they often use locally sourced foods in its vessels.



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*Photos Courtesy of American Cruise Lines*

ABOVE: The upper decks of the American Eagle Cruise ship are expected to feature a walking trail. The line expects this ship to launch later this year. RIGHT: Stops on the Great Rivers of Florida Cruise.

“Our team of master chefs prepares a traditional American menu with a regional flair that features the freshest local ingredients,” the website states. “Fresh foods are brought aboard daily, some from the farms and vineyards that we visit along the way.”

While the company says prices are subject to change, fares, as of March 8 on the website, started at \$4,125 per person for a standard stateroom on the American Star, to \$10,295 per person for a Grand Suite with private balcony on the American Eagle.

For more information, or to book a trip or learn more about specific excursions, visit [AmericanCruiseLines.com](http://AmericanCruiseLines.com) or call 800-460-4518.







*Photos Courtesy of American Cruise Lines*

The American Eagle Cruise ship, expected to launch later this year, features relaxing blue interior design.

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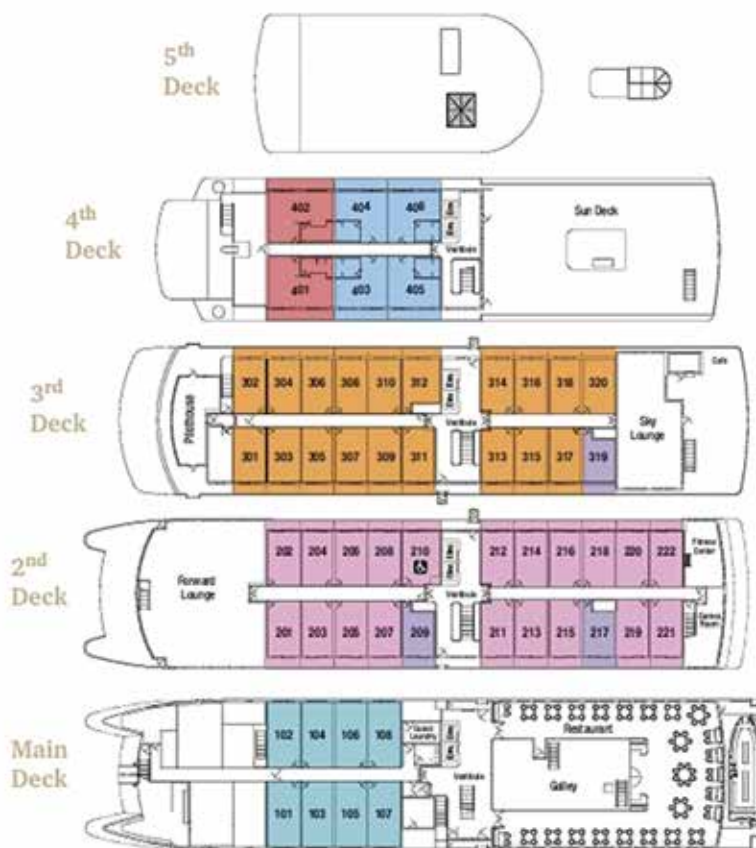
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Photos Courtesy of American Cruise Lines

## CRUISE HIGHLIGHTS: Great Rivers of Florida Cruise

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### Day 3 — Palatka

Sail on a private charter along the St. Johns River. Learn about the numerous bird species, alligators, and other wildlife that live there.

### Day 4 — Amelia Island

Discover the unspoiled beauty of Amelia Island. Relax on a kayak exploration along waters known for their highly reflective properties.

### Day 5 — Cruising the Tolomato River

As you travel to St. Augustine, gaze upon the most impressive stretches of inland waterways from the sun deck or your private balcony.

### Day 6 — St. Augustine

With “Henry Flagler” as your guide, experience a time in St. Augustine when it was a resort for the rich and famous and guests came for the season to the “Newport of the South.” Later, explore on the Old Town Trolley.



## Day 7 — Jacksonville

Aboard an electric Tuk Tuk, driven by a knowledgeable guide, view famous landmarks, architectural treasures, and hidden gems locals may not even know about.

## Day 8 — Jacksonville

Reflect upon your amazing journey as you enjoy breakfast on board, before departing the ship.

SOURCE: [AmericanCruiseLines.com](https://www.AmericanCruiseLines.com)



*Photo Courtesy of American Cruise Lines*

The design of the American Eagle and American Glory, two of American Cruise Lines' newest cruise ships, is seen here. The ships are expected to launch later this year and may soon after be seen on the St. Johns River.

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# **Relax and unwind with blossoming flowers and a slice of natural lands**

**Visit Welaka State Forest and  
Ravine Gardens State Park**





**Sarah Cavacini**  
Palatka Daily News  
scavacini@palatkadailynews.com

**W**hether people want to step back into Old Florida or experience the beauty of majestic gardens, Putnam County's got just the places.

### ***Welaka State Forest***

Head down to South Putnam in Welaka, 17 miles south of Palatka, to the Welaka State Forest. Here, people can swim, bike, camp, go horseback riding, hike and fish along the east bank of the historic St. Johns River.





The State Forest “is one of the best-preserved natural sections of the St. Johns River,” according to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The forest is home to river swamps, pine flatwoods, sandhills and flatwoods lakes, the department states. Take a dip into Mud Springs, which reportedly “empties 13,750 gallons per hour of clear spring water into a half-mile spring run that flows into the St. John’s River.”

In 1935, the federal government began the Welaka Forestry and Wildlife Conservation Project on a State of Florida fish hatchery site. It was later transferred, according to the state agency, to the University of Florida as the “University of Florida Conservation Reserve, Welaka” for researchers to study forestry and wildlife.

In 1992, the state department states, the property lease was transferred from the University of Florida to the Florida Forest Service to manage as a state forest.

File photos/Palatka Daily News

On pages 24-25: Welaka State Forest’s Mud Springs is seen in 2022. TOP: A narrow walkway leading from a lake to Mud Springs in the Welaka State Forest. ABOVE: Courtesy of the Florida Forest Service. A map of the Welaka State Forest.



The forest is open from sunrise to sunset and a day pass can be bought for \$2. An annual pass for all Florida state parks can be purchased for \$45. All passes can be purchased at [fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/Our-Forests/State-Forests/State-Forest-Recreation/Passes-and-Reservations](https://fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/Our-Forests/State-Forests/State-Forest-Recreation/Passes-and-Reservations).

“Welaka State Forest is part of the Bartram Trail in Putnam County, which follows the route of William Bartram’s travels via waterway, hiking, biking and driving routes,” the state department said online.

Welaka State Forest offers hiking trails up to 4.5 miles, a 6-mile equestrian route named Sandhill Horse Trail and a path to observe the scenery from inside a vehicle called Indian Pond Road.

People hoping to be a little more adventurous can take part in the state forest’s primitive camping options. Make camping reservations at [floridastateforests.reserveamerica.com](https://floridastateforests.reserveamerica.com).



*File photos/Palatka Daily News*

The Welaka State Forest Education Trail map welcomes visitors.

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File photos/Palatka Daily News

This promenade in Ravine Gardens State Park is a place fit for wedding and event photos.

### ***Ravine Gardens State Park***

Opened July 4, 1933, the Palatka state park is most known for its blossoming azalea plants.

The park is located at 1600 Twigg St. and offers 152 acres of sloping ravines, a spring-fed stream that flows into the St. Johns River and plenty of picnic spots.

While peak azalea season is from January to March, according to the state park's website, there's plenty to see all year. The park is open 365 days, including holidays, 8 a.m. to sundown and the Ravine Loop Drive is open to vehicles from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, according to the park's website.

People can bicycle on the gardens' 1.8-mile loop, which is closed to vehicles one hour before sunset but remains open for pedestrians, bicycles and wheelchairs. Take

a hike on trails like the Springs Trail, which is labeled "moderate," and includes narrow paths and stone stairs, or hike the "strenuous" Azalea Trail which includes numerous stone stair, slope changes and suspension bridges but features an "unbeatable view of the ravines," the state park's website explains.

Admission is \$5 per vehicle, exact change only, or \$4 for a single-occupant vehicle. Pedestrian prices are \$2 per person.

Ravine Gardens used to be city-maintained and was home to the Miss Azalea Queen beauty pageant that coincided with Palatka's Azalea Festival.

"In January 1970, the gardens were deeded to the Florida Internal Improvement Trust Fund and Ravine Gardens officially became a Florida State Park," the state park's website shows. "Ravine Gardens State Park is one of the nine New Deal-era state parks in Florida"





File photos/Palatka Daily News

Overhead view of fountain in Ravine Gardens State Park.



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File photos/Palatka Daily News

Left: Azaleas bloom along a walking path. Right: A suspension bridge in Ravine Gardens State Park is seen here in 2020.

Even after becoming a state-maintained park, the park system still hosted the beauty pageant at the park's amphitheater until its final year at the park in 1979.

It's not likely visitors will see a beauty pageant going on today at Ravine Gardens, but there's still plenty of beauty to see with the blooming flowers and intricate landscapes.

For more information about the park and upcoming events, visit [floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/ravine-gardens-state-park](http://floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/ravine-gardens-state-park) or call (386) 329-3721. Check out the state park's Facebook page for the latest happenings at [facebook.com/ravinegardens](https://facebook.com/ravinegardens).

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*Archives/ Palatka Daily News*

Left to Right: Attendees watch a Miss Azalea Queen beauty pageant from the 1970s, which was held at Ravine Gardens State Park's amphitheater. A Miss Azalea Queen beauty pageant winner smiles for a photo in the 1970s. A Miss Azalea Queen beauty pageant winner talks to a younger contestant after the contest is over.

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