

## Hotels welcome paddlers -- and their wish lists

Southwest Florida's hotels, inns and RV parks are welcoming to visiting kayakers and canoeists – and they want to do even better in 2009.

These days, most people have to scrutinize where they spend their travel dollars. They also want to sculpt vacations that give them exactly what they want. So it makes sense that managers of lodging establishments would want to step up to accommodate tourists who arrive with their own paddlecraft.

Many a Carolinian or even a Mainer or two have driven down here with their kayaks. Our recent kayak/canoe count also tallied Texans and Georgians. Some people don't even get here by car with their craft. Elaine Hilmer of Beloit, Wis., told me earlier this month that she and her husband hauled their boats down in January 2008, but then on a return trip in April last year, they packed an inflatable paddlecraft in their luggage and flew to Southwest Florida International Airport.

But I digress.

Once you get here with your boat, you want a few amenities. But what are those? At a meeting last week for planning our 2009 Calusa Blueway Paddling Festival, several hotel managers said, "Hey, we're not kayakers, but we want them to come and have fun. What can I do for them?"

So I e-mailed paddling clubs, outfitters and paddlesports enthusiasts. Here I share some of their feedback. Read through it and then shoot me an e-mail at [bclayton@leegov.com](mailto:bclayton@leegov.com) or use our community forum here at this site to share your ideas. If a place in our community is doing something outstanding, let me hear about that, too.

For now, read on:

The crew at Adventures in Paradise of south Fort Myers offered up a post-trip basic: areas to relax and a general-type store on site.

A past president of the non-profit Estero Bay Buddies suggested that in addition to supplying Calusa Blueway maps, hotels create something extra. "It does not have to be too expensive or elaborate," said Nancy Kilmartin. Show where they are in relation to cool sites on the trail, which can be gleaned from the blueway maps' highlights or from other kayaking guests.

Mel The Guide of Gulf Coast Kayak thought about the pre-trip tummy grumbles. "Early morning breakfast and coffee, plus an apple or fruit to take on the trip so you can get a quick start on the day."

Rob Phelan of the Southwest Florida Paddling Club suggests campground and hotel managers make ice easily accessible. "I once felt like I was sneaking around by the kitchen to get ice for our cooler."

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What else? "Since often kayaks extend beyond the ends of vehicles (in the bed of a pickup for example) a spot to park in that will allow the kayak to stick out without being in danger of being hit or hitting other vehicles." Make sure there is secure parking in a well-lighted place, too, he suggests.

Rob and his colleagues from the club also mentioned this biggie: Have a freshwater hose available on site to wash down the kayak and gear at day's end. That's a plus for fishing gear in these salt- and brackish-water parts.

Kayakers would like to have access to a freezer or have mini-freezers in the room to keep cold packs, water bottles and extra beverages cold for the next day's trip.

Hotels that offer a box lunch are on the right track, but kayakers and canoeists like to get up and go pretty early. So that needs to be available before sunrise. And it should not be in a box. Cardboard gets too soggy too fast in a cooler or the bottom of a boat.

Daniel Landwer of the Southwest Florida Paddling Club suggests that waterfront establishments provide a place to lock a kayak. "It could be as simple as a post with a hole to put a chain through."

Pat Owen, the club's leader, gets back to that parking issue.

"When I travel with my kayaks ideally I'd like to park my vehicle right outside my motel/hotel room door or in a place nearby where I can see my vehicle from the room window. Usually this is possible when I arrive mid-afternoon but not so after I return from dinner. After dinner the parking lot is full and I have to park around the corner or all the way in the back like when the hotel is hosting a big wedding reception."

Not so good. "I almost feel like I have to sleep in my truck to guard my kayaks."

One more thought: Railing or clothes lines to hang out wet life vests and clothing. If a place can make a drier available, that's a plus, too.

And then back to the day's end – the part we talked about at the top of this wish list. Pat puts it simply. "A warm spa with multiple jet streams to relax in at the end of the day."