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Kayaker knows mangrove tunnels are the best

First introduction still a vivid memory of a moment stuck in time

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Not long ago, friends from Connecticut visited with their kindergartner and fourth-grader, and to fill an afternoon when the husbands were away fishing and my daughter was stuck in school, I suggested we go paddling in the mangroves.

Will it be fun? What are mangroves?

Yes, it will, I told the little ones. And mangroves are, well, funny looking trees. They have long legs like something from a subtropical version of "Where the Wild Things Are." They live in salt water. Their roots appear above ground and are the color of milky chocolate. They like to hold hands and stand in groups.

Let's go, they said. So we put on water shoes, wide-brimmed hats and sunscreen. We borrowed two tandem kayaks from a friend. We shoved off.

Any resident boater knows that mangroves are not far from most Lee County launch sites. If you're a powerboater, you whiz by them on the way to sugar-white beaches or waterfront restaurants. If you're an angler, you look around them for spots with current to cast into. If you're a bird-watcher, you position yourself near them at low tide for spectacular views of feeding waterfowl.

If you're a kayaker you do what Robinson Crusoe would do: You look for tunnels. Mangrove tunnels are the best.

Traveling up a saltwater creek beneath the entwined branches of mangroves is like infusing an energy drink into your outdoors soul.

No matter how chatty your party is, silence falls when everyone enters.

Kayaking newbies can't help but become keenly into paddling when they're in a tunnel. No matter the age of the paddler, the tunnel brings out the kid in them.

We're fortunate here to have abundant back bays with acres of mangrove forest.

From open water, just watch for a tidal creek or parting of the trees. Nudge your bow into the opening, ready to bend over if branches are low or scoot forward if water is shallow. Keep going. What you'll find may be a dead end, allowing you only space to turn around. Or you may find a tunnel that opens onto a mud flat studded with leggy birds feeding. Or onto a secret lagoon.

The adventure is in not knowing - and pursuing.

The smart part is in knowing to go in winter and spring to avoid pesky mosquitoes.

The fun is in taking someone new.

I recall the first time someone took me. It was nearly sunset on the day of the full moon. We set off to watch the sun drop. But on the way up Matlacha Pass, a tunnel sidetracked us.

Beneath the branches, it seemed as if darkness had already come. But details were vivid. Coin-sized crabs scurried. Statuesque herons eyeballed dinner. Skinny, clear water permitted a view of fighting conchs and starfish.

It was a moment stopped in time.

The trees bound together overhead, offering shafts of scarlet light through as if they were stained-glass windows and we were in Mother Nature's cathedral.

Just as our eyes were adjusting and we were less leery of spider webs spanning our path, the tunnel opened onto a lagoon. The orb to the west began to set. The moon behind us rose. I sighed.

The tunnel on the way home was dark, but not creepy. More like a walk in the woods with branches gently guiding our way.

It's a contagious thing, falling in love with mangrove tunnels. Makes you want to share.

Which is what I did with the Connecticut friends.

As we wound through with the kids, the kindergartner said in awe, "Mommy, this looks like where Shrek lives."

Whoever you want to imagine living in mangrove tunnels - they can.

So can you - on a visit in a kayak, if only for a moment.

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