

BEWARE THE

OF EVERGLADES

Fotos: Tracy Kraft and Simon Narramore
Text: Haz Mat man

The Everglades is the sprawling 1.5 million acre home to sawgrass marshes, mangrove swamps, and one of the largest populations of alligators in North America. Exactly this was the destiny of our journey, which was a really bad idea.

Arrival

Together with Andre "Dre" Phillip, Damien Leroy, Julien Fillion and Jon Modica, some of the world's best pro kiteboarders, I was in Miami for an NPX photoshoot. But the wind gods were not favoring us and with nothing better to do someone suggested wakeboarding with the alligators in the Everglades. The guys were all for it. It is amazing, the naiveté of youth.

Coopertown

We stood under a large sign that announced we had arrived in "Coopertown, Population: 0008, Home of the Original Airboat Tour". It was late afternoon and we had pulled up in front of an old wooden building that was deserted except for a guy in the corner smoking a cigarette. He had one of those long bushy mustaches and was clearly a fan of beer and Harleys. The splendidly dilapidated Cadillac parked in front of the building must have been his. Asking for the proprietor of the place, I expected to meet a grizzled old man, maybe with a pony tail, maybe with some tobacco in his cheeks, and definitely with war stories.





War stories and a good ol' American drawl.

You wouldn't believe he existed, but he did. Complete with pony tail and drawl, Jesse Kennon is the owner of the Coopertown Airboat Company and also the Mayor of Coopertown, successful wrestler of alligators and bearer of war stories that will make your hair stand on end. And his friend with the Cadillac, Skippy Scooter (his real name), really existed too.

When we meet Jesse, he is standing in front of a life sized dried alligator that must have been stuffed somehow. It is nailed to the wall behind him. He takes us on a tour of the grounds, which are located alongside a swamp lined with mangrove trees. The air is thick and humid. In the back, there are a few alligator pens, the largest housing a 14ft alligator named Big Ben.



He is lying there completely still with his mouth open. Ants crawl freely over his tongue and teeth. Alligators have 400 teeth in each of their upper and lower jaws, all of them razor sharp – they do not possess molars at all. That would be a total of 800 teeth, a real dentist's nightmare. Appropriately, there is an alligator named Ginger in the pen next to Big Ben. Jesse tells us she was not named after the color, but the gum disease – that is, gingivitis.

Big Ben's girth is about the size of a large desk. You could almost pull a chair up to his side and comfortably put a laptop, 20 inch monitor and a large cup of coffee on his back if not for his spiky reptilian skin, which I later learn is inherited directly from prehistoric dinosaurs. I can't bring myself to get too near to Big Ben so I take the long way around his pen as I follow the others along the water's edge. That is when I notice a free-range alligator staring at me silently only 10 feet from where I stand.

The Ride

We zipped through the tall sawgrass on one of Jesse's airboats, with the warm humid air blowing in our faces. A huge fan blade behind our seat propelled us along. The water was shallow, muddy, and bathwater warm. And there were alligators everywhere. We could see their creepy eyes watching us wherever we went. Anytime we stopped the boat, they would swim silently up to us. "When they hear noise or water splashing, they think its food so they come to investigate," Jesse explained. Julien threw his weskate in to test the theory and sure enough, a gator chomped on it. Then we tried throwing a wakeboard handle at the gator and it bit, though much more savagely than I would have preferred. At that point we decided to move to another spot to launch.

