

Crystal River/King's Bay is a Favorite of Kayakers, Snorkelers -- and Manatees

The Crystal River area has some of the most beautiful scenery a kayaker will ever see.

Crystal River/King's Bay actually is a network of more than 30 springs, making it the second largest such springs system in the state. In fact, this spring network accounts for almost all (99 percent) of the fresh water entering King's Bay. Crystal River heads from the northwest end of King's Bay for about six miles before discharging into the Gulf of Mexico to the west.

You're going to want to explore several springs in the area by kayak. Keep a sharp eye out of manatee as you do so. These wonderful mammals like to swim in the area's springs, rivers and inlets in the winter months because the waters here are much warmer than the Gulf at that time of year. Early morning is the best time of day to see them, especially since there will be fewer snorkelers and other "swim with the manatee" aficionados at that time of day.

The Three Sister Springs have extremely clear water. Each of the springs is unique and average in depth from 4-7 feet to 15-18 feet, depending on whether it's high or low tide. The clear water and varying depths make these springs divers' favorites. For kayakers, you're going to be able to take in many varieties of cypress trees, Spanish moss, palmetto trees and many other native plants.

You also may want to mosey over to Idiot's Delight Springs -- just outside Three Sisters' entrance -- because manatees are known to gather there in the coldest winter months.

King's Spring is simply marvelous. It's deep -- at 30-60 feet -- and it has an underwater cavern that's not to be missed if you're a diver. The cavern's water is quite clear and sports tons of mangrove snapper, mullet, sheepshead, jacks, tarpon and manatees in the winter. If you are a diver, be sure to check out the manatee statue that's about 20 feet down in the cavern.

Crystal River is a part of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, a private, non-profit organization that works to preserve natural areas for future generations. The Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1983 specifically to help protect the West Indian Manatee. The association works to keep the springs preserved in a pristine state as much as possible.

Don't be surprised if you run into one of the refuge's Manatee Watch Volunteers, individuals who use kayaks and canoes to visit the springs during the winter, when most of the manatees and visitors come to the area. The volunteers are there to keep an eye out on manatees and humans to ensure that interactions between the two species are beneficial to the manatees. They also can answer questions you may have about the manatee and give you a quick course in "manatee etiquette."