

Kayaking with Manatees: A Terrific Way to Interact with These Wonderful Animals

Perhaps the best way to see a manatee up close and personal, aside from getting in the water and standing among them, is by kayak.

In fact, paddling softly by these wonderful creatures may be a better experience for those who may be a bit timid around the gentle giants -- manatees do weigh upwards of 800-1,200 pounds, after all -- or those who feel their swimming skills are lacking.

Kayakers also can do something those who swim with the manatees cannot: kayakers may follow the manatees as they swim along the inlet, spring or river. From a respectful distance, of course.

Crystal River, Florida could readily be called the manatee capital of the world; so numerous are the manatees that come to the area's streams and inlets in later fall through early spring. (Manatees hang out in the Gulf of Mexico in late spring through late-late summer. The Gulf's waters turn chilly during the winter, but Crystal River's coastal tributaries stay about 72 degrees in the winter - the perfect temperature for a manatee.)

The Crystal River Kings Bay springs system often is home to upwards of 400 manatees in the winter and spring, so you're practically guaranteed to see several of these lovely creatures.

And don't be surprised if they come to you! Curious as well as gentle, manatees often like to check out swimmers and kayakers alike. We actually require that you not pursue a manatee, yet there's no need to worry that you won't be able to get a close up look -- or even a chance to give one a belly rub -- for manatees like to be around people and will almost always come around to give you a once over.

When you see a manatee, never give chase. Stop paddling and wait for the manatee to come to you. You may certainly touch the manatee (one hand only, please), and don't be surprised if the creature turns over on its belly!

Please remember that manatees are wild creatures and your kayak is not a ride at Disney World. State and federal law protects manatees, so harming a manatee can get you in some big trouble. In addition, a "minor offense," such as teasing or otherwise making a pest of yourself around manatees will certainly get you banned from renting a kayak from us ever again.

Additional manatee etiquette: Please don't corral a manatee calf from its mother. In addition, don't try to wrangle a manatee away from its pod. As mentioned above, don't chase after a manatee. If a manatee comes to see you and then leaves, just stay put and don't be surprised if it looks back at you and then returns for another belly scratch.

We hope you enjoy your up-close-and-very-personal encounter of the manatee kind. We

look forward to providing you with kayaks so that you may experience this incredible opportunity to commune peacefully with incredible creatures.