Headline: Nature grabs your attention in Crystal River

Deckhead: Hop in for a dip with manatees in sparkling blue waters

Few counties in Florida combine ingredients to create a masterpiece like Citrus County. It takes aspects of nature, shakes them in a bag and – *voila* – a delectable destination is waiting to be explored.

The location boasts seven rivers, a chain of freshwater lakes, the Gulf of Mexico and a web of islands, marsh and mangrove to present endless opportunities to experience the outdoors in and out of water.

Native Americans laid the foundation for Citrus County more than two millennia ago. The vestiges of their culture are displayed at the Crystal River Archaeological Sire. The six-mound complex is a National Historic Landmark and a visitors center/museum hold artifacts excavated from the site.

Countless miles of undisturbed islets, channels, streams and rivers bless the Citrus County shoreline. Located 70 miles north of Tampa, it’s a place where fresh water and saltwater meet in the gulf. Native plants, birds and marine life enhance the intimacy of Fort Island Beach, turning it into a secluded getaway.

Crystal River is labeled “The Manatee Capital of the World” and is one of Florida’s top eco-tourism hotspots. Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge encompasses more than 70 springs. Each winter, warm, spring-fed waters attract North America’s largest manatee population.

Hundreds of manatees gather in Three Sisters Spring from January to March. It’s also the only place in the U.S. where visitors can swim with the endangered Florida Manatee. These gentle giants measure more than 13-feet long and weigh as much as 1,300 pounds. Guided tours are recommended to guests who might want to take a dip.

Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife Park resides in a historic fishing village and is believed to be the only place in the world to see West Indian manatees year-round. Pontoon boats take visitors to an underwater observatory, where they can see the manatees’ slow-moving water ballet without getting wet. A manatee’s nose and nostrils often are its only parts visible above the water. Other native wildlife includes black bears, Florida panthers, bobcats and river otters, which can be seen along paved walking trails and boardwalks.

Floral City is nestled in Citrus County’s peaceful southeast corner. It’s famous for its Florida charm, beautiful older homes and the Avenue of the Oaks, which is covered by a canopy of oaks and draped in Spanish moss.

It also is the opening to the Sunshine State’s longest paved recreation trail. Withlacoochee State Trail offers 46 miles for hiking, biking and horseback riding. Withlacoochee State Forest is considered one of the “10 Coolest Places You’ve Been in North America” by the World Wildlife Fund.

Citrus County is sweet, adventurous and charming. It’s a recipe for good times and lasting memories.

Cutline: **MARINE LIFE –** A West Indian manatee lifts its snout out of the water at Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park in Citrus County, Florida. Image: Sunshower Shots. Adobe Stock.