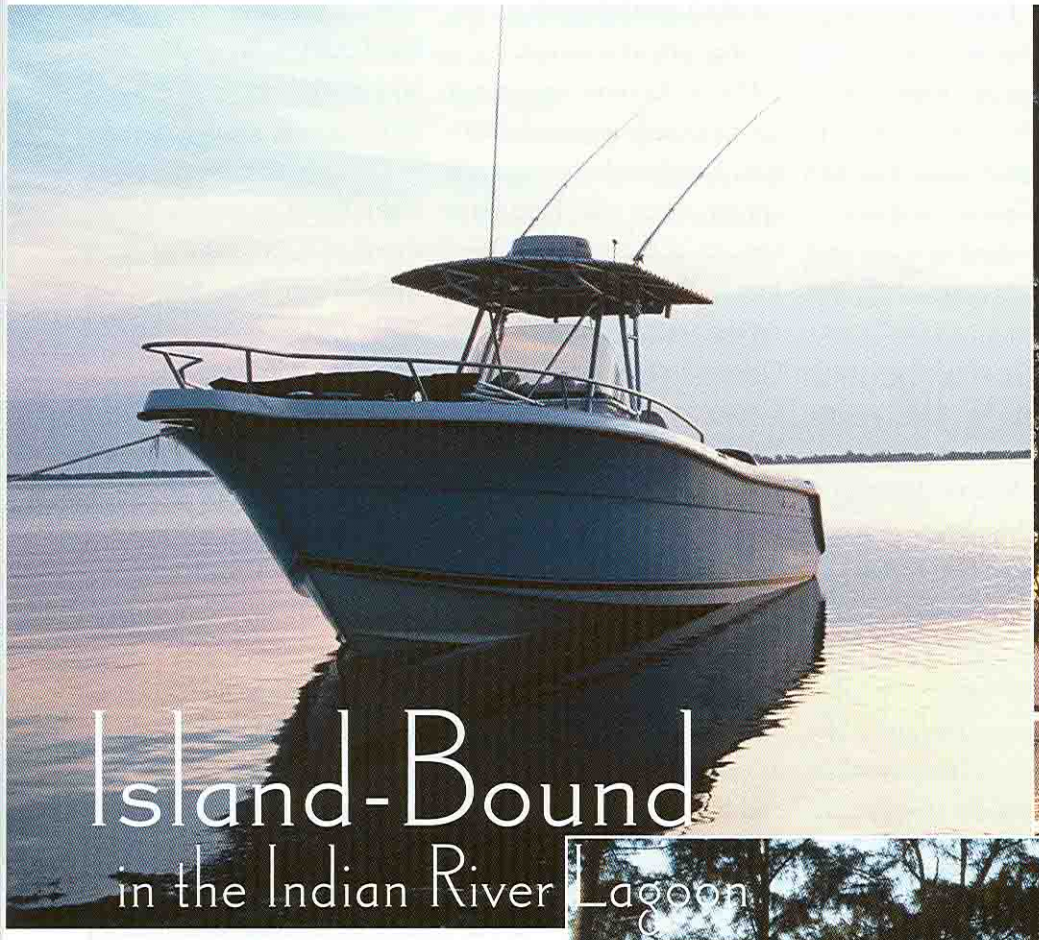
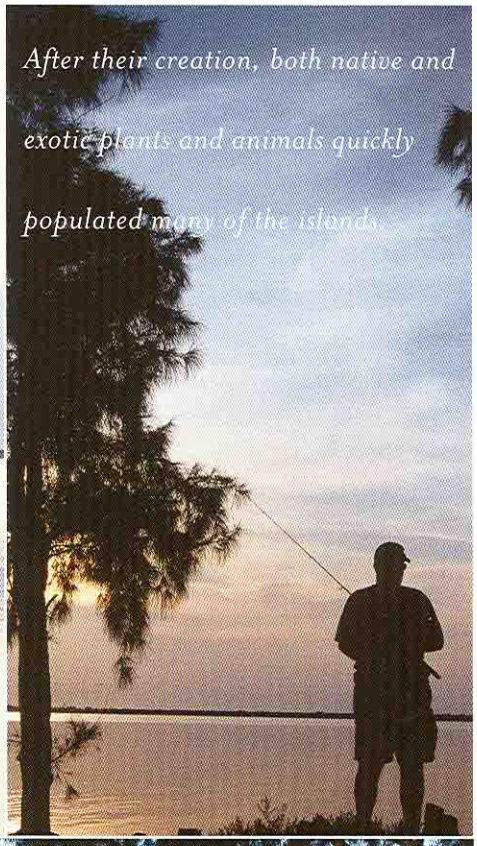




After their creation, both native and exotic plants and animals quickly populated many of the islands.

Island-Bound in the Indian River Lagoon



PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM TOWNSEND

A Wilderness Getaway in Your Own Back Yard

by Bill Klimas

Have you ever had a friend tell you about an amazing restaurant that just happens to be right around the corner from your home? You had driven by it dozens of times, but never thought to give it a try. Many of the truly standout attractions, in any given area, are nearby, but known only to the few who search out these unique locales.

For boaters, local knowledge can be the key to finding a passage across shallow water, locating a deep-water honey hole for a trophy fish or discovering a quiet island hideaway for a weekend or day trip.

The Spoil Islands, lining the Intracoastal Waterway's (ICW) channel of the Indian River Lagoon (IRL), are just such a not-to-be-missed getaway. For regulars to this inland waterway, the islands are a beautiful string of shoals, bars and isles dotted with trees. To those who have stopped to explore their shores, they are much more. The Spoil Islands are beautiful, prime destinations for day-tripping or camping with family and friends.

The Indian River Lagoon

The Indian River Lagoon is North America's most diverse saltwater estuary, with a vibrant and extensive ecosystem. It is actually a linear maze of wide shallow lagoons made up of immense sea-grass flats punctuated by narrow passes, as well as natural and man-made islands. Throughout its 156-mile length, the lagoon is bordered by intertidal mangrove fringes and salt marshes that are home to hundreds of species of

birds, fish and marine mammals. The IRL, with its shallow sun-drenched waters and matrix of vibrant sea-grass beds, oyster bars and clam beds, is one of the most spectacular saltwater estuaries in North America.

This aquatic wonderland eclipses any inshore boating playground in the eastern United States due to its abundant marine life. The IRL system supports a higher diversity of plants and animals than any other system on the North American continent. It contains 2,100 species of plants and 2,200 species of animals, including 700 fish species and 310 species of birds. Fifty species of threatened or endangered plants and animals live in the Indian River Lagoon, among them the West Indian Manatee, the Florida Alligator and the American Bald Eagle.

Through the center of this waterway runs the deep-water channel known as the Intracoastal Waterway. This deep-water channel affords boaters access to the entire length of the Indian River Lagoon. Bordering both sides of the ICW are islands formed from the dredge material left behind when the ICW was built. This material, known as spoils, formed the tree-covered islands that line this channel. Some of these islands, with their white-sand beaches, abundant clam beds, extensive bird life and unmatched fishing opportunities, have long been recognized as destinations for weekend getaways or day trips by boaters with local knowledge.

There are 137 Spoil Islands dotting the lagoon that spans from Ponce de León Inlet in the north to Jupiter Inlet in the south. They are owned and managed by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and maintained by a variety of volunteer groups. Of these 137 islands, 55 are open for camping and picnicking. The remaining islands are preserved as bird rookeries or set aside for research and education. To access a map with designations and descriptions of the individual islands in your area, visit the islands' Web site at www.spoilislandproject.org.

Choosing an Island

When choosing an island at which to spend the day or weekend, the experienced island hopper looks for the characteristic white-sand beaches, mature Australian pines and openness that makes for a comfortable campsite. Check local charts to find deep-water access from the ICW. The white beaches and their lack of mangrove fringes allow captains to beach their vessels with minimal impact on sensitive saltwater marshes. They also afford little habitat for the mosquitoes that rule the heavily vegetated islands. Mangrove-encircled islands should be avoided entirely to help preserve the protected mangroves and the marine nurseries they support.

Many of the more popular islands in the southern end of the IRL have been upgraded, by local environmental groups, with picnic tables and fire rings, while similar improvements are slated for popular islands in the northern lagoon. Additionally, many of these groups help keep the islands free of garbage and refuse.

These islands are state-owned, but there is no fee or registration required to use them. They cannot be reserved and are available on a first-come, first-served basis year-round. Pets are welcome and restrictions beyond common courtesy are virtually nonexistent. These are considered primitive camping locations due to their lack of facilities and structures, but they can be easily transformed into comfortable and accommodating campsites with a little effort and some basic camping equipment.

Planning the Trip

When planning your trip, remember you will need to bring all of your supplies and equipment. There is no need to limit the equipment or supplies you bring beyond the capacity of your vessel. Gas grills and folding lawn furniture can transform a wilderness site into a comfortable patio setting. Boat coolers and common kitchen utensils can afford the gourmet cook all of the necessities required to create delicious meals using local seafood.

The basic equipment you will need is readily available at your local Kmart or Wal-Mart. A tent, air mattress, sleeping bag, folding chair and grill are the most useful and least expensive items you should bring. If you have not considered camping in the past few years, check out what's new. There is a wide variety of new high-tech equipment available that can add to the quality of the experience and increase your comfort level.

On a recent camping trip to one of our favorite Spoil Islands close to Capt. Hiram's Resort in Sebastian, my family and I, along with a few friends, had the welcome opportunity to try out the new Pursuit 2670 Center Console for our long-awaited excursion.

We brought a Coleman Hot Water on Demand unit that supplied continuous hot water for showers and cleanup,

powered by a small propane tank and rechargeable battery; a double-high air mattress that was more comfortable than my bed at home; an oversized camp stove from Coleman on which we prepared four-course meals for the nine campers in our group; and a series of tents from Eureka with attached screen rooms, complete with "no-see-em" netting. Our tents were well lit with palm-sized, light-emitting diode (LED)–based lighting units, powered with AAA batteries that lasted for days.

Island Activities

The Spoil Islands offer a wide variety of activities for the whole family.

Younger children will find the grass flats and rocky points a virtual classroom of marine biology. Just hand them a dip net and a small bucket, and watch them delight in catching and releasing a wide variety of sea life. From shrimp and crabs to sea stars and sea horses, the intertidal zone is alive with unique and unusual creatures. The bottom is covered with hermit crabs and shellfish.

Teens and young adults can enjoy water-skiing or tubing along the ICW channel or cruising along the nearby beaches. Our mall rats would never be seen in public with their parents, but they suddenly became enthusiastic family members, fireside.

Kayak and canoe enthusiasts will find miles and miles of tidal creeks and canals to paddle and explore.

Backcountry fishing for snook, redfish, spotted sea trout and tarpon is as simple as wading out a few yards from the campsite. For bottom fishermen, grouper, snapper, flounder and sheepshead roam the drop-offs within casting range from the beaches on the Intracoastal side. In the northern end of the lagoon, clamming or crabbing is as simple as wading to the edge of the grass flats and dipping a net, or pulling them up with a rake.

Bird-watchers will find an abundance of species only surpassed in the Florida Everglades. From rosette spoonbills and pileated woodpeckers to bald eagles and ospreys, the variety and sheer number of birds will amaze even the most experienced birders. During the winter months, white pelicans, wood storks, sandhill cranes and great blue herons migrate to this area.

Provisioning

When buying supplies for a weekend camping trip, there are several items that should not be overlooked. Sunscreen is a necessity and insect repellent is a must. Water for drinking and washing is needed, and if you plan on enjoying a campfire, bring your own wood. (Supplies are limited to driftwood and live vegetation should not be cut.)

Many islands are in the vicinity of state parks or marine facilities. These parks or facilities will often allow you to use their parking lots, showers or bathrooms for a fee. Call first to confirm availability and costs.

In today's overcrowded and high-stress world, few locations offer you peace, at such little cost and so close by, as these isles in the lagoon. If you live in Stuart, Merritt Island or anywhere in between, your slice of weekend paradise is probably in view from the nearest causeway or bridge. You probably just never stopped to look. ⚓



2670 CENTER CONSOLE BY PURSUIT

The Pursuit 2670 Center Console features classic lines with modern touches around the console and T-top. The advances in tackle and live-well storage make this new center console an excellent fishing platform. Matched with Yamaha's twin 225 four-stroke outboards, the 2670 topped out at 50 mph in calm water.

This classic offshore runner offers port and starboard seating forward with storage below and in the forward cockpit floor. Lockable rod storage also comes standard so you can secure your trolling or spinning outfits when you're not on board. The center console itself contains a flushable enclosed head. At the helm is a tilt-away panel that provides ample space for flush-mounted electronics.

Specifications

LOA WITH PULPIT	28'5"
LOA WITHOUT PULPIT	26'5"
BEAM	9'3"
HULL DRAFT (MOTORS UP)	1'8"
HULL DRAFT (MOTORS DOWN)	3'0"
AVERAGE DRY WEIGHT	5,800 LBS.
MAXIMUM HORSEPOWER	450
CLEARANCE WITH T-TOP	8'6"
CLEARANCE WITHOUT T-TOP	6'9"
FUEL CAPACITY	188 U.S. GAL.
FRESHWATER CAPACITY	18 U.S. GAL.
DEADRISE	21 DEGREES