



Backroads of Paradise: A Journey to Rediscover Old Florida

Cathy Salustri

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“A handy road companion for any tourist, newcomer, or longtime Floridian who wants to get off the beaten path and travel back in time.”—Bobby Braddock, Country Music Hall of Fame songwriter

“In staccato bursts of frenzy and passion, Salustri has written a modern love story affirming her tangled relationship with the Sunshine State. Retracing the routes of 1930s guidebooks, she re-creates the great Florida road trip.”—Gary R. Mormino, author of *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida*

“This delightful trip through space and time gives us glimpses back and ahead at our ever-evolving Florida. Salustri stops along the way to mourn the parts of paradise we’ve lost and to celebrate what’s still around to enjoy.”—Craig Pittman, author of *Oh, Florida! How America’s Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country*

“A compelling, bittersweet odyssey across seventy-five years of Florida changes, a trip filled with dreams tarnished now by overdevelopment but still harboring a few unspoiled pieces of paradise.”—Brian Rucker, author of *Treasures of the Panhandle: A Journey through West Florida*


In the 1930s, the Federal Writers’ Project sent mostly anonymous writers, but also Zora Neale Hurston and Stetson Kennedy, into the depths of Florida to reveal its splendor to the world. The FWP and the State of Florida jointly published the results as *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, which included twenty-two driving tours of the state’s main roads. Eventually, after Eisenhower built the interstates, drivers bypassed the small towns that thrived along these roads in favor of making better time. Those main roads are now the state’s backroads—forgotten by all but local residents, a few commuters, and dedicated road-trippers. Retracing the original routes in the *Guide*, Cathy Salustri rekindles our notions of paradise by bringing a modern eye to the historic travelogues.

Salustri’s 5,000-mile road trip reveals a patchwork quilt of Florida cultures: startling pockets of history and environmental bliss stitched against the blight of strip malls and franchise restaurants. The journey begins on US 98, heading west toward the Florida/Alabama state line, where coastal towns dot the roadway. Here, locals depend on the tourism industry, spurred by sugar sand beaches, as well as the abundance of local seafood. On US 41, Salustri takes us past the state’s only whitewater rapids, a retired carnie town, and a dazzling array of springs, swamps, and rivers interspersed with farms that produce a bounty of fruit. Along US 17, she stops for milkshakes and hamburgers at Florida’s oldest diner and visits a collection of springs interconnected by underwater mazes tumbling through white spongy limestone, before stopping in Arcadia, where men still bring cattle to auction. Desperately searching for skunk apes, the Sunshine State’s version of Bigfoot, she encounters more than one gator on her way through the Everglades, Ochopee, and the Skunk Ape Research Headquarters.

Following the original *Guide*, Salustri crisscrosses the state from the panhandle to the Keys. She guides readers through forgotten and unknown corners of the state—nude beaches, a rattlesnake cannery, Devil’s Millhopper in Gainesville—as well as more familiar haunts—Kennedy Space Center and The Villages, “Florida’s Friendliest Retirement Hometown.” Woven through these journeys are nuggets of history,

environmental debates about Florida's future, and a narrative that combines humor with a strong affection for an oft-maligned state.

Today, Salustri urges, tourists need a new nudge to get off the interstates or away from Disney in order to discover the real Florida. Her travel narrative, following what are now backroads and scenic routes, guides armchair travelers and road warriors alike to historic sites, natural wonders, and notable man-made attractions—comparing the past views with the present landscape and commenting on the changes, some barely noticeable, others extreme, along the way.

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