

Orlando Sentinel

TRAVEL & ARTS

New expanded section: More travel and arts coverage, plus added book reviews



Gus Bianchi, the ninth paddler to complete the entire CT, has his kayak parked on a spoil island with other kayakers near Yankeetown. **GUS BIANCHI**

SEA KAYAKER’S PARADISE

The 1,515-mile Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail



Patrick Connolly
Central Florida Explorer

Gus Bianchi was pelted with freezing rain as he trudged through a week of bad weather while paddling with a friend near Apalachicola in 2009. Despite that, he was having the time of his life.

Almost by accident, that was the start of Bianchi’s more than 1,500-mile journey paddling around the Florida peninsula in sections.

“I decided to paddle with my

friend on a section, not thinking I was going to keep paddling,” he said. “Eventually I said, ‘I should just complete it myself.’ I finished in 2013.”

What might appear like a wayward adventure is actually a well-established route with campsites and maps, a feat completed by only a few dozen daring souls.

Finishing the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail is a daunting task, with only 34 paddlers who’ve checked off the entire trail since its founding in 2007.

“It’s a great way to see Florida, and you get sucked into it. It’s like, ‘What’s around the next bend?’” Bianchi said. “You really get to understand Florida and appreciate the coastline a lot better.”

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The 1,515-mile Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail contains every kind of coastal habitat. **DORSEY DEMASTER**

Who’s in, who’s out at Dr. Phillips Center, Orlando Fringe, United Arts and more



Sometimes it feels like there’s a revolving door of arts leaders around Central Florida. Here’s a look at some of the recent comings and goings backstage at cultural institutions including the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, Orlando Fringe, United Arts of Central Florida

and the Mount Dora Center for the Arts.

You may not know their names but these folks changing jobs are just as important as singers, dancers, actors and artists when it comes to entertaining us.

DR. PHILLIPS CENTER: The Dr. Phillips Center’s

programming and education department has lost several employees in recent months, including the departure of Foster Cronin in September. As vice president in charge of programming and education, Cronin was one of the downtown Orlando arts center’s top officials.

This month, director of education programs Laura Peete also resigned. In her role, Peete had overseen the staff and activities of the center’s School of the Arts since 2019.

Cronin, who joined the Dr. Phillips Center staff shortly after its 2014 opening, is now director of special-event booking for the Oak View Group in Mesa, Arizona. The Oak View Group runs various arts centers, theaters and convention centers.

Peete posted on Facebook that “with an immensely heavy and emotional heart” she was leaving Orlando to become director of education for Theatre Under the

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FALL

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Connolly

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Charting the course

The roots of this epic route date back to the 1980s, when environmental lobbyist and paddler David Gluckman took inspiration from the 350-mile Maine Island Trail system. But the trail wasn't scouted until 2004 when the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Greenways and Trails hired Doug Alderson, a photographer and writer. By October 2007, the 1,515-mile Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail (CT for short) was complete and the Florida Paddling Trails Association (FPTA) was formed to support this new system. Starting from Big Lagoon State Park near Pensacola and ending at Fort Clinch State Park, just south of the Georgia border (or vice versa), kayakers can experience every Florida coastal habitat on the way, plus historical sites and points of interest.

Matt Keene, a Clermont native, became the first paddler to complete the CT in 2009, shortly before backpacking the entire Florida Trail with his wife, Jodi Eller. While the CT is by far the longest of Florida's designated paddling routes, the state's DEP oversees 60 water-based trails totaling 4,000 miles in areas all throughout the peninsula.

'It's like a magnet'

Considering the amount of time, energy, money and effort it takes to paddle the entire coastline of Florida, why bother? Some paddlers fall into it by accident, saying kayaking becomes an addiction over time. "I would come home from doing one segment and plan the next," said Dorsey DeMaster, current president of the FPTA. "Why do people do this? It's like, 'Why do people climb Mount Everest?' This was the best experience I've ever had in my life." Beginning in August 2019, DeMaster paddled in segments and finished the last stretch 23 months later when she landed on the coast of Jupiter. She was the first female veteran to complete the whole trail and the 34th finisher overall. AJ Rivera, 69, is planning a continuous "through paddle" of the CT beginning later this year, with plans to finish before his 70th birthday next September. But this isn't his first big kayaking trip. "I shipped my kayak from Miami to Lima, then shipped it over the Andes and put it in the Amazon River, then went up a little over 2,000 miles," he said of his journey that began in 2007.

Rivera first heard about the CT from his friend, Bianchi, and decided it was time for another adventure. His planning began earlier this year. "First, you have to make the decision to do it. Until you make that decision,



Dorsey DeMaster, an Air Force veteran, is greeted with a hero's welcome after becoming the 34th person to finish the entire Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail. **DORSEY DEMASTER**



AJ Rivera has gear set out in preparation to paddle the 1,515-mile Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail. **AJ RIVERA**

you're not really committed. It's just a dream that can evaporate," Rivera said. "It's like a magnet that pulls you. You have to have that emotional pull toward it because it is a commitment, a distance to travel. What I love is the solitude, being out in the wilderness." The kayaker is also mindful that time is not on his side. Rivera previously worked in a department dealing with preretirement death benefits, a job that made him realize how many people die young. "A lot of people retire and they quickly die. They worked their whole lives for something at the end of a journey they never make," he said. "I'm asking, 'How much longer can I do this?' If I'm going to do it, I need to do it now."

Trials, tribulations and triumphs

Wind, sun, weather, boat traffic and tides pose challenges for anyone who tries to paddle the CT. But planning is key for someone like DeMaster, an Air



The Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail is a 1,515-mile route that takes paddlers around the entire peninsula. **FLORIDA PADDLING TRAILS ASSOCIATION**

Force veteran with nearly four decades of aviation experience. "Pilots have flight plans. You find out the weather at point A and point B, and in between," she said. Despite preparation, DeMaster still found herself clinging to mangrove roots while paddling from Key West toward Miami. Some paddlers have faced 30

mph gusts of wind at times, but others have finished in record time with favorable conditions and endurance. The fastest CT paddle was completed in just under two months. For those looking to enter the "CT Hall of Fame," a class of people who've officially completed the trail, the main source of propulsion must be a paddle,



Gus Bianchi, the ninth paddler to complete the entire Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail, paddles a section in the Florida Keys with Dorsey DeMaster, left. **GUS BIANCHI**

only sails under one meter squared are allowed and the launch/takeout points must form a continuous line around the state. Gear is another consideration for those preparing for the journey, such as Rivera. Sea kayaks measuring 14-to-8 feet are best suited for such an endeavor. Paddles, quick-drying clothing, a water filtration system, lightweight backpacking gear and navigation tools are also essential for making the trip. Although many adventurers make painstaking preparations, others sort of "wing it." DeMaster recalled a Mississippi resident who finished the trail without any major considerations of weather or tide. He just got up each day and kept paddling in the direction he was headed. "Someone stole his PFD (personal flotation device)," DeMaster said. "He had to mooch one from a local boater. They gave him a kid's orange PFD and that's all he had." Many Florida-based CT paddlers — even after finishing — find themselves paddling some segments over and over again. Many would be content to skip Miami's "Concrete Canyon," which involves frequent boat traffic and wakes, or they might not want to again cross Tampa Bay. But certain sections of

the trail keep calling to kayakers like Bianchi, who was the ninth CT finisher. "I've probably paddled the CT again maybe 75 percent of the way. I love the Keys and I love the Everglades," he said. "I ended up paddling the Keys five times from Key Largo to Key West." Loneliness can sometimes pose a bigger challenge than the elements when attempting segments solo. But the camaraderie among paddlers keeps people motivated while attempting the whole CT and inspires finishers to stay involved after completing the trek. DeMaster said she has no regrets but notes the "weird feeling when you're camping by yourself" But the payoff was worth it. "It was enriching to the soul — the saltwater, the fresh air, being away from society, the media and the TV, just everything while being out there," she said. To learn more about the CT, FPTA and Florida's paddling trails, visit floridapaddlingtrails.com or floridadep.gov.

Find me @PConnPie on Twitter and Instagram or send me an email: pconnolly@orlandosentinel.com. For more fun things, follow @fun.things.orlando on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Palm

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Stars at the Hobby Center in Houston. "Our programming department is going through a transition," wrote Dr. Phillips Center spokesperson Jacklyne Ramos in an email, adding the center plans to fill both positions. In the meantime, she wrote, a team of three education-department managers and a trio of senior directors and a manager in programming will oversee those functions. "There are so many great jobs available across the country right now," Ramos wrote. "These changes and new opportunities are a reflection of our industry going back to business following the pandemic." **UNITED ARTS:** Juliana Steele, the chief financial officer of United Arts of Central Florida, plans to retire. Steele notably — and tirelessly — served two stints as interim president of the advocacy and grant-making organization,

including throughout the COVID-19 pandemic after Flora Maria Garcia retired from the top job in January 2020. Jennifer Evins became the new president 18 months later. "The last 15 years have flown by," Steele wrote in her official statement. "I would like to think that my time here has moved the mission forward, elevated the organization in the eyes of the community and of our partners." Steele was indispensable during the pandemic, putting in long hours to process grant applications for local institutions trying to make sense of — and stay afloat with — the different county, state and federal grant funding offered to keep them in business through shutdowns and social distancing. With typical modesty and collaborative spirit, Steele said she couldn't



Steele

name one accomplishment she was most proud of, "because I view the arts as a team effort. We are all critical to ensuring the magic stays alive in our community." And with her usual team-player attitude, Steele has offered to continue working until a replacement can be found and she can pass on her knowledge. "I'm not going to leave without having someone in place," she told me. She also said she was looking forward to some "hammock time" after retiring. If anyone deserves a stretch of rest and relaxation, it's Steele. **MOUNT DORA CENTER FOR THE ARTS:** Nancy Zinkofsky has stepped down as executive director of the Mount Dora Center for the Arts, where she had served since 2007. Board president Deb Hitchcock thanked Zinkofsky for her work, in which she oversaw the art festival that brings in more than 200,000 visitors annually as well as an annual summer art camp attended

by more than 4,000 children since its inception. Janet Gamache, a prior board member of the organization, will step in as interim executive director while a permanent replacement is sought. Gamache runs the Mount Dora Craft Festival. "Janet's history with MDCA and her extensive experience and successes in festival management is essential to facilitating our team through this season and the 2022 Mount Dora Arts Festival," Hitchcock wrote. **ORLANDO FRINGE:** Orlando Fringe this month announced new faces joining its team. Emma Parker is now the nonprofit's development manager, responsible for fundraising. This is a case of musical chairs among our cultural institutions, as Parker comes to the Fringe from the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra, where she was the annual giving manager. She replaces Lisa Hardt, who left the Fringe in September to become lead grant writer at Orlando Science

Center. Recent University of Central Florida graduate Yanelly Aguilar will take on the newly created position of social-media coordinator for the Fringe. Marlon Burnley, who won a Critics' Choice Award in 2017 for his performance in "Black in the Box" at the annual Orlando Fringe Festival, has been named associate producer of the Digi-Fringe, the organization's online-programming arm. Jordan Lewis, who has worked with Kids Fringe, will be the associate producer of the upcoming World Fringe Congress, when Orlando will host Fringe leaders from festivals around the globe. In addition, Lewis will serve as the organization's accessibility coordinator. Finally, the Fringe's board of directors will have three new members: Leah Patterson of City



Burnley



Williams

Beverages, the presenting sponsor of the May festival; John Payne-Rios of Howard Middle School; and Marcus Williams, a student retention and completion specialist at Seminole State College. Williams is a long-time Fringe volunteer who this year won the organization's Beth Marshall Spirit of the Fringe Award for his contributions. "We are bringing new and exciting voices to the Fringe table," wrote Fringe executive director Alauna Friskies. "Each individual brings something unique to Fringe to help broaden our scope and strengthen our foundation."

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