

# Photographing Alligators in Florida

by Hannes Klostermann

To many divers, being in the water with apex predators is a thrilling and fascinating experience. Though while thousands of divers swim with sharks on any given day, bespoke crocodilian (i.e. crocodiles and their close relatives like alligators, caimans etc.) encounters are still fairly rare. In fact, there are only three popular destinations to experience these prehistoric looking animals up close and personal. American Crocodiles inhabit the Chinchorro Banks in Mexico and Jardines de la Reina in Cuba whilst alligator encounters can be experienced at the Everglades Outpost in Florida. Here Chris Gillette conducts guided sessions with American alligators for up to four people.

## The Everglades Outpost

The Everglades Outpost is a legitimate wildlife rescue facility - registered as a non-profit educational organisation - which takes in, among many other animals, so called “nuisance” alligators. These are individuals that are at least 4ft/1.2m in length and have turned up in someone’s back yard so are therefore believed to pose a threat to humans, their pets or property. As there are more than a million alligators in Florida they are deemed a healthy and stable population so, sadly, the usual way of dealing with nuisance alligators is to kill them and harvest their meat. Between 7000 and 8000 alligators die this way every year. At least Fluffy will be safe now! Oh well...

Luckily some trappers work with rescue facilities like the Everglades Outpost and therefore a few lives are spared. Rescue facilities are not



*Seeing a slight ripple at the surface was the “worst” conditions we encountered during our three hour session. The water is simply crystal clear and perfect for taking photographs. Not one of the images in this article had any backscatter removed. Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 10 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F14, 1/125th, ISO 100.*

allowed to relocate “nuisance” individuals as they are known to return to their capture site following release. Instead, they remain in captivity – certainly still preferable to being shot dead whilst they’re taking a nice relaxing bath in a swimming pool!

The Everglades Outpost alligator enclosure currently contains 15 “inmates”: 14 females and one large male called Casper\*. The enclosure is nicely kept and spacious, featuring a sandy area where the alligators can bask in the tropical sunshine. The large artificial pond has crystal clear fresh water, a maximum depth of around 6ft/1.8m,



and a temperature in the low 20s Celcius / low 70s Fahrenheit (at the end of march). This makes photographing the animals an absolute joy! But more on that later...

\*Fun fact: Alligators can be quite easily trained to recognise their name! With some individuals, this only takes a couple of training sessions! While this, of course, is not a natural thing to do, it really goes to show how clever they are.

## Safety First

The experience is run by Chris Gillette, a professional alligator handler with years of experience with these animals. While he makes this a fun and very enjoyable experience, his first priority clearly is safety. He conducts a thorough safety briefing before anybody enters the enclosure. It is important to remember that even though the alligators are held in captivity, they are still very much wild animals. Granted, some of them have become accustomed to humans to a certain extent. Throughout the session Chris keeps an eye out for nearby alligators that we're not dealing with directly. He likes to stress that although he works with the animals on a daily basis, he does not trust them. What he does trust in is his ability to read the situation and understand what they're up to.

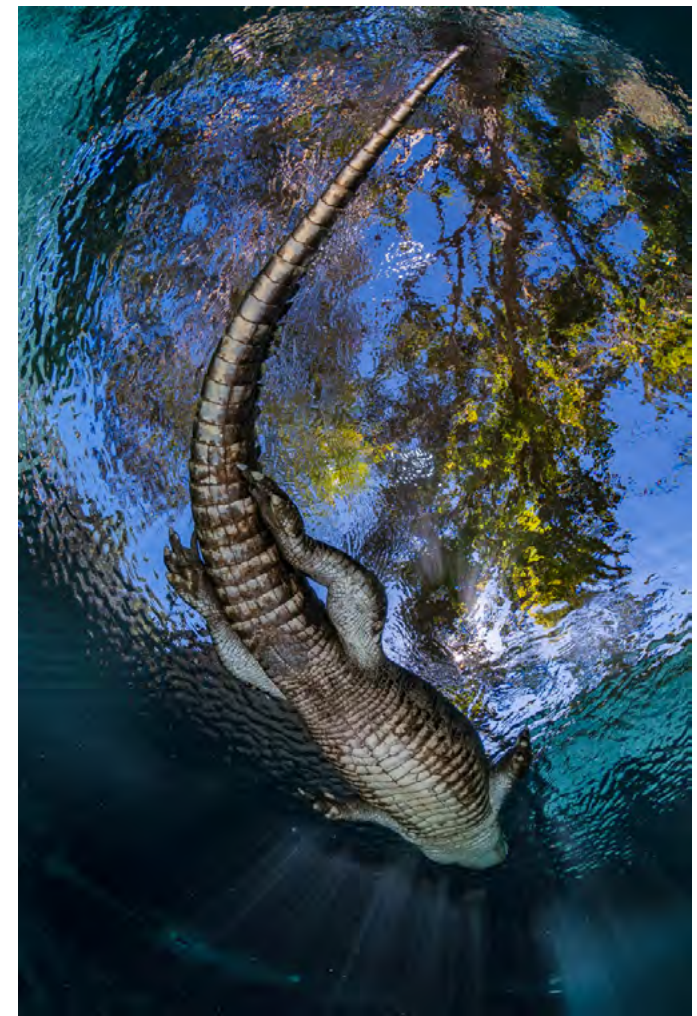
It is hard to describe, but despite there being 15 alligators in the water, the whole experience is incredibly serene. In a way this reminded me of a shark dive: something that sounds crazy and borderline suicidal to the layman but in reality is simply an incredible experience. The animals move at a very relaxed pace and hardly show any interest in those strange looking, yet potentially delicious creatures that share the water with them. Having said that, they do become a bit more active and more easily excitable when the temperatures go up in the summer. In any case it is of utmost importance not to peak their interest by flailing or splashing around. All movements need to be slow and deliberate.

During our safety briefing - as if they were to demonstrate what not to do - two peacocks, which move freely within the Outpost, started fighting right outside the alligator enclosure. Four of the reptiles immediately entered the water



*Split-level images are certainly a favourite with any crocodilian. Beware of particles at the surface! Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 14 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F14, 1/125th, ISO 100.*

from the opposite end of the enclosure and began investigating in their typical, quiet and motionless fashion with only the top of their heads breaking the surface. As Chris informed us, there have been occasions on which peacocks had made very poor



*This was probably my favourite perspective. There is nothing quite like seeing these prehistoric creatures swim right above your head! The trees seen through Snell's Window, as well as the sunrays provide a pleasing background. Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 10 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F11, 1/200th, ISO 100.*

decisions and jumped the fence. This turned into a true feast for the alligators very quickly! This is

exactly the deal with these creatures. Everything seems slow, calm and even lazy until it doesn't anymore and things become very messy very quickly. This is an important thing to keep in mind. As with sharks, you simply want to avoid looking like potential prey! As part of this basic concept, everybody moves around the pond walking as quietly as possible. No swimming or fins are allowed. Of course this doesn't mean that you will be instantly death-rolled when your camera makes a little splash at the surface, but you will want to keep the noises to a minimum. Clear communication with Chris is also crucial as he can advise on what can or cannot be done.

All you need for this experience is a wetsuit, mask and snorkel. A weight belt is necessary should you want to join them on the bottom or have them pass over your head. Taking a camera might also be a good idea – not just to take pictures but also as the world's most expensive shield for added peace of mind.

To make things more controllable, only one person is allowed in the water with Chris at any given time during the three hour session. Time in the water, as well as cost, is usually split equally amongst the participants but it can be arranged in whichever way the group desires. Normally, each participant would get



*Casper warming up after a photo shoot. Nikon D500, Nikon 10-24mm @ 14 mm, F6.3, 1/200th, ISO 100.*

two turns in the water, giving everyone an opportunity to review pictures (without having to worry about nearby alligators) and adjust their setup. That's enough of me rambling on about alligators, equipment and safety. Let's take some pictures!

## Photography

From a photographic perspective, the alligator experience at the Everglades Outpost could hardly be any better. As previously mentioned, the water is crystal clear and completely flat. At most there was



*Intercepting the animals as they “walk” along the bottom works well to get a close pass. This smile is simply irresistible! Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 17 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F13, 1/160th, ISO 100.*

a little ripple at the surface from the wind that had picked up during our session. Backscatter is a non-issue. In fact I haven't removed a single spec from any of the pictures in this article. Beautiful trees hang over the pond and provide an appealing backdrop seen through Snell's Window. The only thing I wouldn't consider ideal is the lining of the pond. Since this is an artificial body of water, the bottom and walls are mainly concrete. This is not the most appealing environment for your subjects to be placed in. Nevertheless, this can be mitigated

to a certain degree by using different angles.

Chris has a special bond with the 9-10ft/3m male, Casper. The pair have known each other for over 10 years and Chris is usually able to gently point him in the right direction for photo ops or steer him away should you be uncomfortable with him bumping the camera. Like our beloved sharky friends, alligators all have different personalities and Casper is about as calm as they come, making him the ideal photographic subject! His female companions are a

lot less “nice” and not as used to humans. This did help quite a bit when trying to get “mouth open” shots, but wasn’t as desirable for everything else. Therefore, most of the session will usually revolve around Casper. You can either approach him in a natural way or ask Chris to place him wherever you’d like him to be. Once Casper has been steered in the right direction, breathe in, sink to the bottom as gracefully as possible, and an overhead pass for a silhouette or strobe-lit underside shot will be a breeze. This can be repeated pretty much as often as the photographer desires.

However, weighing in at around 250 lbs, Casper’s cooperation is very much required. He is definitely not going to do anything he doesn’t want to do. Sometimes he would sink to the bottom and rest there for a while. In response you will have to dive down, but this also gives plenty of angles to work from. Provided photographers move slowly, pictures can be taken right on the dome. Note that this is however a no touching experience apart from by the handler of course. As this is a legal requirement to conduct these sessions it is strictly enforced.

Creating split-level images is certainly a favourite with any crocodilian. This can be easily achieved as you will be standing up and the water is very flat. The only issue I had (and noticed too late!) was that there were a lot of small particles floating on the surface. These tended to stick to the dome, causing strange distortions on some images. They’re not really droplets, but the water sheets off the dome differently around these particles. Here it would definitely be ideal to enter the water specifically for over-unders and therefore not get the top half of the dome wet in the first place. The usual method of spit, dunk, lift, shoot, which had never



*Casper showing us his pearly whites. Even though this is clearly one of the least comfortable positions to be in in front of a large alligator, they do remind me of frogs from this angle. Taken within inches from the dome. Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 17 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F14, 1/125th, ISO 100.*



*Very occasionally, Casper would bump the dome. Clearly, this image could have used strobes closer to the dome and more depth of field. The lesson here is, be prepared for very close encounters! Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 17 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F14, 1/125th, ISO 100.*

failed me previously, didn't work very well in this setting. Maybe I should've re-applied the spit more often? Possibly. I certainly should've done some more pixel peeping to check for artefacts, as they are not all that obvious when not zoomed in. Can you tell they're present in the not-bumping-the-dome split? Either way, pixel peeping with 15 alligators around me simply didn't feel right, so I kept it to a minimum.

In hindsight, what would I have done differently? Not an awful lot really! I definitely would've liked some more time in the water, as it just went by so quickly, but that's true for any time you find yourself in perfect conditions, I suppose. Naturally, having more time allows for trying more creative techniques once you've bagged the shots you absolutely wanted to get. Considering that this was my first time in the water with these animals, I was still more than happy with the images that I managed to create (apart from a few heartbreakingly distorted, otherwise great half-and-half



*Alligators would occasionally rest at the bottom and Casper preferred to have his eyes closed. Though he could clearly still sense his surroundings, this allowed for a very close approach and countless angles to shoot from. Also, the sunrays dancing on their skin created beautiful colour and texture. Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 10 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F11, 1/200th, ISO 100.*

images) and I can definitely recommend this to anyone who has a soft spot for prehistoric predators.

The first alligator picture I posted on social media generated several comments implying I had large spherical objects made of metal suspended from my groin area ("You've got balls of steel!"). I'm not going to lie, I went in the water that day feeling a little nervous. However, whilst having respect for potentially deadly animals is never a bad idea, being nervous was completely unjustified and that feeling vanished very quickly. Just like sharks, these are simply incredible creatures that don't deserve the bad press they're usually getting.

Make sure you pay Casper and the girls a visit next time you're in the area and see for yourself!

No balls required.



*Sometimes, even the Tokina 10-17 would simply not be wide enough! This was shot inches from the belly of the alligator. A little piece of anatomic trivia here: alligator penises are permanently erect and can be deployed and retracted rapidly using a specific set of muscles and tendons that act like a rubber band. When not in use, they're protected by thick skin. The greyish part between his rear legs is where the magic happens! Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 10 mm, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes, F11, 1/200th, ISO 100.*



**Hannes Klostermann**  
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