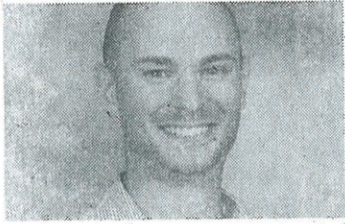


OUTDOORS



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Robinson Preserve a great little getaway

I woke up Tuesday morning in my average apartment, in my average northwest Bradenton neighborhood, staring at a white, dimpled ceiling.

A front page headline on the Bradenton Herald read: "BAILOUT DEFEATED; DOW PLUMMETS".

Whatever. I was gonna blow my million dollars.

I stumbled down the apartment steps with my maroon Columbia mountain bike, hopped on the two-wheeled wonder and blasted through the neighborhood, then a cycling lane, over uneven slabs of sidewalk, through a ritzier neighborhood and finally to the front gates of Robinson Preserve.

I hooked a right down a swirling, gravelly dirt road that led to the steps of a high, wooden tower. With heavy thighs, I plodded up the steps, which wound into a morning freshly sprayed with humidity by a dusk rainfall. The air smelled like ground-up earth.

I reached the top, and there it was. Wildlife all around, in every form.

Some 53 feet down, mullet crashed in celebration through the water, leaping like slews of skinny kids on pogo sticks. Past the mullet was a row of native trees. Boardwalks and bridges wound over the waterways and through the vegetation. Even farther was Tampa Bay, stretched in every direction, with the regal Sunshine Skyway as its crown.

Each head turn brought a different sight. Behind me, to the south, were muddy flats, exquisite because they are not tailored to impress. This led to the green volume of open Florida. I felt like an explorer who had stumbled into untouched paradise.

To think there were plans to turn this 487-acre paradise into more than 400 homes and a waterfront golf course. That would have been like trading a waterfront cardboard box for a mansion. As if there aren't enough flat, man-made carpets of rug on which to knock a ball around in this state. I love golf, for sure, even though my natural slice makes me borrow balls from playing partners. But not as much as I love nature.

I glided laps around the top floor of the tower, noticing the artistry of the wooden fish or seagulls that were carved at each of the four corners near the tower's roof.

Soon, a man below parked his bike and scaled the tower.

At the top, we met eyes, nodded and exchanged hellos. He had white, slicked-back hair that fell on a sweaty towel draped around his neck. Wrinkles formed a wise

As this hunched stranger and I stared across the view that had many dimensions — trees, bridges, varying forms of water, mullet hopping, Tampa Bay, the Skyway Bridge — there were no words. Just a picture, both surreal and real.

Finally, the man spoke. "You couldn't build this tower yourself," he said.

I agreed, to save time and preserve the mood.

I felt like all this was mine. This morning, this tons of wooden tower, the bays, the wetlands, everything — it all belonged to me. Because it does. And it's yours, too.

Before descending the steps and riding away, the man spoke again.

"A spectacular view," he said. He continued to stare, then nodded slowly.

"A million-dollar view."

If you go

What: Robinson Preserve.
Where: 1704 99th St. N.W.
Activities: Kayaking, hiking, biking, camping.
Hours: Open dusk until dawn.