

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## The swamp's the thing at Fargo's Gator Motel

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The four-room Gator Motel has an unlisted number, but tourists from as far away as Germany and Australia manage to find it. Owner Kevin Hart, who is also the reservations clerk, housekeeper and maintenance man, seldom sees his guests. The hotel doesn't even have an office, so arriving customers look for Hart at the grocery store across the street. If he's not there, the likely response is: "He's probably gone fishing."

Still, the motel is rarely empty -- other than during the heat of summer, when the area around the Okefenokee Swamp becomes the dominion of gnats, mosquitoes and bloodsucking flies. And don't expect the amenities of modern hotels. Pool? Try swimming in the nearby swamp. Free HBO? Enjoy the 1960s black-and-white television sets that emit snowy images from three or four stations. High-speed Internet access?

Not likely.

But people don't come to Fargo to watch television or surf the Web. They come from all over to hunt, fish and visit the 1,800-square-kilometre swamp, much of it a national wildlife refuge and wilderness area teeming with alligators, bears and wild hogs.

"When we've got water in the swamp, there probably isn't a week that goes by when I don't rent two or three rooms to people from Germany, Australia or England," Hart says.

At check-out time, customers leave their money on the dresser and walk out, often with the door unlocked. Hart says he has never been bilked in 27 years. "I have people come in and I never see them," he says.

Despite the old-fashioned televisions and décor, the Gator Motel is clean and comfortable. Hart tidies up each room himself. The area around the hotel gets quiet around 10 p.m., when most of Fargo's 380 residents have parked their pickup trucks and retired for the night. The only evening entertainment is the crooning of frogs and crickets.

In the morning, guests can walk a few doors down for sausages and scrambled eggs at the Sportsmen's Cafe or head across the street to Fargo's other restaurant, the Suwannee River Cafe.

One of the state's most remote towns, Fargo is located in southeastern Georgia, 76 kilometres east of Valdosta, near the Florida state line. It is surrounded to the north, west and south by vast tracts of pines, grown by timber companies. The Okefenokee Swamp is to the east.

The swamp is the eastern headwaters of the Suwannee River, which flows by Fargo on its way to Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. With its Spanish moss-draped cypress trees and sandy banks, the river attracts hordes of canoeists, anglers and nature lovers.

About 27 kilometres northeast of Fargo is the 33-hectare Stephen C. Foster State Park, which provides boating, camping, cabins, swamp exhibits and nature trails, and attracts about 80,000 visitors a year.

The Okefenokee and Suwannee have been plagued by low water levels for the past four years because of a drought, but boating has improved lately due to a recent storm that dumped 17 centimetres of rain on the area. If there's adequate water in the swamp, the motel's occupancy rate is highest in the fall and from late February until June. Business drops during the hot summer months.

Hart is a laid-back kind of businessman: The motel's phone number is unlisted because he doesn't want to be called in the middle of the night.

Some of the guests come via U.S. Route 441, a scenic route from Lake City, Tenn., to Miami, that cuts through the centre of town. Others are referred by the staff at the state park.

Hart says those who do find their way to the Gator appreciate the small-town, unhurried lifestyle it provides. "There's not a lot going on," he says, "but there's nowhere like Fargo, Ga."

*For more information visit: National Wildlife Federation at <http://www.nwf.org/okefenokee> ; Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites at <http://www.dnr.state.ga.us/dnr/parks>.*