

de soto

VISITING THE PARK

De Soto National Memorial commemorates Hernando De Soto's landing in Florida in May 1539 and the resultant four-year expedition across the southeastern United States.

Besides memorializing De Soto's exploits, the park also provides insights into the way 16th-century man lived. From December through April, park employees in period dress demonstrate the use of various weapons, including the crossbow, and show how food was prepared and preserved for

the extended journey. Members of the park staff also give talks about the way a 16th-century Spaniard looked at life.

Walk along the nature trail and see the plants that Spaniard and Indian used. Your visit will be all the richer for your personal expedition into the 16th century.

For further information about the park, which is located on Tampa Bay eight kilometers (five miles) west of Bradenton, Fla., write to the superintendent at De Soto National Memorial, 75th Street, NW, Bradenton, FL 33529.

For Your Safety

Do not be lured by the natural setting into doing something foolish, for inherent dangers are here. Sharp shells and barnacles can cut your feet while wading, and deep holes in the river may catch you unaware. Be alert for poisonous snakes, cacti, and poison ivy along the nature trail and in the swamp. Keep pets on a leash and do not ride bicycles on the trail.



Red mangroves are land makers. Their roots trap drifting plantlife and soil particles thereby inching the land forward into the shallow water.



THE ELUSIVE SEARCH FOR GOLD AND RICHES

The De Soto expedition was the first European penetration into what is now the southern United States. In the next four years the explorers gathered a vast amount of knowledge of the interior lands and peoples and recorded priceless information about native American life in the 1500s.

Hernando De Soto, the expedition's leader, was a brave, capable officer. A veteran of the conquests of Nicaragua and Peru, he petitioned the Spanish crown in 1537 and received a grant "to conquer, pacify, and populate" the northern continent, for many believed that North America possessed riches that would rival the treasures of Mexico and Peru. Investing his personal fortune, De Soto outfitted the expedition with tailors, blacksmiths, farriers, carpenters, cobblers, and many others needed for such a venture.

On April 7, 1538, the flotilla left the Spanish port of San Lucar for the New World. After making final preparations in Cuba, the expedition sailed for Florida, landing somewhere on the west coast on May 30, 1539.

After setting up camp in the Indian village of Ucita, patrols went out to reconnoiter the countryside. One patrol was amazed to find a Spanish-speaking Indian who turned out to be Juan Ortiz, a survivor of the ill-fated Panfilo de Narvaez expedition some 12 years earlier. Ortiz proved to be a valuable guide and interpreter for De Soto for much of the expedition.

Leaving 100 men at Camp Ucita, De Soto started inland with about 200 lancers, 300 crossbowmen, and harquebusiers, a dozen priests, a physician, and workmen whose job was to build boats, bridges, repair weapons, and rivet slave chains. Wardogs used in tracking down recalcitrant Indians trotted alongside the column, while a company of cavalry herded a drove of grunting, squealing hogs that reportedly numbered over 300. Pack horses and mules followed carrying supplies and provisions.

Problems beset them at every step. And their weapons, the crossbow and sword and methods of fighting with a cavalry charge and fixed battle formation, were no match for the hidden ambush and stealth of the Indians. Only in the open prairies, where the cavalry could operate, was the conquistador master.

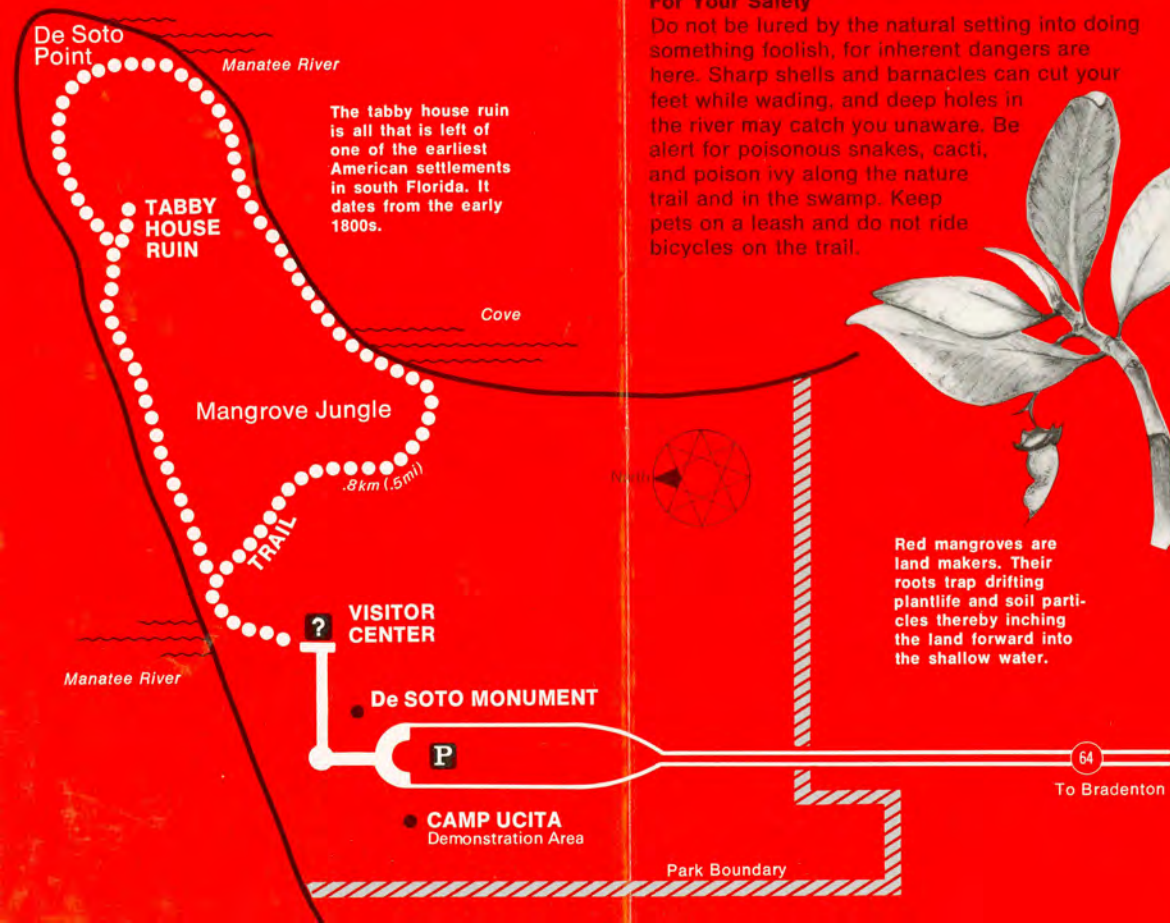
De Soto did little to make himself liked by the Indians, for he seized the village chieftain wherever the expedition went and persuaded, or forced, him to provide his men with carriers, food, and guides. Hoping to rid themselves of the bearded invaders as soon as possible, the Indians told the Spaniards that the treasure they sought lay just a day's journey away or just across the next river.

By October, the expedition had passed near the present cities of Ocala and Gainesville, Florida, to winter near Tallahassee. The next spring they started north into what is now Georgia. Somewhere near Augusta, De Soto met the comely chieftainess Cofitachequi, who bestowed upon him a necklace of pearls. Other pearls and necklaces were taken from Indian burial mounds; enough were found to make them all rich.

The land, too, was fertile and suitable for colonization, but De Soto informed his men that they had come for gold — not mere pearls. Somewhere in this wilderness, De Soto told them, was surely another Mexico or Peru. Such was De Soto's indomitable character that he would not accept less. They must continue until gold was found.

Reduced in numbers by deaths and desertions, the band passed through part of South Carolina, western North Carolina, into the foothills of the Smokies, and on into Tennessee. Near Chattanooga the weary men turned southward.

North of Mobile, the Spaniards fought their most decisive battle with the Indians. Power-



ful Tascalusa, lord of the Mobile Indians, hid his anger when the Spaniards seized, and forced him to furnish 400 carriers as soon as they reached his town of "Mabila." But warriors, not carriers, surrounded De Soto in Mabila. The Spaniards fought free and in a fierce day-long battle burned the Indian town and slaughtered about 3,000 Indians.

De Soto also suffered crippling losses in the battle, for 20 men and a number of horses were killed and most of the extra clothing, food, supplies, and the pearls were burned. Worse yet, "the wounded comprised all the men of most worth and honor in the army."

Determined to go on, De Soto thwarted the wishes of his disillusioned men to sail away on the supply ships that lay off the Alabama coast. Turning northward into Mississippi, the Spaniards endured another hard winter. And in

the spring of 1541 disaster was narrowly avoided when a band of Chickasaws launched a surprise night attack on the camp. Had not the Indians mistaken stampeding horses as mounted cavalry, the expedition would have been annihilated.

In near shambles, the expedition turned westward and stumbled out of the forest onto the banks of the Mississippi River on May 8, 1541. So wide was the river they had discovered that it was said that "if a man stood still on the other side, it could not be discerned whether he were a man or no." Hardly aware of the importance of their discovery, the Spaniards hurried to build barges that could carry them across this barrier and enable them to renew the search for gold.

Once on the other side, they faced endless battles with the Indians. To protect themselves during the winter that they spent on the plains of Arkansas, they built a stockade around their camp.

In the spring, tormented by the failure to find gold, De Soto proposed to return to the Mississippi, build boats, float down the river, and establish a seaport. There he would refit the expedition and continue the search for wealth. But before he could carry out his plans, he died May 21, 1542. "Many of his men did not mourn his passing," one man noted, "for he was a stern man, and bent his men to his own will." Yet, skill and courage had demanded respect. Those who marched with De Soto said that he was "one of the best lancers who have passed to the new world."

His men buried him in camp, but suspecting the Indians might discover his grave, they

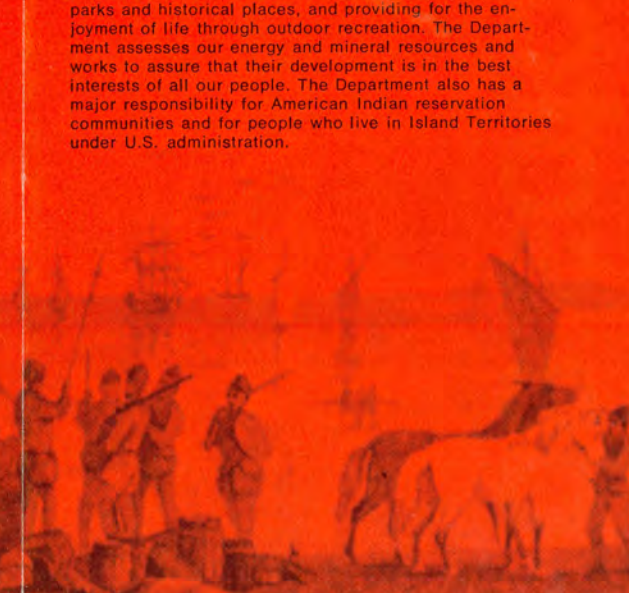


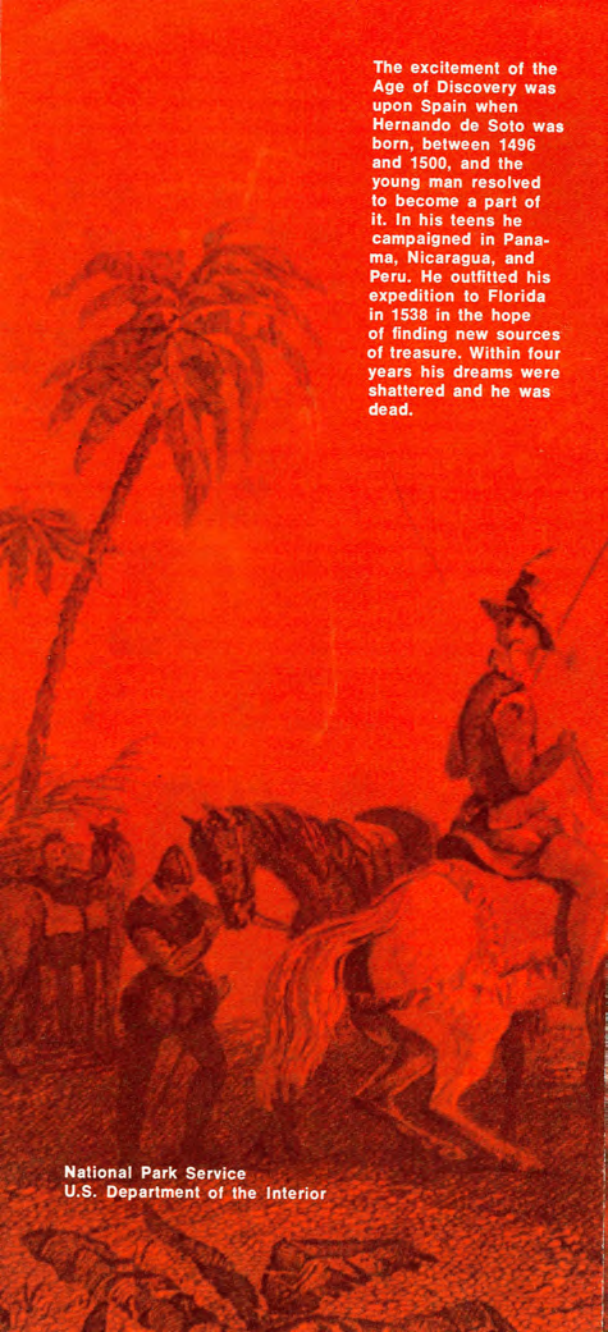
secretly placed his remains in a weighted oaken casket and sank it in the "Father of Waters."

Weary of the fruitless search for gold, the survivors tried to reach Mexico by going overland. The harshness of the plains dispirited them, however, and they retraced their way to the Mississippi hopeful that by following it they would come to the Gulf of Mexico. On July 2, 1543, 322 Spaniards and 100 Indians began to sail down the river. On September 10, they reached Tampico, Mexico.

No gold had been found and contemporaries saw the expedition as a failure. But these men had learned about the land and its inhabitants at first hand. The Spanish reports about the land ironically helped stimulate English colonization in the 17th century. And the Mississippi, a broad avenue into the heart of the continent, had been discovered by Europeans.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.





The excitement of the Age of Discovery was upon Spain when Hernando de Soto was born, between 1496 and 1500, and the young man resolved to become a part of it. In his teens he campaigned in Panama, Nicaragua, and Peru. He outfitted his expedition to Florida in 1538 in the hope of finding new sources of treasure. Within four years his dreams were shattered and he was dead.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior