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## Visit, eat alligators at Gatorama in Florida; The farm harvests 1,000 of these reptiles per year

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A dozen pairs of ominous olive eyes and snouts emerge from the murky lagoon, gathering near the dock where Roy Dyer stands with a 5-gallon bucket of raw chicken.

He coos to them like kittens and dangles a chicken leg over the water until one of the crocodiles leaps up - revealing 64 menacing teeth - and slams its powerful jaws shut around the snack with such force that it can be heard inside the gift shop.

It's eatin' time at Gatorama, a venerable Florida roadside attraction and gator farm with nearly 4,000 alligators and crocodiles.

And after watching the reptiles chow down, visitors can sample the creatures themselves: the restaurant serves gator ribs and specialties made from Florida's other white meat.

The delicacy tastes "close to pork, but there's no bone or fat," said Patty Register, who owns and operates Gatorama along with her husband, Allen. She disputes any likeness to chicken.

In addition to a menu of gator dishes, Gatorama claims to have the largest collection of large alligators and crocodiles - about 60 that are 12 feet or longer - and the only breeding colony of alligators in the United States.

Gatorama was one of the state's original gator farms - it holds one of 30 licenses issued in 1987 - and is one of about 18 farms currently producing in Florida, according to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Statewide, Florida farms produced more than 207,000 pounds of alligator meat and more than 27,000 hides in 2002, the most recent year statistics are available.

Gatorama harvests about 1,000 alligators annually and sells more than 15,000 pounds of meat a year, most if it over the counter at the Gatorama gift shop, although they will ship it overnight anywhere.

Despite the demand for the meat, Register said they're more interested in tourism than farming, even though "it's a harder way to make a living."

When Gatorama opened in 1957, it was one of about 70 roadside tourist attractions in Florida, Register said. Now it is among the 20 or so that have survived competition from Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando and other big theme parks.

"But smaller, vintage attractions continue to draw some segments of tourists," said Donna Ross, president of the Florida Attractions Association. "They've had kind of a resurgence for the nostalgia market."

Ross attributed part of the comeback to the "grand-tripping" market, baby boomers who want to take their grandchildren to places that are slower-paced.

Gatorama sits on U.S. 27 in the middle of rural Glades County, about 80 miles west of West Palm Beach, although it seems a lifetime away from the hustle and bustle of South Florida's booming cities and suburbs.

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This summer's hurricanes knocked down half of the covered boardwalk and some billboards, said Ben Register. But the damage was quickly repaired and business is back to normal, he said.

At Gatorama, a sign warns visitors: "No swimming or sunbathing. Violators may be eaten."

Guests walk down a covered boardwalk over a lagoon that is crawling with about 60 alligators and crocodiles - gators on one side, crocs on the other. Crocs are more aggressive, so they are kept apart.

A few yards down, concrete pools on each side of the boardwalk hold dozens of gators and crocs - from little babies to rare Cuban crocodiles.

To show the difference between the two reptiles, Dyer plucks out a young gator and croc, each about 2 feet long, and tapes their jaws shut - even these skinny little guys have about 20 pounds of jaw pressure, he said.

He tries to let each visitor hold a croc and gator and teaches them about the reptiles in hopes of demystifying the creatures.

"Most people don't want anything to do with them, because they think they're slimy, nasty creatures," Dyer said. "Actually, they're very smooth, soft animals."

The crocodile has a lighter olive color, a long snout, no tongue, and an extra row of interlocking teeth. They are also a protected species - no crocodiles are served at the restaurant and no croc hides are sold at the store.

American alligators, on the other hand, came off the threatened species list in 1985, and are fair game. They are darker in color, have tongues, wider flat snouts and about 40 teeth.

But farther down the boardwalk, past the bobcats, tortoises, monkeys and raccoons, sits a crocodile so scary looking that it reinforces all of the stereotypes Dyer tries to quell: a 14-foot behemoth crocodile named Goliath.

About 40 years old and weighing at least 1,500 pounds, Goliath wears the signs of a crocodile who has been through his share of fights: he is missing one eye, the last two feet of his tail are gone and his cage is lined with nine skulls of alligators that he has killed.

Now in a cage by himself to protect the other animals, Goliath could break a human leg with a swipe of his tail, Dyer tells a group of gasping onlookers who shout out questions.

Several questions involve the Crocodile Hunter and Crocodile Dundee, but Dyer quickly dismisses any suggestion of battling the beasts.

"If you just had a knife and went up against one of these crocodiles," he said, "you would not win."

If you go

Location: 6180 U.S. Highway 27, Palmdale, about 15 miles north of Moore Haven in Glades County. Palmdale is less than a two-hour drive from Miami, Orlando or Fort Lauderdale.

Admission: \$9.95 for adults and \$3.50 for "critters less than 56 inches"

Hours: Monday-Saturday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; Sunday 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

For More Information: [www.gatorama.com](http://www.gatorama.com) or 863/675-0623.

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**GRAPHIC:** Baby alligators crawl over top of each other in a holding pen at Gatorama near Palmdale, Fla. Tyler Amedee, 6, and his brother, Seth, 3, from Camp LaJune, N.C. hold a baby alligator while visiting Gatorama.

