

St Augustine, Florida USA

www.allwaystraveller.com

Pleasures anew in the nation's oldest city

St. Augustine, a strikingly attractive city in north eastern Florida, is 'the oldest continuously occupied European-established settlement within the borders of the United States'.

More commonly called the Nation's oldest city, it was founded in 1565 by Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles, a Spanish admiral, and grew in prominence as a Spanish military outpost.

While much of St Augustine still reflects its Spanish heritage, the city's status as a premier tourist destination also owes as much a debt of thanks to Henry Flagler, the American industrialist and a founder of Standard Oil.

Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway brought America's elite to St Augustine in the late 19 Century and he accommodated them in his magnificent Hotel Ponce de Leon (now Flagler College).

It began a 'golden age' of tourism and set the standard that discerning travellers continue to enjoy today.

Those looking for a Florida destination brim full of historic relevance and cultural sophistication should add St Augustine to their trip list.

Ashley Gibbins
Managing editor
AllWays traveller



A personal view of St Augustine



This second impression will be the lasting one

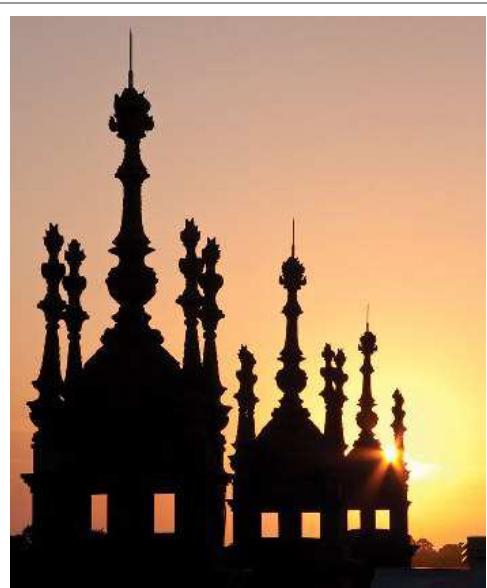
Forget the more long winded definition. To its citizens (particularly those with an interest in tourism) St Augustine is the Nation's Oldest City - plain and simple as that.

By Ashley Gibbins

And they make the very most of this status in attracting visitors to the city - and deservedly so.

They say you never get a second chance to make a first impression and, in this respect, our first impression of the city was not a positive one.

Ann and I first visited the city in 2004 at the tail end of a gruelling, whistle stop trip of the Southern States, which took in Georgia, North and South Carolina and finally Florida.



Doing the city justice

St Augustine was the last stop and, perhaps not surprisingly, we were mentally and physically 'frazzled' by the time we arrived in the city.

There was nothing left in the tank and our visit all but passed us by in a fatigue fuelled blur.

Returning 12 years later, I felt we had not done the city justice and were determined to make amends.



After this second, highly enjoyable short break in St Augustine it is obvious that we, rather than the city, were at fault.

Our second impression of St Augustine was greatly favourable and will be the lasting one.

While in the area



Take a guided tour

Red Train Tours and the Old Town Trolley Tours take guests on a multi-stop, hop-on-hop-off, fully narrated, route through downtown St. Augustine.

www.ripleys.com/redtrains
www.trolleytours.com/st-augustine

And have a ghostly experience



Come nightfall in St Augustine, the ghost tours come into their own.

The city's historic downtown district is seemingly teeming with ghosts, ghouls and various strange apparitions and all make for tours that are much more entertaining than nerve tingling.

Guided walking, trolley ride and pub crawl tours take visitors to the most 'haunted' buildings with recounts of devilish deeds long since past.

Ghost Tours of St. Augustine has been offering 'authentic' haunted tours for over 20 years and is 'dedicated to historical integrity and accuracy'.

Ghostly Experience has nightly tours that explore the haunted back alleys of St. Augustine by the light of a lantern and guide .

The Haunted Pub Crawl offers ghost stories and historic pub-lore and the chance to sup at some ales, wines and cocktails in the 'haunted' establishments.

The Ghosts and Gravestones tour on the *trolley of the doomed* takes guests around the downtown area, past cemeteries and 'haunted' buildings, while the Ghost Host recounts the terrible tales of St. Augustine's ghostly past.



Flagler College (once the magnificent Ponce de León Hotel)

No avoiding the history of this place

First things first, it's impossible to visit St Augustine and not appreciate its historical status. And nor would one want to.

St Augustine was founded by one Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles, a Spanish sea captain who settled here and became Florida's first governor.

As the admiral of a fleet of ships carrying settlers, troops, and supplies from Spain, he first sighted this Florida coastline on 28 August 1565.

Being close to the 8 September feast day of St. Augustine, a service of thanks was given to the saint and, lo and behold, the city got its name.

St Augustine flourished and served as the capital of Spanish Florida for over 200 years.

It then became capital of East Florida, when the territory briefly changed hands between Spain and Britain, and finally capital of the Florida Territory until this status was transferred to Tallahassee in 1824.

But Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles was not the only one deserving a place high up in the city's role of honour, for one has also to recognise Henry Flagler in this respect.

The Flagler legacy

A hugely wealthy industrialist, thanks to his oil interests, Flagler was one of the first 'snowbirds' travelling to Jacksonville for the winter sun with his ailing first wife Mary.



The Lightner Museum (nee The Alcazar)

After Mary died, Flagler returned to Florida with his new wife Ida Alice, but this time to St Augustine of which they were greatly impressed.

While the couple found the city charming, they were less impressed with the available hotel accommodation. This was well below par by the multi-millionaires standards.

And so, as was his want, Flagler built the magnificent 540-room Ponce de León Hotel, with guests getting to it on his Florida East Coast Railway.

Following the great success of the Ponce de León, Flagler built the Alcazar hotel just across the road.

While Flagler's railway has long since stopped bringing tourists to the city, and his two St Augustine hotels have stopped taking guests, the legacy of this pioneer of Florida tourism remains.

In addition to a city conditioned to welcoming visitors, Flagler's two hotel buildings can be explored on tours of Flagler College (the Ponce de León) and the Lightner Museum (the Alcazar).

The oldest of places

The Oldest House Museum

The Gonzalez-Alvarez House, the Oldest House Museum is owned and operated by the St. Augustine Historical Society, and is the oldest surviving Spanish colonial residence in Florida.

The museum offers two museums, a colonial kitchen and ornamental garden.

The Oldest Wooden School House



The Oldest Wooden School House dates back to the early 18th century and is located on St. George Street by the City Gate.

Visitors will get an understanding of the life of colonial school children.

The Spanish Military Hospital Museum



The Spanish Military Hospital Museum gives visitors an idea of the medical practices and procedures in the Colonial Spanish Period of St. Augustine.

The 40-minute fully guided tours offer a glimpse into another world, with demonstrations of "cutting edge" colonial surgery techniques by the Museum staff.

The Apothecary shows guests how herbs used in colonial times were the origins of some of the most popular medicines today. Many of these herbs can be found in the Apothecary's garden at the Museum.

St Augustine today

The St Augustine of today remains rooted in the historic Downtown area with many examples of Spanish Colonial or Renaissance architecture including Flagler College and the Lightner Museum.

St George Street is a colourful pedestrian thoroughfare of shops, bars and restaurants.

During the day it throngs with families and shoppers while, come evening, this is the city's night time entertainment hub and a main focus for the many ghost tours able to mine a bonanza of ghoulish stories from St Augustine's long past.

Just beyond, Cathedral Place, King Street and the brick paved Aviles Street offer a range of high end galleries and restaurants.

Frome here it is but a short walk to the grand Mantanzas Bay.



St Georges Street

Having got the lie of the land one can decide what to take in during the stay.

We opted for the Castillo de San Marcos, Flagler College and Lightner Museum on our first day before exploring further out on the second.

Castillo de San Marcos

The Castillo de San Marcos, is a Spanish stone fortress built between 1672 and 1695 to defend Spanish claims on the then New World.

The oldest structure in St. Augustine and a designated National Monument, it first came under fire in 1702 when the British attacked and burned the city but failed to breach the Castillo's walls.

In fact the British were never able to take the city of St. Augustine by force.

The fort changed hands in more peaceful circumstances as Florida and the city became, in turn, a British colony and then part of Spain again and finally, in 1821, a US Territory.

A visit to the Castillo offers the chance to enjoy views of St Augustine from its thick outer walls and gun deck.

Rooms that once housed soldiers and prisoners can be explored and ranger-led tours and daily activities include cannon firings and weaponry demonstrations.

www.nps.gov/casa

Serenity also close at hand

While the downtown area of St Augustine is the obvious tourist draw, one is only a ten minute walk from quiet residential avenues lined with live oaks strewn with Spanish moss.

The city's oldest guesthouse

During our visit to St Augustine we stayed at the St Francis Inn, the city's oldest guesthouse.

A short stroll from the downtown area, the contrasting serenity here was wonderful as Ann explains (below).

Taking a tour

A guided tour at the outset can provide an overview of the place and help determine the itinerary for the stay.

We chose Red Train Tours, which has been serving the city since 1953, and whose drivers come guides take guests throughout the downtown and riverside area with 22 hop-on-hop-off stops on route.

Ripley's Believe It or Not!



Ripley's was founded by Robert Leroy Ripley to showcase some of the amazing artifacts he had collected on his world travels and documented in his comic strip, *Believe It or Not!*

Inside this museum, guests can see a wax replica of the world's tallest man; the world's smallest production car; take a picture with the lizard man or walk through the vortex tunnel.

The Space Oddities gallery includes a giant replica of the International Space Station made entirely from matchsticks; a model of the lunar landing pad and a display of crayons carved into characters from the Star Wars movies.

The Museum is housed in the former Castle Warden Hotel and employees of Ripley's say they hear or see the ghosts of the two women that died in a fire in April of 1944.

www.ripleys.com/staugustine

St Augustine Distillery



The St Augustine Distillery is gaining a genuine reputation for its gin, whiskey, rum and vodka while also highlighting the city's legacy of producing spirits from cane liquor

The Distillery offers free tours and tastings to help visitors appreciate the process of manufacturing artisan spirits.

It is housed in a one time power and ice plant built between 1905 and 1927.

www.staugustinedistillery.com



Flagler College (once the magnificent Ponce de León Hotel)

Flagler College



Flagler's Hotel Ponce de Leon, which is now Flagler College, must be one of the most stunning university campus buildings anywhere.

This former hotel was built 1887 and no expense was spared as Flagler looked to create an 'American Riviera' in St Augustine with a magnificent property that captured the 'architectural spirit' of old Europe.

In its heyday, the hotel hosted presidents, royalty and the elite of American society.

The Ponce de Leon incorporated every modern convenience of the time including electricity, running water and a Thomas Edison clock, one of the first ever to be used in a public space.

The Ponce de Leon also had the largest collection of Louis Comfort Tiffany stained glass windows, with over 79 windows decorating the Dining Hall, and which the students and visitors can admire today.

The best way to appreciate what was one of the world's finest hotels is to take a fascinating student led guided tour of the property.

www.flagler.edu

The Lightner



The Lightner Museum is housed in the former Alcazar Hotel.

The Alcazar closed during the Depression, and in 1947 the building was purchased by Otto Lightner to house his truly eclectic collection of Victorian-era 'antiques'

Lightner maintained a compulsive, lifelong passion for collecting almost anything and the museum reflects this.

Visitors will pass through displays of costumes, furnishings and mechanical musical instruments.

A stuffed lion and a shrunken head then compete with shaving mugs and early dollar bills before a collection of keepsakes made from human hair vie for attention with beer mats.

The Lightner also has one of the best collections of fine and decorative 19th century art in the country and makes for an enjoyable visit as it is memorable.

www.lightnermuseum.org

The St. Augustine Pirate Museum



The St. Augustine Pirate and Treasure Museum offers interactive exhibits depicting the time of the plundering pirates.

Guests can experience what it was like to be a pirate in Port Royal, Jamaica along with a collection of authentic pirate artefacts from the 'Golden Age of Piracy' in the 17th century.

www.thepiratemuseum.com

The Colonial Quarter



The Colonial Quarter gives visitors an insight into hundreds of years of Colonial Spanish and British living history in St. Augustine.

This two acre attraction offers an Historic Adventure Tour with a guide acting as a resident of Colonial Quarter St. Augustine, who tells of St. Augustine's history as a fledgling port.

Guests can do musket drills, climb to the top of a 17th century watchtower replica, and dine and drink in 18th century style at the Bull and Crown or the Taberna Del Caballo.

www.colonialquarter.com

A little further afield

On our second day, and this being Florida, we just had to head out to the beach.

On the way we stopped at the local lighthouse, a Spanish fort and an alligator farm.

The lighthouse



The St. Augustine Lighthouse, which is still in operation, stands 165 feet above sea level with views of the Matanzas Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

The St. Augustine Lighthouse and Museum charity is dedicated to the preservation of the structure and keeping alive the story of the nation's oldest port.

www.staugustinelighthouse.com

Alligators galore

St. Augustine Alligator Farm Zoological Park was first opened in 1893 by George Reddington and Felix Fire to display their collection of alligators.

Today it is a small zoo with educational shows and exhibits that also undertakes research and supports worldwide conservation efforts.

It is the only place to see every living species of crocodilian along with a wading bird rookery, lemurs and exotic birds.

www.alligatorfarm.com



The Schooner Freedom offers St. Augustine visitors the opportunity to sail the waters of this historic city aboard a Class B tall ship. An authentic replica of a 19th-century blockade runner, Freedom is a double-masted, gaff-rigged, topsail schooner.

Fort Matanzas

Fort Matanzas, in the Matanzas Inlet, was built in 1742 to defend St. Augustine from British attack (though it never saw action).

Now a National Monument, the fort is maintained by the National Park Service with a free ferry service getting visitors across the short stretch of water to it.

And the beach



The beaches of St. Augustine offer miles of Atlantic coastline, which is separated from the mainland by the Intracoastal Waterway.

While some stretches allow car access, the Anastasia State Park offers a vehicle free beach experience.

Anastasia State Park



The Anastasia State Park covers 1,600 acres of rich ecosystems and wildlife and with four miles of pristine beach.

The estuarine tidal marsh is teeming with plant and animal life and there are self-guided nature trails through the maritime hammock and onto ancient sand dunes.

Visitors can also take in the Coquina Quarry, an archaeological site where coquina rock was mined to help construct the nearby Castillo de San Marcos.

www.floridastateparks.org

The Ponte Vedra Concert Hall



This concert hall brings locals and visitors together to enjoy performances by a range of national and international performers.

www.pvconcerthall.com

More information



Castillo de San Marcos

www.FloridasHistoricCoast.com
www.augustine.com

A place to stay in St Augustine : The St Francis Inn



By Ann Mealor

Tucked away down a quaint, narrow brick paved street in St Augustine is the traditional, truly 'olde worlde' St Francis Inn.

Dating from 1791, the city's Second Spanish Colonial period, the Inn perfectly embodies this historic area with its wide, creaky wooden staircase, antique furniture and cozy nooks and crannies.

The architecture reflects the early residents' concern for their own safety, as the Inn stands directly on the street, protecting and concealing its front entrance and courtyard, now a peaceful oasis enjoyed by hotel guests.

The warmest of welcomes

Following a warm and friendly welcome we were shown up the well trodden stairs to our quarters.

This was a comfortable two room suite, with a lounge and bedroom decorated in a homely cottage style with a large pine bed, embroidered white cotton bedspread; small mahogany side tables with lamps and sprung, cushioned sofas.

On one table was a welcome decanter of sherry and fresh flowers.

The Inn really is generous with its many complimentary offerings. Guests can sit and relax in the Inn's living room, and browse through a number of daily newspapers and magazines.

Here tea, coffee and hot chocolate can be enjoyed all day along with home baked cookies and fresh fruit.



Iced tea and water are available for guests to help themselves to throughout the day.

For those who get peckish later in the evening, a generous basket of crisps, crackers, pretzels and snacks are left in the lounge.

A delicious breakfast



However, it is well worth building up a bit of an appetite for the delicious breakfast.

This is served each morning in the Inn's dining room or the tranquil courtyard, amongst the lush banana trees, bougainvillea and colourful tropical flowers.



Breakfast always includes two hot homemade dishes such as bacon and broccoli quiche (one of my favourites), cheesy eggs and French toast flan.

There is also a selection of breads, marmalade, jam, yoghurts, pastries, granola and a fresh fruit salad or a refreshing strawberry soup.

Extended brunch

Extended brunch is served weekends with complimentary Champagne Mimosas and make-your-own Bloody Mary's.

For that extra coffee fix, a flavoured latte, cappuccino or espresso can be made to order before 12 noon.

There is plenty on offer to keep the traveller well fed throughout the day – or at least until appetisers and wine at 5pm.

A selection of nibbles such as nachos, cheesy dip, crudités with a dill crème fraîche are served in the dining room, and guests can help themselves to choice red and white wines and locally brewed beers.

St Francis Inn

There is no chance anyone going hungry at the St Francis Inn as, at 8pm, out come the speciality desserts including wonderfully moist, chocolate brownies and peanut butter cakes.

Guests can also help themselves to S'mores making kits with crackers, Hershey chocolate and marshmallows that can be toasted over the fire pit.

It was very relaxing sitting around the fire, with the fairy lights twinkling in the tall trees above and the Inn's friendly cat snuggling up to me.



We also chilled-out in the rocking chairs on the large, open first floor verandah with a pre-dinner sherry.

The St Francis Inn really is a delightful, antique gem of a place, managed by a knowledgeable and helpful team of people who can help you organise your sightseeing and dining plans.



Oh, and it has its own beach too, just a few miles away for guests to use at their pleasure – what more can you ask for?

www.stfrancisinn.com

Places to eat in and around St Augustine

Spot me on Sherry's wall of flame



Sherry Stoppelbein, who has been feeding St Augustine for 30 years, runs the Hot Shot Bakery & Café.

Sherry has a daily flow of regulars mingling happily with those visitors lucky enough to happen on the place.

Favourite dishes include her breakfast Panini and a large selection of sandwiches, quesadillas, soups, and wraps.

The Hot Shot Bakery & Café also sells its *Datil B Good* hot sauce, made from locally grown datil peppers.

Those, like me, brave enough to eat a chocolate coated datil on the premises get their photograph posted on its 'wall of flame'.

This is one of those places where the food is as delicious as the welcome is warm and if we were in St Augustine for a month we would breakfast at Sherry's every day.



The Columbia

Established in the early 80s, The Columbia Restaurant is popular with locals and visitors. Situated in the historic district, the restaurant is light and airy with an authentic Spanish feel writes Ann Mealor .

Tiled tables, marble and terracotta floors, green palms, open brickwork and colourful art give the diner plenty to look at whilst perusing the many tempting dishes on offer.

A blue tiled water fountain provides a central focus and the gentle sound of water splashing on the tiles is very soothing, all adding to the Cuban atmosphere.

Family owned recipes have been handed down through the generations including Chicken and Yellow Rice 'Valenciana'; Red Snapper 'Alicante' and Colombia's Original 1905 Salad.

This is named after the year the family restaurant chain was founded and includes lettuce, ham, tomatoes, Swiss and Romano period cheeses and speciality garlic dressing.



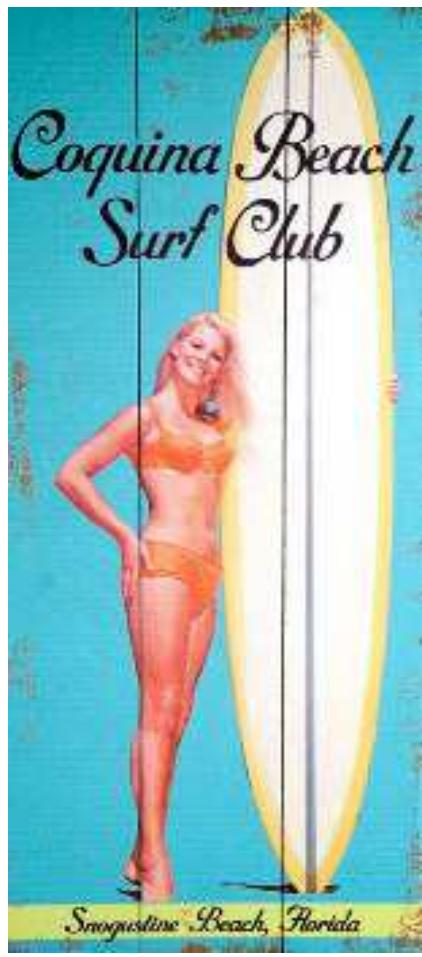
The salad is mixed and tossed at the table – a lively and entertaining experience.

The menu is large, detailed and varied with tasty options ranging from original Cuban sandwiches and tapas to Stuffed Grouper and filet steak.

Cook books, hand painted ceramics, Sangria Jelly and the Colombia's famous garlic salad dressing can also be bought in the restaurant's shop, which offers interesting browsing before heading home.

www.columbiarestaurant.com

Places to eat in and around St Augustine



The Coquina Beach Surf Club

Ideally situated close to the beach, The Coquina Beach Surf Club is casual, yet chic serving a selection of seasonal seafood, burgers, sandwiches and steak *writes Ann Mealor*.

Here you will find local beer, an interesting wine list, a stylish bar and comfortable outdoor dining.

Dishes on the menu include Monster Softshell Crabs, Pan Seared Scallops, Cumin Crusted Pork Chop and the cajun dried rubbed Coquina Beach Burger.

Don't miss out on the daily afternoon happy hour and live music every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

There are also some great special events such as Monster Shrimp Monday with \$5 martinis all night.

Worth coming off the beach for.

www.coquinabeachsurfclub.com



The Reef

Situated right on the oceanfront in beautiful North Beach, the views from The Reef are stunning *writes Ann Mealor*.

The sound of breaking waves and a variety of bird life can be heard from the recently rebuilt and expanded deck and the ocean can be seen from any table inside or out, making for a very special dining experience.

The menu, created by Chef Bob Henle features plenty of fresh seafood served in a variety of creative ways.

All ingredients are sourced locally where possible, and I was pleasantly surprised to see local vodka and gin featured on the drinks list – and very good they were too.

I started my meal with Datil Pepper Shrimp in a lime sauce.

The shrimp were large, juicy and plentiful and the pepper gave the lime sauce added zing.

Datil pepper is grown locally and has a distinctive flavour that can bring out the best in seafood and meat dishes.

The warm, malted grain wheatbread with molasses that came before the starters was extremely moorish and was eagerly devoured by all.

My Grouper Oscar, grouper stuffed with crabmeat and served with hollandaise sauce and asparagus was light and flavoursome and I finished the meal with a few mouthfuls of the recommended German chocolate pudding.

It is worth dropping by during the daily happy hour to enjoy some live music, local wines and cocktails and relax in these stunning coastal surroundings.

www.thereefstaugustine.com



Scarlet O'Hara's

Scarlett O'Hara's is a popular pub in downtown St Augustine with a porch, live music, good food and handcrafted cocktails and beers.

The menu at Scarlett's features a variety of Southern comfort fare, including shrimp and grits, fried chicken, and chicken fried steak.

The upstairs dining room at Scarlett's offers a relaxed, Southern atmosphere and there is the Ghost Bar.

Scarlett O'Hara's is listed in the National Directory of Haunted Places and is said to be haunted by the man who built the original house in 1879.

www.scarlettoharas.net

A snapshot of St Augustine



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