



FLORIDA History 101

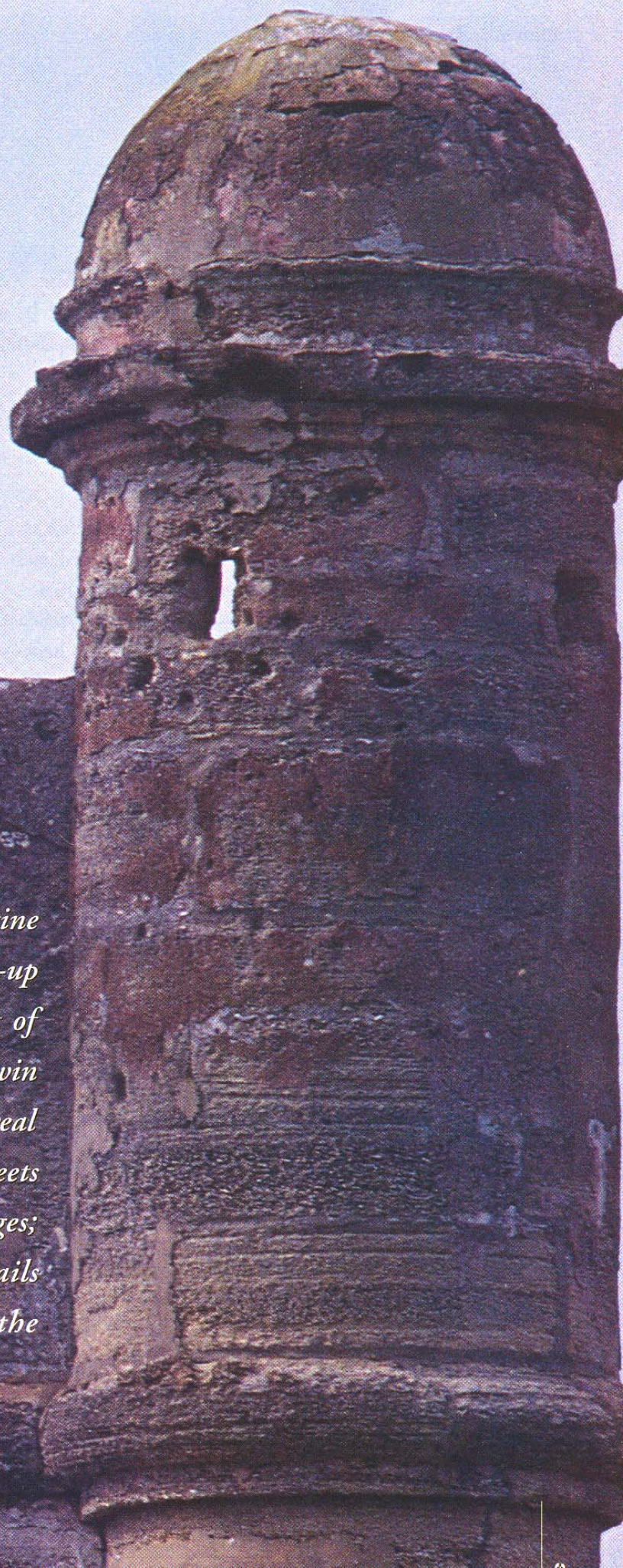
Immerse yourself in it along A1A's Buccaneer Trail—and hold on to your senses

BY JUDY DiEDWARDO / PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN LAFFAL

Piper's Retreat / Surprise!

British history is evident even in a place like Castillo de San Marcos.

The postcard-perfect seaside town of St. Augustine unfolds before me like a colorful cardboard pop-up display as King Street pours itself into the heart of the city. The former Alcazar Hotel's signature twin towers and red tile roofs on my right look surreal against the cobalt blue sky; the cobblestone streets clatter with the sounds of horse-drawn carriages; and ahead are the triangular peaks of boat sails bobbing in the municipal marina beneath the

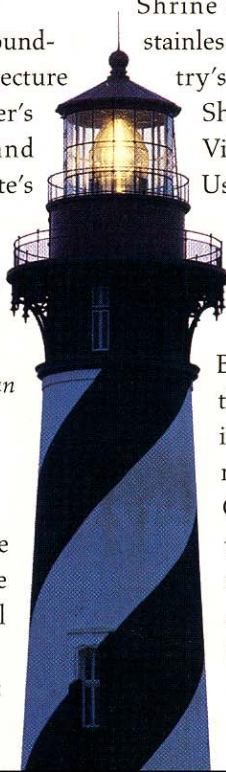


favorites: the Castillo and the former Hotel Ponce de León—now Flagler College. This magnificent hotel was built in 1887 by New York entrepreneur and Standard Oil Company co-founder Henry Flagler, who saw the city's potential as a winter resort. He chose the Spanish Renaissance style to complement its historic surroundings—a style that strongly influenced the architecture of southern Florida for the next 50 years. Flagler's subsequent development of transportation and resort facilities in St. Augustine and along the state's east coast spurred rapid development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The glory days of the hotel itself had long ended when in 1967 it was sold to Flagler College.

Across town on the waterfront sits St. Augustine's most famous landmark, the Castillo de San Marcos, built between 1672 and 1756 to protect Spain's Florida real estate as well as its coastal shipping routes. It's the oldest masonry fortification in the continental United States.

One driving note before leaving St. Augustine: Winding north along the waterfront, A1A shares

The lighthouse is an ever-present sentry along St. Augustine's historic shoreline.



the road with a number of streets, but don't be confused by the name changes. As the highway markers confirm, you're still on A1A.

Continuing north, make a stop at the La Leche Shrine on your right. The Shrine's 208-foot-tall stainless-steel crucifix marks the site where the country's first Catholic Mass was celebrated. Past the Shrine, you cross what is popularly known as the Vilano Bridge (now named for Frank and Mary Usina), and A1A springs free of the mainland.

With the bridge in my rearview mirror, I glimpse the first shock of powder-white sand through a bare spot in the thick mane of green and blond sea oats lining the road embankment. Beyond mammoth sand dunes that stand higher than my car, the Atlantic awaits, pounding and hissing as waves roll ashore. Needing a visual image to match what my other senses tell me, I stop at Guana River State Park eight miles after entering this picturesque seaside town of old-money communities, pristine beaches and world-class tennis and golf. The park's raised elevation provides a breathtaking view of the ocean.

You'll appreciate the "nature fix" as you drive north to Neptune Beach, where the patches of



minutes, with the last departure at 4:30 p.m.) • FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH, 11 Magnolia Avenue, St. Augustine; 800-356-8222. Be sure to sample the water just in case Juan Ponce de León was right! Open daily, 9 a.m.–5 p.m. • KINGSLEY PLANTATION, Fort George Island, one mile north of the Mayport Ferry; 904-251-3537. Open daily, 9 a.m.–5 p.m. • MARINELAND, A1A South, St. Augustine; 888-279-9194. Opened in 1937 as the world's first underwater motion picture studio when Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney helped establish the park. For \$125 you can enjoy a two-hour "Swim-With-The-Dolphins" (reservations required). Open year-round, 9 a.m.–5:30 p.m. • MAYPORT NAVAL STATION, Mayport. Commissioned in 1942, the base was used by patrol craft, rescue boats and Jeep carriers. Free public tours of the grounds and vessels can be arranged. For group tours, call 904-270-5226. Individuals: 904-270-6289. • ST. JOHNS RIVER FERRY (Mayport Ferry), Mayport; 904-241-9969. The 40-passenger craft transports cars across the mile-wide mouth of the St. Johns River to Fort George Island. Operates daily, 6:15 a.m.–10:15 p.m.; 50 cents per bicycle, \$2.50 per car. • SEA HORSE STABLE, Amelia Island (in Little Talbot Island State Park, two miles south of Amelia Island Plantation); 904-261-4878. Take a guided hour-long ride (\$35) along five miles of beachfront. The docile mounts make this the ideal adventure for novices and reluctant riders alike. Open year-round except Christmas. • WASHINGTON OAKS STATE GARDENS, 6400 North Ocean Boulevard, Palm Coast; 904-446-6780. Open year-round, 8 a.m. to sunset. / **Lodging** / AMELIA

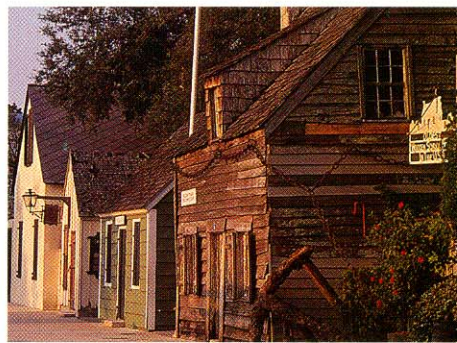
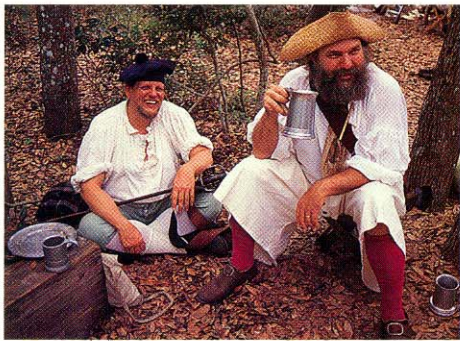


Spanish moss-laden trees thicken and form a canopy over the road.

Returning to A1A, I head north past Sea Horse Stable and the Amelia Island Plantation resort for Fernandina Beach—and A1A's Florida terminus. It's only seven more miles, but it seems to take forever as I crawl past seaside houses lined up along the Atlantic like prized Monopoly pieces. At the island's northernmost tip, the late 19th- and early 20th-century wood-frame buildings of Fernandina Beach's 50-block downtown historic district belie the Spanish origins of the town. Centre Street is its hub. Turn-of-the-century brick buildings, grand homes, churches, cozy bed-and-breakfast inns and charming restaurants reflect the town's Victorian heritage. But even if you don't know your Queen Anne from your Chinese Chippendale, driving these quiet, shaded streets is delightful. I especially enjoy making the 5-mph crawl without being tailgated.

Opposite Fernandina on the ocean side of Amelia Island is the 1,086-acre Fort Clinch State Park, where uniformed soldiers bring the 19th-century Union garrison to life on the first weekend of each month. Even if you're not a history buff, it's a real blast to watch these players re-enact the past. If you're more than a casual historian, your first stop should be the Amelia Island Museum of History,

The nation's oldest wooden schoolhouse—in the nation's oldest city, St. Augustine.



located in the town's renovated 1935 county jail. You can talk with resident historians here, and book a walking tour of Fernandina

Beach's historic district. At the end of Centre Street is the island's busy marina, where shrimp boats are docked when they aren't out filling their nets. From here, day trips to Georgia's St. Simons and Jekyll islands or Cumberland Island National Seashore can easily be arranged.

While I'm parked at the Amelia Island Gourmet Coffee Company, sipping cappuccino and taking in the sights and sounds of this very old city, the air buzzes with talk of the annual Isle of Eight Flags Shrimp Festival the first weekend in May. The event is the island's biggest, attracting hundreds of artisans and more than 150,000 visitors.

I'm thankful to be a week early. Apart from light traffic and one very loud group of tourists, Centre Street is rather quiet. Just as well. Three days of being hip-deep in 500 years of Florida history have turned my head into a collage—swimming with images of pirates, Spaniards and Juan Ponce de León's fountain. Historical references scribbled on scraps of paper. Maps, lots of maps. And brochures from every stop along the way. When I close my eyes, the reality of the Buccaneer Trail comes clearly into focus—as does the magic of this spectacular scenic drive.

Judy DiEdwardo is a Florida-based freelance writer.

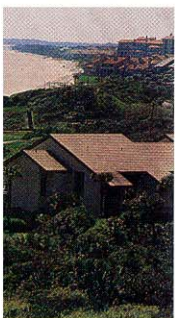


Photo © Robert Holmes

state-of-the-art spa and fitness facility. Rates from \$170. / **SUSTENANCE** / A1A ALE WORKS, 1 King Street, St. Augustine; 904-829-2977. The "Ragtime Shrimp Lunch"—five large, beer batter-dipped shrimp rolled in coconut and deep-fried, \$5.95—isn't to be missed. Nor is the view from the second-story front porch of this 110-year-old restaurant and microbrewery.

• **AMELIA ISLAND GOURMET COFFEE COMPANY**, 207 Centre Street, Fernandina Beach; 904-321-2111. The perfect spot for enjoying a great cup of coffee alfresco. • **THE BUNNERY CAFE**, 35 Hypolita Street, St. Augustine; 904-829-6166. A great little streetside café and bakery where you can do some serious damage to your waistline. • **MARINA**

Casa de Solana bed-and-breakfast in St. Augustine is a great escape from the ordinary hotel stay.

RESTAURANT, 101 Centre Street, Fernandina Beach; 904-261-5310. Facing the Amelia River, this place is legendary for its seafood and stellar waterfront view. • **THE PALACE SALOON**, 117 Centre Street, Fernandina Beach; 904-261-6320. This colorful former haunt of the Carnegies and Rockefellers is Florida's oldest watering hole, circa 1878. —J.D.

