



Horse-drawn carriages clip-clop along narrow cobblestone streets that are lined with historic buildings and feature a 17th-century castle in the foreground ... a quaint European village? Nope! You've just docked for the weekend in America's oldest city – St. Augustine, FL.

Founded in 1565 by Spanish explorer Pedro Menendez de Aviles, St. Augustine provides a unique glimpse into a distant past. With over 144 blocks of colonial-era houses, the romance of the Old City is vividly brought to life.

At the heart of St. Augustine's pedestrian-friendly historic district is the Colonial Spanish Quarter – a virtual living history museum. Here, costumed interpreters illustrate the lives of mid-18th-century Spanish soldiers and their families. Intertwined among the historic attractions is a veritable

St. Augustine

AMERICA'S OLDEST CITY *by Glenn Swift*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON COLLINS

Below: Founded as a memorial to Henry Flagler, Flagler College's campus displays historic and architecturally unique structures.



colony's infertile, sandy soil made agricultural success a near impossibility. Making matters worse, Menendez's arrogant management style and unscrupulous Indian policy led to a widespread corruption that kept his soldiers on the verge of mutiny. Other than a brief euphoria stemming from their defeat of a French force from Fort Caroline (near present-day Jacksonville Beach) a few weeks after their arrival, there was little to cheer about for the residents of Spain's newly founded colony. Menendez died in 1574 with little, if any, return from his Floridian venture.

Toward the end of the 17th century, attacks became even more frequent. After the British established the nearby mainland colonies of Georgia and the Carolinas, a stone fort (the Castillo de San Marcos) was constructed by the Spanish. Taking 24 years to build (1672–1695), the castle-like fortress represents America's oldest and best-preserved masonry. With a double drawbridge over a 40-foot moat (now dry) and diamond-shaped bastions in each corner, a deadly crossfire awaited any potential invader. In large part, due to the Castillo's seemingly indestructible design, St. Augustine successfully defended itself against repeated British assaults in the first half of the 18th century. The attacks did not come without a cost, however. Apart from the human toll, all of the original structures, with the exception of the fortress, were destroyed as a result of raids in 1702 and 1740. Consequently, the architectural legacy of the Spanish Quarter dates from this latter period.

Florida became the 27th state admitted to the Union in 1845. The recently established town of Tallahassee, however, became the new center of government. As a result,

potpourri of antique shops, boutiques and fine eateries. So whether your passion is fine art, handmade chocolates, designer clothing, household goods or old books, you'll be delighted with the variety at hand.

Although tourism provides a daily monetary infusion into the vibrant local economy, St. Augustine was not always so prosperous. In fact, throughout most of the Spanish colonial period, times were downright tough. They began, however, with high expectations.

Shortly after coming ashore with banners flying and trumpets sounding, Menendez and his 600 fellow settlers, nearly all of whom were related to him through blood and marriage, hastily set about fortifying their fledgling village. Because the expedition first sighted Florida landfall (near present-day Cape Canaveral) on August 28, the feast day of St. Augustine, the town was so named. An entrepreneur with visions of wealth and fame, Menendez sought to reverse nearly a half-century of Spanish setbacks by becoming Florida's first great land developer. Fate would not be so kind.

In direct contrast to the riches reaped in distant lands by the likes of Pizarro and Cortez, Florida provided not a single discovery of precious metals, gems or minerals, and the

St. Augustine's nearly three-century role as Florida's capital had officially come to an end.

Following the election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860, Florida soon followed the lead of South Carolina and seceded from the Union in January 1861 – the third state to do so. Although Florida politically remained firmly in the Confederate camp (The Ordinance of Secession had been passed unanimously by both houses of the state legislature), St. Augustine was occupied by Union troops throughout most of the Civil War. The newly arrived “consumers” provided a boon to the local economy. By war's end, numerous speculators and land developers had made their way to the Old City. A new industry had been born, one which would change the face of St. Augustine forever – tourism.

The arrival of railroad magnate Henry Flagler in 1885 signaled the dawn of St. Augustine's “modern era.” Beginning with the wealthy tycoon's nearly overnight construction of two lavish hotels – the beautiful Alcazar and magnificent Ponce de Leon – St. Augustine was transformed into a major resort for America's Northern “aristocracy.” Flagler was also responsible for building the town's hospital, city hall and several churches. This “golden age” of St. Augustine, however, came to an abrupt end just three decades later. Just as misfortune had befallen the city so many times throughout its long history, St. Augustine would once again succumb to disaster. Sadly, in 1914, a massive fire swept through the town, wiping out many of the Spanish Quarter's historic buildings.

Recovery was slow, and not until the late 1950s did St. Augustine's economy enjoy a meaningful rebound. Beginning in 1959, the city, along with the State of Florida, began a massive preservation effort by painstakingly restoring many colonial-era structures to their original appearances. The effort is ongoing and has made St. Augustine a center of Spanish colonial culture.

The Old City's idyllic location on the banks of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW), and its proximity to the nearby Matanzas Inlet, have made St. Augustine a popular destination in recent years for water lovers of all kinds. So if you're looking for small-town charm in your next port of call, give some serious thought to America's oldest city. With a well-marked channel and excellent dockage within a stone's throw of the historic district, St. Augustine is a “must see” for boaters anxious to do a little shopping while catching a glimpse of a bygone era. ⚓

GETTING AROUND

After parking at the St. Augustine/St. Johns County Visitor Information Center (VIC) (on-street parking is nearly nonexistent), there are a number of trolleys that routinely stop at various attractions. If you decide to get off, you won't have to wait more than 20 minutes for the next one.

The city's historic attractions are too numerous to mention, but all are conveniently located within the compact, pedestrian-friendly Old Spanish Quarter.

DOCKAGE/MARINA

An ideal base for exploring the Old City is the St. Augustine Municipal Marina (904-825-1026), located at ICW Mile Marker 778.3. Concrete floating docks, fuel, oil, ice, a pump-out station, showers, laundry facilities, a boaters' lounge and a host of other conveniences are available at modest prices.

If you choose to anchor out, you can dinghy into the marina for \$7 a day. Just don't anchor too close to the city's seawall – when it is low tide, many vessels end up high and dry.

Don't be nervous about St. Augustine's shoaly harbor. Despite the numerous sandbars, the channel is deep and extremely well-marked. Navigating the ICW in and around St. Augustine is easy, as long as you stay within the channel.

WHERE TO STAY

Casa Monica Hotel is a majestic 1888 landmark in the heart of historic St. Augustine. Restored in 1999, this castle-like hotel offers a level of comfort and luxury that is simply unequalled anywhere else in St. Augustine. Located at 95 Cordova St., the hotel can be reached directly by calling (800) 648-1888, or by visiting online at www.casamonica.com.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The St. Augustine/St. Johns County VIC is located at 10 Castillo Drive at San Marco Avenue, opposite the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, and can be reached by calling (904) 825-1000. The VIC is open daily, 8:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.

GHOST TOUR

Don't forget the nightly St. Augustine Ghost Tour, which can be reached by calling (888) 461-1009 or by visiting online at www.ghosttoursofstaugustine.com. Guides in period dress lead you through the “spirit-filled” historic district.