

Greetings from Sunny St. Augustine

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 24 May 2011 16:19 - Last Updated Wednesday, 08 June 2011 14:06

The Backyard Tourist Sails on Stranger Tides



The way I figure it, St. Augustine owes a debt of gratitude to the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Let's face it: if things had worked out well here for the Spanish settlement of Santa Elena on Parris Island, St. Augustine might just be another condo-rina on the Intracoastal Waterway and things might be a bit more...*quirky* around here.

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Since I first set foot in “America’s oldest city” last January, I’ve been searching for a way to conjure up the vibe. It’s not easy. There’s a lot going on here from a basic coastal tourism perspective. Some of eastern Florida’s best beaches and golf courses are just minutes from the time worn cobbled streets of The Old City. Water sports, fishing and boating opportunities abound with easy access to the San Sebastian and Matanzas Rivers, the Intracoastal Waterway and the Atlantic Ocean. Believe it or not, The Fountain of Youth is a stone’s throw from Ripley’s Museum. In fact, the town is practically lousy with museums of all types spanning culture, history and kitsch.

Occasionally an attraction hangs around until it transcends time and status. Just across the



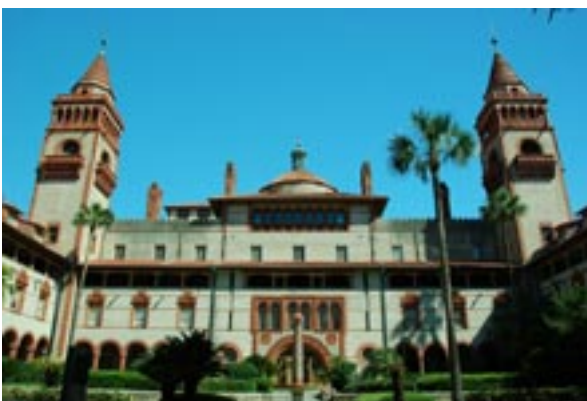
e Bridge of Lions on Anastasia Island, The St. Augustine Alligator Farm is a bona fide piece of Floridiana, famously entertaining tourists with giant reptiles since 1893. This means that people were paying to gawk at gators here well before Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders charged San Juan Hill.

This is St. Augustine in a nutshell – still unique and vibrant yet soaked in four and a half centuries of history, much of it violent, some involving a fair measure of swashbuckling and nearly all of it colorful. If Charleston and Savannah are prim spinster sisters – the Grand Dames of Southeastern coastal culture – St. Augustine is the dashing older cousin, the one who makes all the girls blush. He’s the one with a pencil thin mustache who plays cards, sports a hip flask, drives too fast and relishes the occasional bar brawl, always with a unique sense of character. To risk beating the analogy senseless, St. Augustine’s a lot like the cousin who always manages to get you into trouble, but whom you hate to leave behind and can’t wait to see again – the fun cousin, the one who taught you how to drink beer.

The Tycoon and Don Pedro



The great Spanish Admiral, Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles, came ashore at the Timucuan Indian village of Seloy with 600 soldiers, settlers and much fanfare in September, 1565. Needless to say, as soon as the trumpets fell silent life changed for the locals. Don Pedro still looks out over his city, or at least his likeness does, high on a pedestal in front of the former Alcazar Hotel, now city offices and The Lightner Museum. The Admiral's gaze is fixed on another former resort across the street. The Hotel Ponce de Leon opened its doors in 1888 as the centerpiece of tycoon Henry Flagler's plan to transform sleepy old St. Augustine into "a winter Newport" for his wealthy industrialist pals. Ultimately Flagler's plan failed, but his vision remains – as does he. Today the Ponce is the magnificent cornerstone of Flagler College, complete with its gilded rotunda and priceless Tiffany stained glass windows.



The tycoon is buried nearby with his wife, daughter and granddaughter in a mausoleum in Memorial Presbyterian Church – another exquisite reminder of Flagler's failed vision.

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Nonetheless, even as Flagler himself is now a relic in a city filled with ghosts of The Golden Age, his influence endures in each sunset reflected on the elegant red tiled rooftops he left behind.

Who's on first?



It's only logical that in a town billed as "America's oldest city" there is a damnable amount of history to wade through. So, we'll skip that for the most part. The number of museums and "museums" is simply overwhelming. Indeed it seems as if nearly every building bears the designation "Oldest" or "First" as in The Oldest House, the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, or the First Farewell Tour (I think it was The Who's *Sod off, New World Tour*, circa 1576).

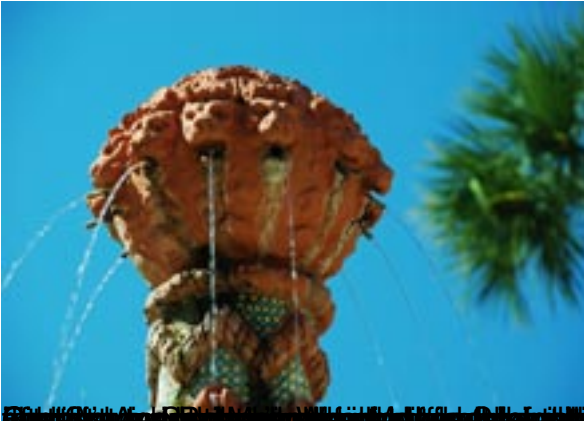
The point being, there are museums and even more "museums." Choose wisely. None of them are free and it could take months and hundred of thousands of dollars to hit them all.

If your tastes run more toward wax figures of British royals and Star Wars characters, chances are

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Photo by John "The street was a little bit empty, but not empty." "Not a soul out there."
The street was a little bit empty, but not empty. The street was a little bit empty, but not empty.
The street was a little bit empty, but not empty. The street was a little bit empty, but not empty.
[The Street was a little bit empty, but not empty. The street was a little bit empty, but not empty.](#)