



St. Augustine

Florida's Most Unique City



Story and Photos By Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings loved Florida. In particular, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of 1938's "The Yearling" loved St. Augustine. Although Marjorie died in 1953, it is doubtful the city's appeal has changed much since her time. We visited the area recently and found it to be fascinating (history), charming (dining, art galleries), and eclectic (Ripley's Museum, Fountain of Youth and, yes, ghosts).

Ms. Rawlings was driven to write about characters she met or knew about in mostly rural Florida. Her novel, "Pelican's Shadow," was influenced by the former owners of her St.



Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' Living Room

Augustine home on the ocean, and the story was set there. Marjorie entertained quite a few good friends at her home through the years, including such literary giants as Ernest Hemingway, Dylan Thomas, and Robert Frost, to name a few. Perhaps the presence of these greats was the seed that would grow into

the area becoming such a draw for artists and writers that it is today. That, and the influence of oil baron Henry Flagler who brought aspiring artists to the area in the late 1800's and provided them with housing and studios. Louis Tiffany, Martin Johnson Heade and Thomas Moran were a few who graced the area.

St. Augustine is home to quite a few art galleries — around 25 — all of whom seem to work in harmony with each other, and give off a welcome "vibe" when you enter them. There are no high pressure salespeople, rather an appreciation of folks enjoying the art.



"Absolute Florida" by Michael Israel



Jan Miller with one of her paintings at her Butterfield Garage Gallery.

We were pleasantly surprised to find the Absolute Americana Art Gallery there. Absolute Vodka ads have always been brilliant, and created by famous artists and illustrators. The first one was done by Andy Warhol. In the gal-

lery, we found the Absolute theme done by local artists of all 50 states, prints of which could be purchased. They have non-Absolute art as well, and even sell work by Henri Matisse's grandson, Pierre Henri Matisse, among others.

We enjoyed the Butterfield Garage Gallery, owned by Jan Miller, an artist herself, but she also exhibits other artists' work. The plain white gallery used to be a garage/car salesroom in 1927.

The museums of St. Augustine are quite interesting as well, highlighting both art and the rich history of America's oldest city. The Lightner Museum is unlike any you have seen elsewhere, and is called "The Smithsonian of the South." Mr. Lightner was a "collector of collections." He used to read obituaries and contact the families to see if the deceased had any collections of anything, and would purchase the lot. He made his money through a highly successful hobby magazine he published. His collections are now housed in what was once a hotel, affording a great space to view some wonderful objet d'art.



One of the magnificent pieces in the Lightner Museum.

Henry Flagler was responsible for turning what was just a fishing village into a resort destination for high society, who arrived via his railroad. He built the magnificent Ponce de Leon Hotel in 1885, with a dining room that sat 700 people (each table had it's own waiter) and Tiffany stained glass windows throughout (worth about \$25 Million today.) Electricity was very new, and he had Thomas Edison install it in his hotel. The hotel rooms cost \$35 per night in 1885 (\$720 in today's money), and you had to be on the social register to stay in the hotel — just having loads of money wouldn't do. The hotel was only open for the season, from January until March, and a lot of people came for their health and to visit the famous "Fountain of Youth." The hotel is considered the best building he created, and is being nominated as a National Historic Landmark. It is the first major edifice to use poured concrete. The structure has withstood many

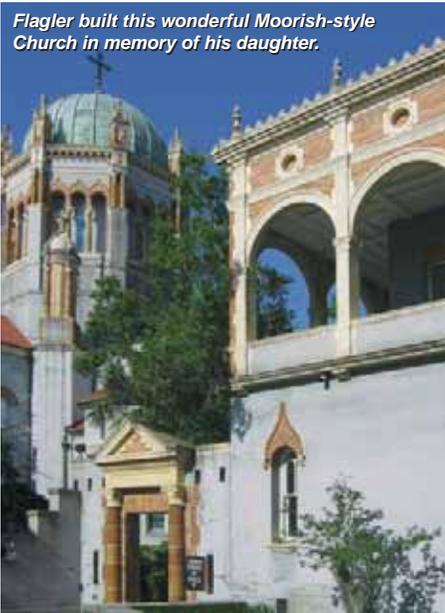
Flagler College (the former Ponce de Leon Hotel)



hurricanes and will probably continue to do so, considering the construction of it is 4 feet thick on the bottom, tapering to 18 inches thick on top. The building became Flagler College in the 1960s, and still retains all its glory.

Across the street from Flagler's posh hotel was the Alcazar, which went for \$3 (\$62 today) per night. This hotel had a casino, tennis courts, a bowling alley, and in 1888, had the world's largest indoor swimming pool (today a delightful cafe is located in the drained pool area.) Needless to say, the male guests from the Ponce de Leon would spend their days across the street, while their ladies went shopping at the "Surprise" store (so named because the men would always be surprised when they got the store's bills!) Today, the store houses some shops and the AIA Ale Works restaurant, which has both indoor and outdoor dining and an expansive menu.

Flagler built this wonderful Moorish-style Church in memory of his daughter.



Flagler was a single-minded and determined man. Tragically, his daughter died at sea on route to St. Augustine, and he decided to build a Presbyterian Church in her memory. He had 500 men work 24 hours a day, 12 on and 12 off, to complete the elaborate Venetian Renaissance style church by the 1st anniversary of his daughter's death. The church is still in use today, and Flagler, his

wife and daughter are all interred there.

Flagler was also a very smooth operator who went after whatever he wanted and got it. A rival hotelier in town, Franklin Smith (an amateur architect), built the Casa Monica Hotel, and ordered furniture to fill it. The furniture was being delivered via Flagler's railroad, so Flagler had it held up so long that Smith ran out of money waiting for his furniture, and was forced to sell his hotel to Flagler.

Flagler was unhappy with the approxi-

mation of a jail nearby his hotel, so he built a new one far away to keep the "riff raff" away from his property. The new-old jail is a tourist attraction today.

Widely accepted as the Western discoverer of Florida, Juan Ponce de Leon landed at what would become St. Augustine in 1513 looking for the illusive fountain of youth and other riches. It is said that when he encountered the Timouca Indians in the area, he was amazed at their brawn and height of almost 6 feet. At 4' 11", Ponce de Leon was the tallest man on his ship. He assumed it was the spring water that made them so hearty - hence the Fountain of Youth was found. This story is pretty



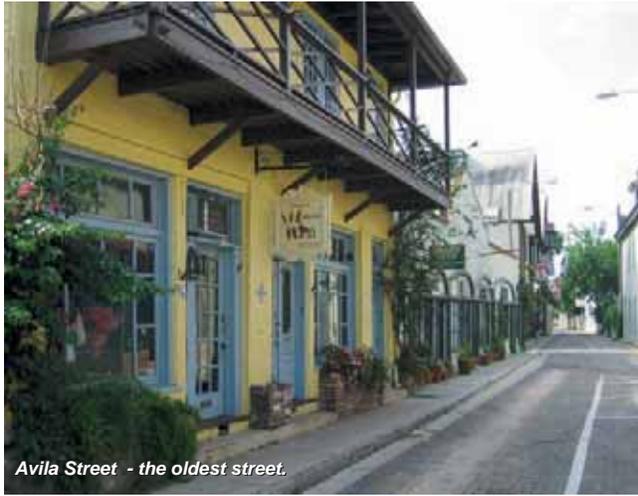
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murky even to those who work at the Fountain of Youth (yes, you can see the actual fountain.) If nothing else, it is where history was made with the landing of Ponce de Leon, and houses ancient artifacts in the natural setting. However, like every other tourist, we skeptics bought a bottle of water in the gift shop which is still sealed and sitting on our shelf for the day when we really need it!



Avila Street - the oldest street.

St. Augustine is proud of its history, and wants to keep it's charm, which flies in the face of the current over-development boom that is happening all over Florida. It is a small city, with only about 12,500 residents. Their street layout dates from the 1590s, and there is an ordinance in place allowing no buildings over 2 stories high to be built in town. How refreshing!

A good way to familiarize yourself with the city is to take the Trolley Tour. An informative guide tells you a bit of history as you pass each landmark, then later you can revisit a place that piqued your interest at a more leisurely pace on your own.

One of the most imposing landmarks is the Castillo de San Marcos, located right on Mantazas Bay in town. Construction on the Castillo was begun in 1672, and it was made of the seemingly indestructible coquina (limestone comprised of broken sea shells and coral) which was the building material of choice because of the natural abundance of it in the area. The structure has survived 300 years of enemy shelling and hurricanes and still counting (hurricanes, not enemy shelling hopefully.) When cannonballs hit



The oldest house, the González-Alvarez House

coquina, they just get absorbed by the wall, so the wall doesn't shatter and break apart. The walls are also 14 feet thick on the bottom and 5 feet on the top.

Walkable from the Castillo is Old St. Augustine Village, with restored old houses. There are 36 original colonial structures in the city. The oldest house, the González-Alvarez House, dates from the early 1700s. It has been through many incarnations, as a house owned by the Gonzalez family in 1702, then a tavern in 1763, then in 1790 the Alvarez family bought it and kept it for 100 years. The Historical Society took it over in 1918. It is a very interesting time warp experience,

as the downstairs is the early Spanish occupied period, and upstairs is the British occupied (1774) era. There is an historically accurate novel about the house available, called "Maria" by Eugenia Price.

The plaza in town is the oldest in the U.S., dating to the 1500s. We were fortunate to be there when costumed sto-

ryteller Michelle Reyna told Minorcan history through her own real ancestry. Minorcans are the largest amount of people brought over enmass as indentured servants to a plantation in New Smyrna. They were sold a bill of goods about working for a certain time, then receiving 50 acres. It never came to pass, and they were actually enslaved. The ones that escaped found their way to St. Augustine, and became the core of the city's population.



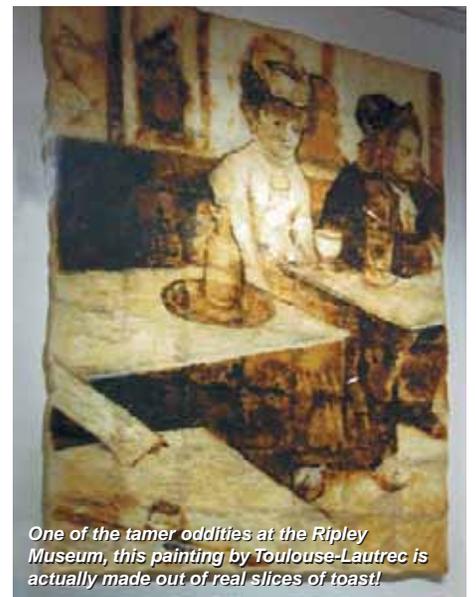
Storyteller Michelle Reyna.

Now for the "eclectic" part of St. Augustine. There are the infamous ghosts, and there is the Ripley Museum, which happens to be haunted by a ghost. To find out about the odd and the weird and the downright creepy, visit the Ripley Museum. The Moorish Revival style mansion that houses the oddities was built in 1887 as a winter home for Millionaire William Warden, then it became a hotel owned by Norton Baskin and his wife, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and has been Ripley's Museum since 1950. Ms. Rawlings lived for a time in a penthouse upstairs, and the ghost said to appear in the window of the penthouse is none other than Marjorie herself. This we found out on Ghost Tours of St. Augustine.

Other ghostly spots of interest include

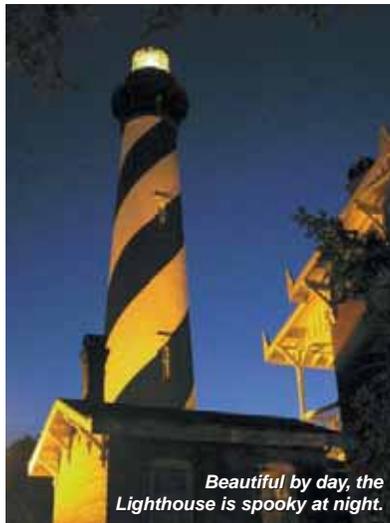


A view of Mantazas Bay from the Castillo de San Marcos.



One of the tamer oddities at the Ripley Museum, this painting by Toulouse-Lautrec is actually made out of real slices of toast!

the beautiful lighthouse, said to be the most haunted lighthouse in the U.S. Of course there is an old cemetery with cold spots and



Beautiful by day, the Lighthouse is spooky at night.

the occasional mysterious old lady in period costume sighting. Ghost Tours are also available by sea, onboard the 72 ft. schooner Freedom. While enjoying a nighttime cruise on Mantanzas Bay, a ghostly pirate appears and starts



Pirate Andy Nance aboard the schooner Freedom.

spinning tales and engages the "crew" in song. The owner of the ghost tours is Sandy Solano Craig, who can trace her St. Augustine family lineage back to 1585. She, too, is of Minorcan decent. Solano is the oldest documented European family name in the U.S.

There are a lot of varied and tasty dining opportunities in St. Augustine.

We ate dinner at the delightful Tavern on the Bay Restaurant decorated with stained glass windows, and overlooking the bay-front and horse-drawn carriages. The salads we ordered were fresh and had very generous portions.



The Tavern On The Bay Restaurant.

The Moroccan themed 95 Cordova Restaurant is located in the Casa Monica Hotel. We had lunch there, and the food was excellent, as was the atmosphere. We enjoyed delicious Shrimp Bisque Soup

and perhaps the best Reuben Sandwich ever.

Right on the beach is the Reef Restaurant which affords a spectacular view of the dunes and the ocean while dining on wonderful seafood. We enjoyed the Cobia Stuffed with Veal Oscar for dinner.



Delicious dinner at The Reef Restaurant.

We stayed at the Alhambra Inn, which is very conveniently located to everything. The rooms are large, extremely clean and the beds very comfortable. In addition to their double, queen, and king rooms, they also have suites with jacuzzis available. The Alhambra has the largest pool in the city, and, most handily, there is an IHop right on the premises.

We just scratched the surface in St. Augustine, and it's definitely worth several revisits. No wonder Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings is still haunting the place.



The Alhambra Inn lobby.

If You Go...

- 95 Cordova Restaurant - 904-810-6810; www.casamonica.com/95cordova
- ATA Ale Works - 904-829-2977; www.ataaleworks.com
- Absolute Americana Art Gallery - 904-824-5545; www.absoluteamericana.com
- Alhambra Inn - 800-223-4153; www.alhambrainn.com
- Butterfield Garage Gallery - 904-825-4577; www.butterfieldgarage.com
- Castillo de San Marcos - 904-829-6506; www.nps.gov/casa
- Flagler College - 904-823-3378; www.flagler.edu
- Fountain of Youth - 800-356-8222; fountainofyouthflorida.com
- Ghost Tours of St. Augustine - 888-461-1009; www.ghosttoursfstaugustine.com
- González-Alvarez House - 904-824-2872; www.staugustinehistoricalsociety.org
- The Lightner Museum - 904-824-2874; www.lightnermuseum.org
- Reef Restaurant - 904-824-8008; www.thereefstaugustine.com
- Ripley Museum - 904-824-1606; www.staugustine-ripleys.com
- Tavern on the Bay - 904-810-1919; www.tavernonthebay.com
- Trolley Tours - www.trolleytours.com

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