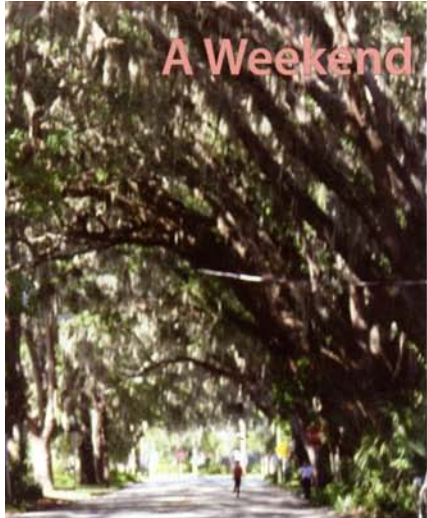


family

B E A U T I F U L



A Weekend Amidst Florida's National Treasures

Being from South Florida originally, I have always considered St. Augustine a somewhat far away destination. However, it is a mere 3-hour jaunt across the state and eons away from the regular mix of suburban sprawl we have grown accustomed to here along the Gulf Coast.

I decided to hang my hat at the swank Casa Monica hotel. An inspiring grande dame of a joint, with magnificent architecture and just the right blend of old and new, this hotel is a delight for the senses. A member of the renowned Kessler Collection, the property is stunning. It is a majestically restored 1888 landmark. Smack in the center of the Old Town, I knew I had arrived at the premium address. Art is everywhere, and there is no need to look further than the gallery on premises for some excellent works in many mediums such as glass, oils, watercolors and more. I was tempted to try the exclusive Serenata Beach Club, available for guests of the hotel, but the treasures of St. Augustine were calling us.

The old town of St. Augustine is remarkably preserved and full of architectural landmarks. Many folks walk, but I decided to partake in one of the more fun modes of transportation: the trolley. There are many trolley services and one seems to be just as good as the other. The key ingredient is that you can pop off at any destination, do your thing, mosey around and within minutes, the trolley returns and whisks you off to your next venture!

My favorite stop was the Lightner Museum. Formerly the Hotel Alcazar, built in 1888 in the Spanish Renaissance style by Henry Flagler, this jewel takes you back in time with very interesting collections. Housed over three floors, the museum features costumes, scientific objects, unique musical instruments, and many other artifacts that provide a glimpse into 19th century daily life.

Off on the trolley again, my next stop was the oldest house. This 250-year-old Spanish Colonial home offers a lovely look into how the many residents lived and spent their often stressful days. Don't forget, many pirates visited this area as well as frequent battles over who was to govern the territory. Things were rather precarious during those times.

A short stroll down the Avienda Menendez took me to a great café for lunch and then on to the Castillo De San Marcos. Construction on the fortress began in 1672 and was completed many years later. The native coquina stone used for the structure was quarried on nearby Anastasia Island. This light and porous stone was a key reason why forces were never able to take over and conquer the fort. Ships would shoot their cannons into the stone and it would literally stick into the walls, allowing the soldiers to quickly repair the holes with plaster during the night and confuse the attackers by morning!

My last tour—and the most spine chilling—was a Hearse Ghost tour by GhostAugustine Ltd. One of the most thorough and well respected ghost “hunters,” these specialists will whisk you off in a hearse to many a creepy site. Our tour guide made a beeline to the old lighthouse. Apparently there is a lot of paranormal activity around this area due to the coquina stone. We were given special hand-held magnetometers to detect any readings out of the ordinary. Oddly enough, near a light pole we found unusual readings for no apparent reason. It was just about at a 3-ft. level in a small circle. The coquina stone is supposedly a recipient of energy waves due to its porous nature. Hopefully my energy wave entities did not follow me back in the hearse to the hotel! This was great fun and really a must-do when you are in the area!

Inspiring, luxurious, interesting, and historic, St. Augustine is a destination that really requires more than just a short weekend. It is a place that calls you to return and explore the many secrets of the storied past she holds in the coquina stone. —SUSAN SHORT



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For up-to-date info and events
WWW.Augustine.com

GhostAugustine Tours
888-OLD-1565

WWW.KesslerCollection.com

WWW.LightnerMuseum.org

WWW.Oldesthouse.org