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Look beyond the tourist traps to discover the true St. Augustine

Casa Monica Hotel was built in 1888 and once served as St. Johns County Courthouse. The hotel and nearby streets are strung with lights for the city's annual holiday celebration, this year beginning Nov. 28.



St. Augustine is the archetypal Old Florida tourist destination. You can drink from the [Fountain of Youth](#), hit the [Oldest House](#), maybe [Ripley's Believe It or Not](#), then mosey out to [Alligator Farm](#) and thrill to all 23 crocodilian species.

I was having such a good time peering into rose-filled courtyards and shops that I was surprised to hear the bells tolling noon. I considered having lunch at [Casa Monica](#), the lush Spanish-Moorish hotel at King and Cordova in the center of town. The King and Queen of Spain stayed there when they visited Florida in 2001; if the recession isn't biting you too hard, you can get a room with a view for around \$250 a night for two ([casamonica.com](#), (904) 827-1888), though I was bunking at one of the very nice, if very ruffled and bowed, Victorian bed-and-breakfasts around the corner on Cedar Street (rooms at the [Penny Farthing](#) or the [Cedar House Inn](#) start at \$150). Lunch at Casa Monica's restaurant, 95 Cordova, runs around \$30 for two — they do a great portobello mushroom and brie stack.

In St. Augustine, Flagler was pretty much lord of all he surveyed. In the 1880s, he owned the Casa Monica (then called the Hotel Cordova), and built the Hotel Alcazar, now home to city hall, upscale shops and the [Lightner Museum of Decorative Arts](#) (75 King St., (904) 824-2874, \$10 admission).