



CASA MARINA HOTEL

REFLECTING ERAS OF AMERICAN HISTORY
IN FLORIDA'S
JACKSONVILLE BEACH AREA

with *Christine Tibbetts*

When Charlie Chaplin slept where I did in Jacksonville Beach, he had to pull his bed out of the wall. So did Mary Pickford and Clara Bow, most likely Al Capone and Machine Gun Kelly too.

Remember Murphy beds?

When the Casa Marina opened June 6, 1925, the hotel featured 60 rooms snuggled in the first and second floors and a sprinkler system that saved its life.

When you make a reservation this year for the same two floors, you'll choose from a civilized 23 rooms and 18 of those are parlor suites.

Enjoy cherry wood floors throughout and ask when making reservations for your preference of furnishings: Victorian, art deco or contemporary.

I don't know where the stars of silent films or the Prohibition-era gangsters sipped their cocktails but today's architectural design provides a third story penthouse public space with a verandah overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Over martinis one night at dusk, beaches resident Phil Huffman told me, "You don't know Jax Beach unless you've been right here, for the view



from the Casa Marina third floor deck."

Retired and happy to be where he is, Huffman describes himself as a Navy brat who stayed. Meeting local people in spaces they embrace is a good way to discover a place.

Equally important about the penthouse is the fact of a 35-foot moratorium, so nothing taller will be built. Six multi-storied buildings were grandfathered in but no long shadows are cast on the beaches by side-by-side high-rise condos.

That also means you can watch the sun setting in the west while you are on the beach. Aaah.

Historic Hotels of America claimed the Casa Marina as a member in 2005, a prestigious designation that also delivers a thumbs up from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

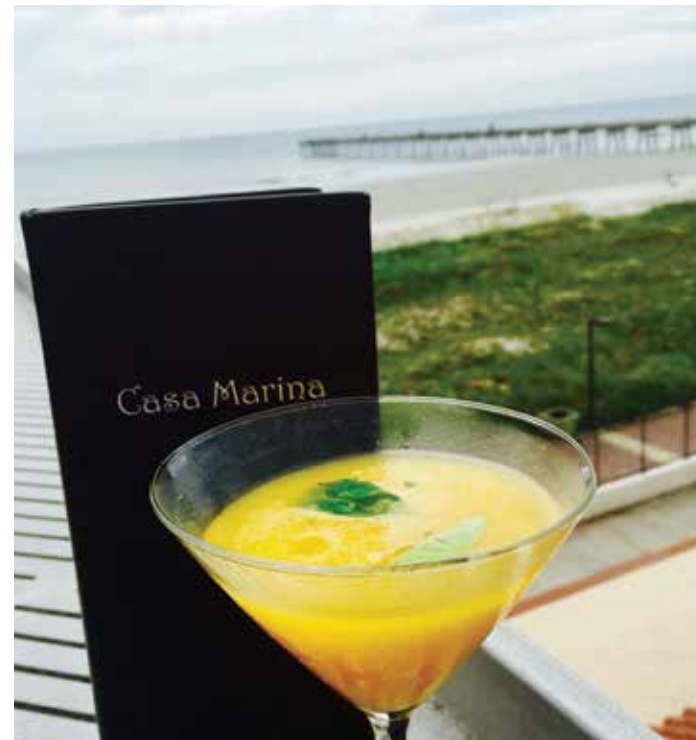
HHA properties vary widely with scores of original purposes for their buildings, and individual designs distinctively different from one

another. The only others you can find in North Florida are The Terrace in Lakeland and Casa Monica in St. Augustine.

Of Casa Marina, Historic Hotels of America describes this enticing personality: A property with a place in history: the Jazz Age 1919 – 1928. Key among the building and design reasons the Spanish Mediterranean-style property endures is its stucco exterior, steel framework and hollow tile construction in an era when other grand hotels were built of wood---and burned.

You can easily find residents of this beach community, or the six neighboring towns, who remember the eras of the hotel. George Hapsis is one of them, drawing on 82 years of personal recollections of his life lived at this beach and in sight of the Casa Marina.

Find him in the photo galleries of the hotel hallways: big black-and-white images of scenes



from the 1920s and '30s or find him at the equally significant Life Saving Corps Station a short stroll down the beach from Casa Marina Hotel.

His father owned a Greek restaurant at the ocean and young George was a lifeguard; today he protects the stories of this being the spot where lifesaving and lifeguarding began.

Climb the stairs to the five-story peg and venture outside on a narrow circular balcony for expansive views of this North Florida barrier island. Walk the 40 miles of beach if you like without dead-ending at impassable piles of jetty stones found on many shorelines. Stroll or bike smooth paved walkways between the low sandy dunes with waving grasses on one side and hotels or commercial properties on the other.

When Casa Marina guests stayed in those little cubbyhole rooms in the early decades, they arrived on the train or drove their Model Ts right on the beach. Looks like they left the kids at home because photos from the Beaches Museum archives show only adults. Don't you too wonder when that family travel style changed?

Perhaps the kids are in the background.

After the gilded age, Casa Marina was a different kind of residence. The U. S. Army declared this headquarters from 1939 – 1945, watching for German submarines in the Atlantic Ocean and housing Naval families and war officers.

Civilians moved in after 1945, adapting those original 60 cubbyholes to 38 apartments. A tearoom named the Casablanca Lounge which served lunch, and a vintage clothing store also made homes there.

Pivotal years leading to today's elegance were 1987 to 2002 when massive renovations interspersed with bankruptcies and vacant times fueled both optimism and despair in Jacksonville Beach.

Acceptance on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993 tipped the balance to hopefulness, and the purchase of the property in 2002 by real estate developer Chris Hionides clinched the future. All that history wraps around the year-long 90th birthday party, including \$90 room rates.

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