



# A New Spin on an Old City

**In St. Augustine, a bed-and-breakfast stay can mean luxury – and maybe ghosts.**

**W**HAT “BED-AND-BREAKFAST” MEANS TO MOST people is, well, self-explanatory. You get a bed and you get a breakfast. Unless it’s the homey ambiance provided by an antique chifforobe and lacy curtains or the charm of chatty mom-and-pop proprietors dispensing local lore, nobody expects extras beyond that.

Joe Finnegan had a different notion. The owner of a bed-and-breakfast in St. Augustine, Finnegan contacted four other innkeepers and formed a loose alliance called The Inns of Elegance.

His notion was that each member would provide amenities above and beyond the usual bed-and-breakfast basics, including such perks as champagne upon arrival, Jacuzzi-style tubs for two in every room, complimentary robes and personal fireplaces.

All of the participating inns, in which room rates range from

\$99 to \$350 per night, are located in the downtown historic district, epicenter of the oldest occupied European settlement in the United States.

Bound by Old Mission Avenue on the north, Avenida Menendez on the east, St. Francis Street on the south and Ponce de Leon Boulevard on the west, the district is filled with cobblestone streets, close-quartered boutiques and houses and quaint storefronts.

In 1872, Harriet Beecher Stowe described the area as “quaint and strange, in harmony with its romantic history ... the current of life has an indolent, dreamy stillness.” More than a century later, the description still fits – for the most part. However, the Oldest City isn’t particularly indolent. It’s a bustling place, teeming with shopping, nightlife and some of the state’s best restaurants.

**by Baileigh Johnson**

It's a perfect place for a long weekend. And here are some wonderful places to stay and visit while you're here.

The **ST. FRANCIS INN**, built in 1791 and owned by Finnegan, is the Inns of Elegance flagship. It's also the city's oldest bed-and-breakfast, which in St. Augustine is saying something.

The St. Francis began accepting lodgers in 1845, when Anna Dummett converted her family home into an inn. There are now two additional guest facilities on the property, including the 1880 Wilson House. And on Anastasia Island, across the Matanzas River and over the iconic Bridge of Lions, Finnegan owns a beach house that offers visitors a more sand-and-sea-friendly experience.

Breakfasts certainly suit the posh ambience at the St. Francis. They're inventive, rotating wake-up specials including Belgian waffles with mixed berry sauce, citrus pancakes with Mandarin orange sauce or cinnamon-pecan French toast.

The inn also offers complimentary wine and beer during happy hour, as well as a bedtime dessert. A small fleet of complimentary bicycles are perfect for pedaling the short distance to the city's shopping and dining district.

There's breakfast. Then there's breakfast in bed. It's a bonus service offered at **THE BAYFRONT WESTCOTT HOUSE**, a Victorian charmer on Matanzas Bay. Having your morning meal and champagne mimosas brought to you in the comfort of your own bedroom is a lovely treat. But with a stunning view of the bay from the front porch of the main building, who wants to stay in bed?

The Westcott House, naturally, offers afternoon tea and hors d'oeuvres. And if you should find yourself at the inn on a Monday or Wednesday, you might just catch the storyteller who stops by in the evenings to spin spooky yarns about St. Augustine's ghosts, of which there are many.

For example, the Old South-style **CASABLANCA INN**, with its colonial columns and second-story porches, seems to have some other-worldly residents. I thought I heard a knock at my door late one night and opened it up to an empty hallway. I later heard phantom footsteps on the stairs and some eerie whistling. Maybe it was just wind wafting through the old building. Maybe not.

**At the St. Francis Inn (left), up-to-date luxuries have been added to the city's oldest bed-and-breakfast. Every one of the aptly named Inns of Elegance is within easy reach of (top to bottom) the beach at Anastasia Island, carriage rides through the historic district and charming walkways along the Matanzas River.**







## DAY'S DRIVE

The next morning, the innkeeper, Bland Holland, told me the suitably hair-raising story of a woman who ran the inn back in the early 1900s and catered largely to the rumrunner trade. On nights when her outlaw guests were due to arrive, she would stand on the roof of the inn and signal with the movement of her lantern whether it was safe to come ashore.

As legend has it, one of the rumrunners was the woman's lover, who failed to appear and was presumably lost at sea. The woman died broken-hearted and her spirit now roams the inn, searching in vain for her long-lost soul mate. Perhaps you'll hear that story told over drinks at the Tini Martini Bar, where guests of the inn enjoy a \$15 bar credit per room per night.

A couple of blocks south of Casablanca lies the **BAYFRONT MARIN HOUSE**. My favorite luxury here: homemade, gourmet ice cream. The inn's owner, Mike Wieber, turned what had been a hobby into an irresistible amenity with his Wednesday night ice-cream socials.

Flavors this past summer included "Girl Scout Shout Out" (a chocolate ice cream base with marshmallow, caramel and chunks of Samoa cookies); "Chocolate Cheesecake Crunch" (a chocolate cheesecake base with Oreo sandwich cookies); "You're a Peach Fruit Cobbler" (peach ice cream with a swirl of caramel and sweet pie crust pieces); and "Gimme Some More S'mores" (chocolate ice cream with chocolate-covered graham crackers and a marshmallow swirl).

The Bayfront's private balconies and verandas boast picture-postcard views, with St. Augustine's famous lighthouse visible in the distance. The inn also offers an evening beer-and-wine happy hour.

Just behind the Casablanca is the **INN ON CHARLOTTE**, built in 1918. In St. Augustine, that practically makes it new construction. A variety of packages are available from which to choose, including the Gourmet Package, which includes free transportation aboard the Old Town Trolley, admission for two to the Lightner Museum, and gift cards to Café Alcazar and Collage Restaurant. The Adventure Package also includes transportation via the trolley as well as tickets to a zip-lining adventure at the Alligator Farm and a gift card to Café Alcazar.

Brick-paved Charlotte Street leads the way straight to the inn's doorsteps. Originally a home, the Inn On Charlotte has been elegantly restored and offers complimentary parking and wine during social hour. Guests may also relax in the parlor or enjoy the large, shaded front porch.



PHOTOS: COURTESY BAYFRONT MARIN HOUSE

**The Bayfront Marin House (top and bottom, right) where gourmet ice cream is a daily treat, is within walking distance of fresh-baked delicacies at Bistro de Leon (center right).**



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Just a short walk away is the Plaza de la Constitucion, the oldest public park in the United States, established in 1573. And it's also near the Basilica Cathedral of St. Augustine, the oldest North American parish north of Mexico.

Indeed, almost every building looks like something you'd ordinarily have to cross the Atlantic to see. As Stowe said: "It is impressive in its unlikeness to anything else in America. It is as if some little, old Spanish town, with its fort and gateway and Moorish bell towers, had broken loose, floated over here and landed on a sand bank."

## OLDEST CITY EATERIES

*St. Augustine boasts some of the state's best restaurants.*

St. Augustine's eclectic dining scene includes some of the state's finest restaurants, in every category imaginable. The following list is far from comprehensive, but it does indicate some of the best dining options located within walking distance of one or more Inns of Elegance.

**BISTRO DE LEON.** Fifth-generation Chef Jean-Stephanie Poinard offers only the freshest homemade entrées, breads and pastries in his cozy bistro off Cathedral Place. Order the split pea soup with bacon chips, the beef tail "confite" ravioli or the flounder civet with red wine sauce. All are très bien.

**LA PENTOLA.** Allow Chef Jorge Talavera to prepare you a continental dish at this Mediterranean-style, Charlotte Street eatery. Try the lobster ravioli or the juicy and spiced camarones al ajillo (shrimp) served with sourdough bread and extra virgin olive oil. There's also an extensive wine list.

**CAFÉ ALCAZAR.** One of St. Augustine's hidden gems, it's tucked inside the bottom floor of the Lightner Museum. The café is open daily for lunch and once a month for dinner during the city's Art Walk. Order the New England clam chowder or the artichokes Giovanni with basil and beer. Leave room for Southern-style oatmeal pie with vanilla bean ice-cream.

**ATHENA CAFÉ.** This traditional Greek diner features murals decorating the walls and arched ceiling, a continuous chorus of "Opas!" and specials such as saganaki (flaming cheese), lamb kabobs, chicken souvlaki gyro and rice pilaf.

**SARA'S CREPE CAFÉ.** If you've got a sweet tooth, here's a tasty choice. Enjoy Belgian waffles and savory crêpes made from Russian recipes handed down from the owner's grandmother.

**At the Casablanca Inn, breakfast can be enjoyed either in-room or from the second-story porches that offer a view of the city's historic district.**

**Tales of St. Augustine's resident ghosts are often told at the Tini Martini bar.**





Order the Napoleon crêpe, made with eggs, ham and hollandaise for a hearty treat. Or indulge in a La'Belle crêpe with chocolate and vanilla/chocolate ice cream.

## DISNEY IT ISN'T

*St. Augustine's tourist attractions tend toward the old, fun and funky.*

St. Augustine doesn't have the sort of glitzy, high-tech attractions that have made Orlando famous. Like the city itself, its attractions tend toward the funky and oddball. But they're delightful all the same.

**ALLIGATOR FARM.** One of the city's more well-known tourist destinations, the facility now offers an aerial adventure through the property. Zip-lining across crocodile ponds and alligator feedings makes for an exciting and somewhat nerve-racking adventure. For more information, visit [alligatorfarm.us](http://alligatorfarm.us).

**VILLA ZORAYDA.** Built by Boston millionaire Franklin Smith in 1883 as a winter retreat, the mansion is now open to the public as a walk-through museum. Still family owned, the facility also offers audio tours and is available for wedding receptions.

For more information, visit [villazorayda.com](http://villazorayda.com).

**CITY WALK FOOD TOUR.** Want to enjoy all of St. Augustine's cuisine but don't have time to do it? On the tour you'll visit an array of restaurants and enjoy an assortment of quicker, smaller-sized meals. Options for tours include the "Savory Fair," "The Plaza Stroll," "Pub Crawl," "Bachelorette Party," "Creepy Crawl," and "History, Mayhem and Murder." For more information, visit [staugustinecitywalks.com](http://staugustinecitywalks.com).

**LIGHTNER MUSEUM.** See elegant artifacts from America's Gilded Age, including stained-art glass from Louis Comfort Tiffany, mechanical musical instruments, and costumes and furnishings. What was once the Hotel Alcazar also houses the city's largest collection of Spanish Renaissance furniture and relics. For more information, visit [lightnermuseum.org](http://lightnermuseum.org).

**OLD FLORIDA MUSEUM.** Explore Fort Menendez, learn about early Spanish St. Augustine and hear the city's history explained by costumed characters straight from the city's storied past. For more information, visit [oldfloridamuseum.com](http://oldfloridamuseum.com).

**SAN SEBASTIAN WINERY.** Dating back to 1562 and located in one of Henry Flagler's old East Coast Railway buildings,

# PARTY LIKE A ROCK STAR!



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## DAY'S DRIVE



**The Old Wooden Schoolhouse is furnished much as it would have been in the early 1800s.**

this is rumored to be the birthplace of American wine. Take a wine tour or enjoy The Cellar Upstairs Wine, Jazz and Blues Bar. For more information, visit [sansebastianwinery.com](http://sansebastianwinery.com).

**OLD TOWN TROLLEY.** "See the best first" and give your feet a break as comfy trolleys transport you to your next destination. You can also purchase a tour with a conductor, who'll point out important landmarks. For more information, visit, [trolleytours.com](http://trolleytours.com).

**GHOSTS AND GRAVESTONES FRIGHTSEEING TOUR.** "Do you dare board the trolley of the doomed?" So asks the conductor of the nightly "Frightseeing" Tour. Explore the city's spooky side at the Old Jail and the St. Augustine Light-house Grounds, both of which claim a long history of paranormal activity. For more information, visit [trolleytours.com](http://trolleytours.com).

**OLD WOODEN SCHOOLHOUSE.** Built more than 200 years ago, the cedar-and-cypress structure was assembled with wooden pegs and handmade nails. It's furnished pretty much as it would have been in the early 1800s, including desks and schoolbooks. For more information, visit [oldestwoodenschoolhouse.com](http://oldestwoodenschoolhouse.com). ●