



The First Coast

Florida's First Coast gets its name from two places: Geographically it's the first stretch of coastline visitors encounter upon entering Florida from the north. And historically, the area is one of the oldest settlements in the U.S. The moniker may have double-meaning but there's one single purpose: To win over visitors with an idyllic blend of seaside leisure and cosmopolitan culture.

The region is a tossed salad of old and modern with landmarks many centuries old sharing the landscape with towering skyscrapers and luxury resorts. It's a place that gets its charm from a capacity to offer contemporary amenities like championship golf and opulent spas continually while still flaunting its historical milestones and natural backdrops.

Miles of white sandy beach hug the Atlantic Ocean, offering everything from kite boarding to deep-sea fishing. In every beachside town or urban neighborhood, there are humble and haute lodgings to suit every taste.

Just a few miles from the Georgia border, Amelia Island and the sleepy town of Fernandina Beach delight with natural wonders and laid-back luxuries. Traveling south, the stately skyline of downtown Jacksonville gives just a glimpse of the charming urban neighborhoods it encompasses. Riverfront streets are lined with sidewalk cafés and boutiques, and those are surrounded by chic residential pockets, each parading its own distinct character and flare.

Just 20 miles down the coast, travelers find themselves in the heart of golf country where some of the best championship golf in the country dots the coastal scenery. Ponte Vedra, home to the PGA Tour Headquarters and The Players Championship, is a chic and sophisticated resort town whose name is now synonymous with luxury getaways. Nearby, World Golf Village and the World Golf Hall of Fame showcase golf's rich history while paying homage to its legends.

Finally, St. Augustine, the nation's oldest continuously settled city, continues to enchant sight-seers with a storied past that's celebrated through museums, monuments and architecture. This picturesque town with its European flavors and vivacious past boasts charming inns, shopping gems and fabulous dining, all accessible by foot or horse-drawn carriage.

By land or by sea, the First Coast region presents the ultimate combination of luxury and leisure, history and outdoor recreational. Big-city busy-ness blends with beach-town laziness for a getaway that will delight and fascinate every sort of traveler.



● Downtown Jacksonville

Downtown Jacksonville continues to come to life thanks to an ever-growing list of culture, dining and nightlife options, including two recent developments: The Core, a collection of nightlife venues, and Off the Grid, an arts hub of galleries. The glorious skyline of high-rises is mirrored in the city's focal point, the St. Johns River, where riverside boutiques and eateries roost on both sides. Most notable is The Jacksonville Landing, which boasts eight full-service restaurants and more than 30 specialty retail stores. The undecided can explore both sides of the river by water taxi, which continuously transports visitors between the North and Southbanks, or perhaps opt to dine on an old-fashioned, paddle-wheel riverboat. Besides being home to the Jacksonville Jaguars, Downtown Jacksonville houses a multitude of museums, including the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville (MOCA) and The Museum of Science & History, which recently unveiled Florida's largest digital planetarium.

Jacksonville Beaches ●

The city's 20-mile shoreline houses three distinctive beaches: Atlantic Beach, Neptune Beach and Jacksonville Beach. Lively Jacksonville Beach features the quarter-mile-long Jacksonville Beach Fishing Pier and the best surfing waves in the region. Tackle the surf with a rented board or opt instead to bob amidst the three-foot waves at nearby Shipwreck Island Waterpark at Adventure Landing, a wonderland of miniature golf, arcade games and go-kart action. Laid-back and quaint, Atlantic Beach and Neptune Beach provide the ideal locale for seaside biking and lazy strolling. The two beaches meet at Beaches Town Center, a small collection of upscale galleries, shops, eateries and popular pubs on Atlantic Boulevard. Beaches can be accessed from downtown by taking Beach, Atlantic or J. Turner Butler Boulevards.



OPENING SPREAD: BIG TALBOT ISLAND SUNRISE, ©VISIT JACKSONVILLE; THIS PAGE, FROM TOP, ©JEFF GREENBERG/ALAMY, ©GREG DOWNING

Riverside/Avondale

As one of the largest historic districts in the South, the charming neighborhoods of Riverside and Avondale are the obvious home for many of Jacksonville's quaint bed and breakfasts. It's also a shopper's paradise. Sophisticated spenders flock to the Shoppes of Avondale, an upscale destination with a variety of specialty boutiques and gourmet eateries. Named for its five-way intersection, the edgy arts district of Riverside's Five Points delights modern day hippies with its outdoor cafés and eclectic shops and galleries. Finally, the new Riverside Arts Market stocks a kaleidoscope of finds from original art to farm-fresh produce Saturdays from April until December at its location under the Fuller Warren Bridge. Just minutes from downtown, the Riverside and Avondale boast parks, big and small, as well as the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, home to a collection numbering in the thousands and two acres of riverfront formal gardens.



San Marco

An interesting blend of high-rise condos, historic stately homes and riverfront mansions defines the area known as San Marco, a quaint neighborhood located just across the Main Street and Acosta bridges from Downtown Jacksonville. Its popular shopping district, named San Marco Square after St. Mark's Square in Venice, boasts upscale clothing boutiques, art galleries and fine dining, including Matthew's, Jacksonville's only four-star restaurant. The district is also home to the Peterbrooke Chocolatier Production Center which gives chocolate lovers insider insights into the world of chocolate making during public tours. Theatre Jacksonville, the country's longest-running community theater, has called the square home for nearly 90 years.

Southside

Three shopping spots mark the most notable stopping points in Southside, the most recent up-and-coming Jacksonville neighborhood. More than 120 retailers draw 10 million visitors annually to the colossal open-air St. Johns Town Center where a wide variety of shops cater to bargain hunters and big spenders alike. The Tinseltown area features a movie theater, restaurants, specialty shops and thriving nightlife. Finally, there's Southside's The Avenues, a multi-level, 1.3 million square-foot shopping mall with more than 150 stores including five department stores. Many budget and high-end chains make up the dining scene, plus a handful of new independent eateries and bakeries that are capturing the attention of area foodies. The neighborhood is also home to Alhambra Theatre and Dining, the oldest continually operating dinner theater in the United States which recently underwent a total renovation, including a new menu.





● Fernandina Beach

The quiet seaside town of Fernandina Beach, with its sprawling 50-square-block of homes and buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, is best explored by foot or on a horse-drawn carriage tour. Widespread Victorian-era architecture, charming lampposts and picturesque street signs denote modern sophistication while only a handful of pirate statues remain to remind visitors of the area's true swashbuckling heritage. Quaint eateries, antique shops and chic galleries line Centre Street and several cross streets which make up a perfect downtown center easily traversed in a few hours. Be sure to visit the Palace Saloon, the state's oldest watering hole, as well as Fernandina's Fantastic Fudge where the scent of freshly made waffle cones lure visitors in for ice cream and fudge. Fernandina's stately neighborhoods shaded by a canopy of giant oaks are where most of the area's gingerbread-trimmed bed and breakfasts can be found.

Ponte Vedra ●

Ponte Vedra is a golfer's mecca. Home to the PGA Tour and The Players Championship, the region boasts some of the most prestigious and scenic golf courses in the world, and was recently recognized by Money Magazine as the best place to live in Florida. Dating back to the 1920s, Ponte Vedra Inn & Club is one of two seaside resorts that sit on a beach lined with lofty dunes and towering palms. Deep-sea and freshwater fishing, horseback riding along the beach and hiking miles of nature trails at the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve are just a few of the many activities to pursue after the 18th hole. Considered as one of the most luxurious and prestigious recreational and residential destinations in Florida, this high-end haven with its beautiful beaches, chic shops and eateries delicately blends small-town warmth with the ambiance of metropolitan sophistication.



● World Golf Village

Tucked between St. Augustine and Jacksonville, the World Golf Village is the ultimate golf vacation destination. This lush, 6,300-acre resort and residential community features two championship golf courses, including the Slammer & Squire (pictured) and two resort hotels, all of which are within walking distance of the World Golf Hall of Fame where the greatest players and contributors are honored. An interactive experience boasting golf swing simulators and a 300-seat IMAX Theater, the attraction houses golf's major championship trophies and authentic memorabilia from golf legends. The World Golf Village also features the PGA Tour Golf Academy offering golf instruction ranging from 30-minute private lessons to two-, three- and five-day golf schools throughout the year.



Amelia Island

Dastardly pirates, foreign princesses, and haunted souls—Amelia Island has seen its share of characters over the centuries—some noble, some notorious. But in modern days, this 13-mile-long barrier island has morphed into a luxury golf and spa haven where a handful of lavish inns and two magnificent resorts—Omni Amelia Island Plantation and the Ritz-Carlton Amelia Island—host a much more relaxed group of travelers. The island is also an outdoor paradise with opportunities for sailing, fishing, hiking and kayaking. Be sure to visit Amelia Island Lighthouse as well as Fort Clinch State Park, which served as a military post during the Civil War, the Spanish-American War and World War II.

St. Augustine/The Old City

Just 45 minutes south of Jacksonville is St. Augustine, the nation's oldest city. Narrow brick streets, best explored by foot, constantly reveal scores of historic sites and museums, restaurants and pubs. From the antique shops along San Marco Avenue to the touristy shops along St. George Street, the historic district in the heart of downtown includes everything from classic to kitsch. Numerous themed walking tours abound highlighting everything from notable sites to ghostly tales. Charming bed and breakfasts, hotels and budget-friendly inns dot the downtown landscape minutes from the city's most famous landmarks—Castillo de San Marcos and Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth. And don't miss The Oldest House, a Spanish Colonial residence three blocks south of the Plaza de la Constitution at 14 St. Francis Street, which was built circa 1706. It is the oldest surviving home in the city.

