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 First Coast

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Up and Down Florida's First Coast

The historic neighborhoods
and quiet seaside towns of Florida's
northern coastal region

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

The Talbot islands
are filled with
unspoiled vistas



Sandy beaches hugging the Atlantic Ocean: This must be Florida's First Coast

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 modern 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 within. Riverfront streets are lined with sidewalk cafes and boutiques, and those are surrounded by chic residential pockets, each parading its own distinct character and flair.

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 scenery. Ponte Vedra, home to the PGA's 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 sightseers 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 sea, the First Coast presents the ultimate combination of luxury and leisure, history and outdoor recreation. 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 transport 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.

Lots of Land: Jacksonville is the largest city in the continental United States with more than 840 square miles.

Eponymous Connection: Jacksonville is named for Gen. Andrew Jackson, the first military governor of Florida who, incidentally, never visited Jacksonville.

It Was a Start: In 1840, the city's population was a whopping 350 residents.

Plenty of Room to Stroll: Jacksonville is home to the country's largest urban park system with 111,669 acres of parks.

Northerly Connection: The St. Johns River is one of two rivers in North America that flows north instead of south.



EXOTIC FUN

Located 15 minutes from Downtown Jacksonville, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is home to more than 1,400 animals, including zebras, warthogs, rhinos and, of course, jaguars. The zoo also features a 4,000-square-foot splash ground perfect for cooling off on hot summer days. Recent additions to the zoo include two new attractions: Tuxedo Coast, a permanent penguin exhibit, and the Asian Bamboo Garden & Komodo Dragon exhibit.

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 3-foot waves at nearby Shipwreck Island Waterpark at Adventure Landing, a wonderland of miniature golf, arcade games and go-kart action. Laidback 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.



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Shopping in Avondale

RIVERSIDE/ AVONDALE

As one of the largest historic districts in the South, the charming neighborhoods of Riverside and Avondale are the obvious homes for many of Jacksonville's quaintest bed and breakfasts. They're also amidst 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 with its outdoor cafés and eclectic shops and galleries delights modern-day hippies. Finally, open Saturdays from April until December, the new Riverside Arts Market stocks a kaleidoscope of finds from original art to farm-fresh produce. Just minutes from downtown, 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 formal, riverfront 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. 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 plus a handful of new independent eateries and bakeries make up the dining scene.



St. Johns Town Center



Castillo de San Marcos

St. Augustine

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.

Seafood Taken Seriously: Each November, St. Augustine hosts the Annual Great Chowder Debate when more than 30 area restaurants compete to see who has the best chowder.

Tall Leg Warmer: There are 219 steps to the top of the St. Augustine Lighthouse.

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 ambience of metropolitan sophistication.

Nice Move: The PGA Tour moved its headquarters to Ponte Vedra in 1979.



Ponte Vedra Inn & Club

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 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 King & Bear Course

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, which offers golf instruction from 30-minute private lessons to two-, three- and five-day golf schools throughout the year.

Meeting of Giants:

The King & Bear is the only course in the world designed jointly by Arnold Palmer ("The King") and Jack ("The Bear") Nicklaus. The Slammer & Squire course is named for legendary Hall of Famers "Slammin'" Sam Snead and Gene "The Squire" Sarazen.



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 horse-drawn carriage tour. Widespread Victorian-era architecture, charming lampposts and picturesque street signs denote modern sophistication, while only a handful of pirate statues remains to remind visitors of Fernandina Beach's true swashbuckling heritage. Quaint eateries, antique shops and chic galleries line Centre Street and several cross-streets, which results in a perfect downtown center that's easily traversed in a few hours. Be sure to visit the Palace Saloon, the state's oldest watering hole, as well as Fernandina's Fantas-

tic Fudge, where the scent of the freshly made waffle cone lures in visitors for ice cream and freshly made 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.



Hailing Autos and Shrimp:

Among the many events to which Amelia Island is host each year, two of the most notable are the Annual Multi-Million-Dollar Concours Car Show & Auction (March) and The Annual Isle of 8 Flags Shrimp Festival (May).

Last One on the Wagon:

The Palace Saloon, on Centre Street in downtown Fernandina Beach, was the last U.S. saloon to close during Prohibition. Circa 1878, it is the oldest saloon in the state of Florida that remains in its original location.

Walk or Crawl, Take Your

Pick: Florida's only oral-history museum, the Amelia Island History Museum, offers a variety of walking and docent-led tours, including the popular Fernandina Beach Pub Crawl.

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.



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