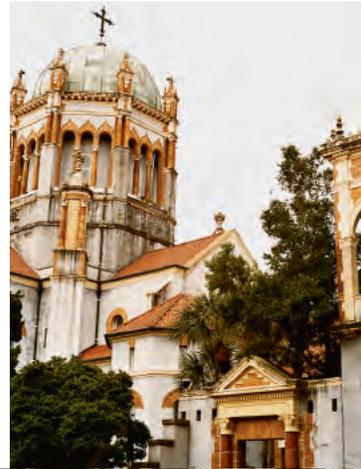


# Of Cigars and

ON THE SUGARY SANDS of St. Augustine Beach, my wife and I look toward Spain. Surfers ply the blue waters where the galleons of conquistadors once sailed. They came chasing myths, of cities of gold and a fountain of youth. Arriving more than 100 years before the Pilgrims, they gave Florida its name—the place of flowers. Then they stepped ashore and discovered it was also a place thick with thorns, mosquitoes, and man-eating alligators.

Now, 500 years later, we are retracing the steps of those warrior-explorers and the settlers who followed, crossing central Florida in the shadow of Mickey Mouse.

Most tourists visit this part of the state to play in its theme parks and breathe deep the scent of its orange groves. As lifelong Floridians,



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: Flagler Presbyterian Church in St. Augustine, Florida; Horseback riders at El Juncal Paso Fino Ranch; the Bridge of Lions in St. Augustine; a cigar maker in Ybor City. OPPOSITE: A new Acura TSX® at St. Augustine Beach.



# Conquistadors

A drive across Florida in an Acura TSX  
conjures the state's Spanish past.

BY CARLOS HARRISON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN KERNICK  
STYLING BY PHILIPPINE SCALI





we do too. This time, though, we've decided to rediscover the swath of sandy flatlands, murky swamps, and rolling hills where the Spanish imprint remains.

Prior to our trip, we map a northeasterly route from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic. We will begin in Tampa's historic cigar-making district, stop in the horse country where champion descendants of the conquistadors' mounts are bred, visit a vineyard of indigenous muscadine grapes (like the ones the Spaniards pressed into wine 200 years before Californians planted their first vines), and then head up along the coast to St. Augustine, the nation's oldest city.

## Start in Ybor City

MAP IN HAND, WE SET OUT for Tampa's Ybor City, a National Historic Landmark District replete with wrought-iron balconies, globe streetlights, and brick walkways. There we meet Angela Fernandez, a guide for the Ybor City Museum State Park. Silver-haired and slight at 90, she was born and raised in a bungalow in the town next door to Ybor City, where her parents, both immigrants from Spain, met while employed in the equal-opportunity cigar factories.

Leading us through one of the wooden casitas that workers rented for \$2.50 a week, Angela peels back the pages of history to the time of her youth. She affectionately describes life using a flatiron, icebox, and stovepipe oven like those in the shotgun-style house. Her lips pucker in a whimsical smile as she points to a straw hand fan.

"That was our air-conditioning," she says.

Once the cigar capital of the world, Ybor City was founded in 1886 when Don Vicente Martinez Ybor built the area's first cigar factory. Ybor City quickly attracted thousands of workers, growing into a center of Hispanic culture, as well as a hotbed of revolutionary activity in the days leading up to Cuba's war for independence.

Only a few of the old cigar makers remain. Dagoberto Rodriguez-Truncoso is one of them. Inside the Ybor City Museum State Park, he deftly demonstrates the cigar-rollers' technique at a wooden *escritorio* (a small pew-like table) like the ones that packed the factories in those bygone days. Still youthful at 76, he rolls 40 *tabacos* in a three- to four-hour day.

"I didn't always do this," he says with a grin. "I only picked it up about 50 years ago."

In the factories, he says, workers rolled up to 120 cigars a day. They were proud artisans, who came to work in ties and straw boaters, squeezing and wrapping moist tobacco leaves into perfect *coronas* and *robustos* as a *lector* read them the daily news (in the afternoons, workers were treated to Cervantes, Zola, or Hugo). Men and women worked side by side. Love spread. So did tuberculosis. But it was cigarettes, automation, and the Great Depression that ultimately killed Ybor City's cigar industry.

From the museum, we take a self-guided walking tour, passing the elegant and ornately decorated social clubs the immigrants built between the 1890s and 1920s. We spot the stately stone columns of the Centro Asturiano and El Circulo Cubano de Tampa, where the original chandeliers still hang from the ballroom's 20-foot ceiling.

Meandering along the Avenida Republica de Cuba, we spy the Don Vicente de Ybor Inn and immediately wish we had made reservations there. Originally built by Ybor in 1895, it's one of only two hotels within the district, and it's been magnificently restored with a marble staircase, Tiffany lamps, and eclectic decor in each of its 16 rooms.

A bright yellow trolley clangs past outside. These electric replicas of ones that ran here in the cigar-making days (thankfully updated with air-conditioning) make four stops in Ybor City, but we decide to press on by foot.

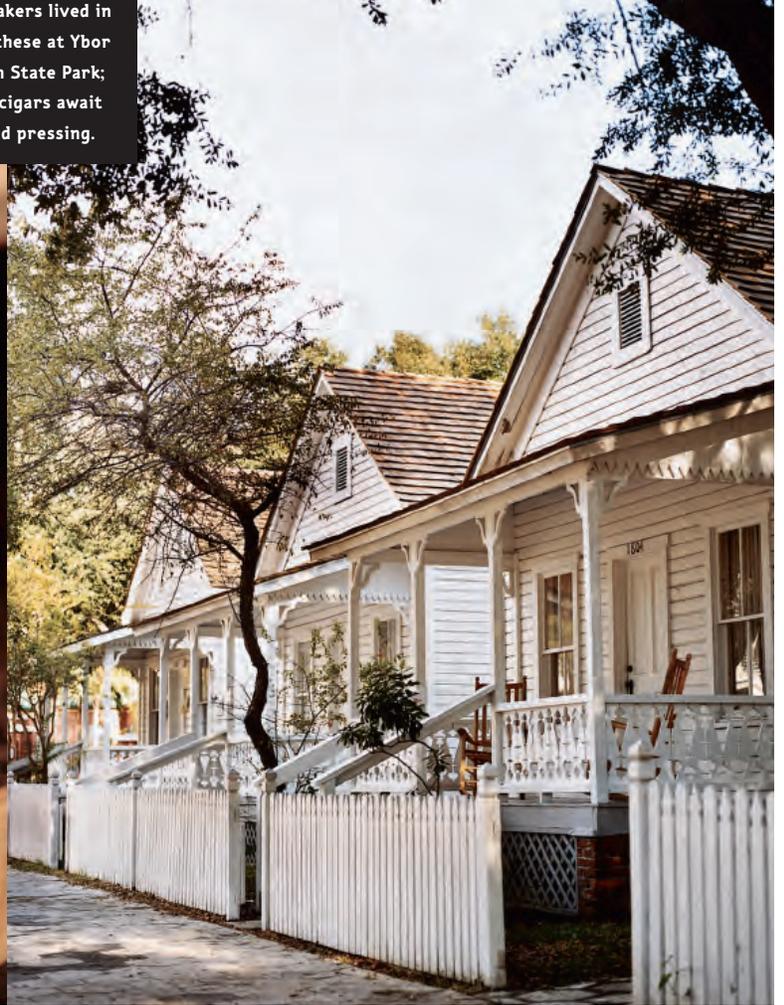
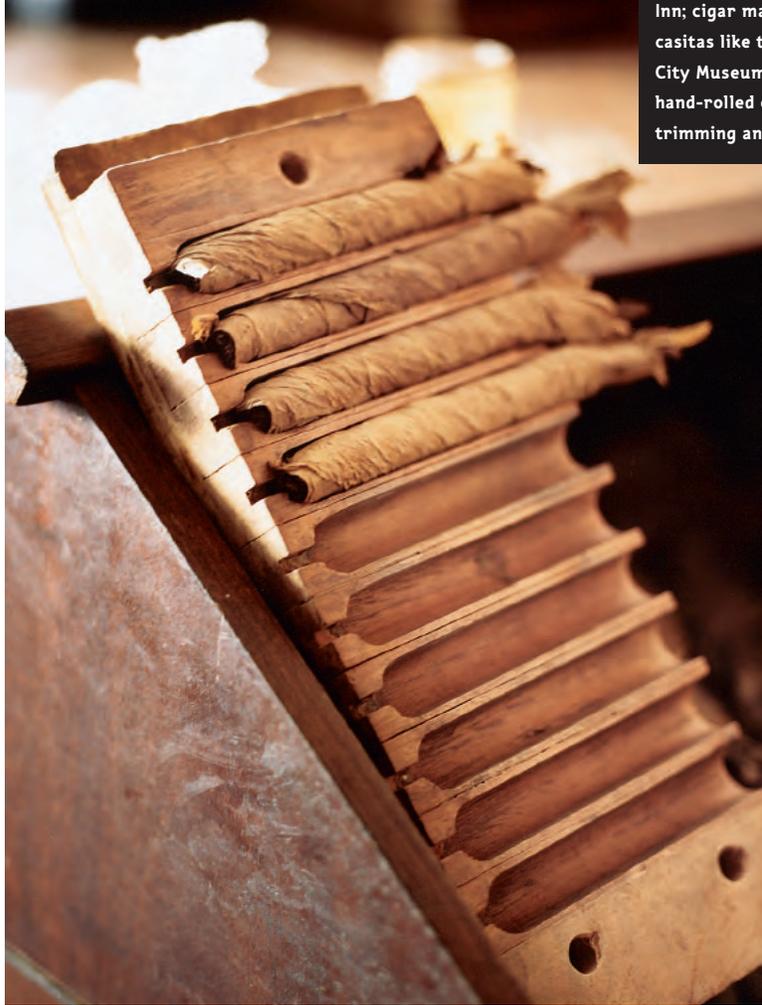
Turning down Seventh Avenue, or "La Sétima" as it's known here, we enter Ybor's main drag. In Don Vicente's era, girls crowded the iron balconies to flirt with the young men walking by below. Nowadays, thousands crowd in on weekend nights for Ybor City's edgy nightclub scene.

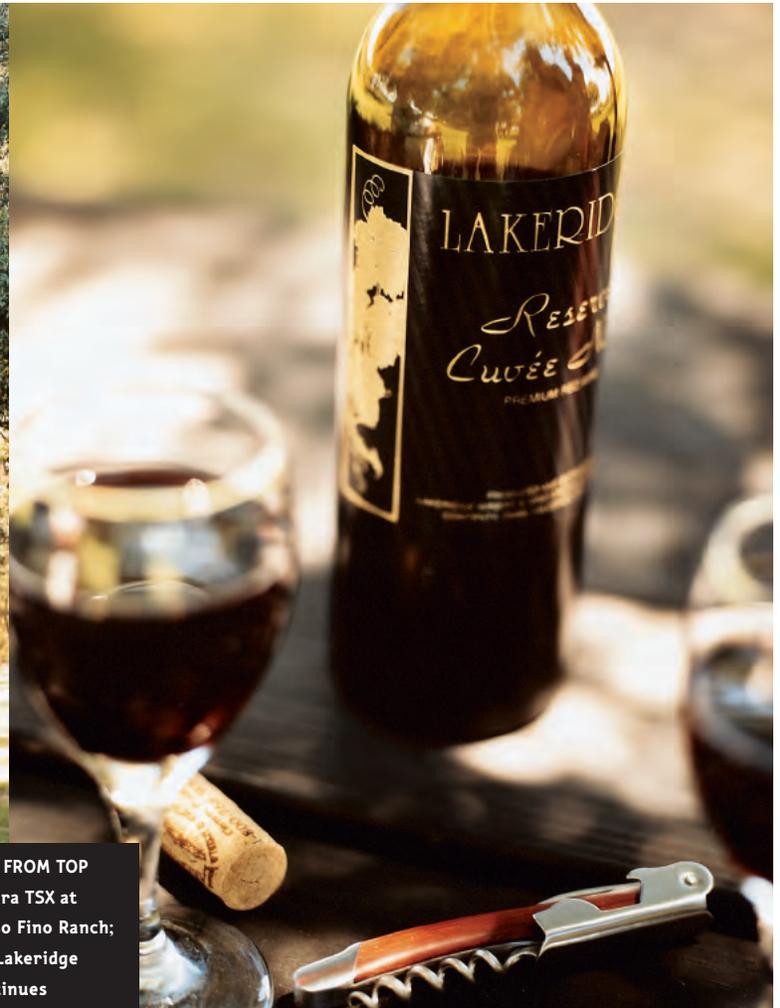
Art is another draw. Inside the 1912 El Centro Español de Tampa, a former social club for Spanish immigrants that is now an exquisitely preserved part of the Centro Ybor retail complex, are numerous galleries, including one devoted to the work of famous ringside physician (and Ybor native)



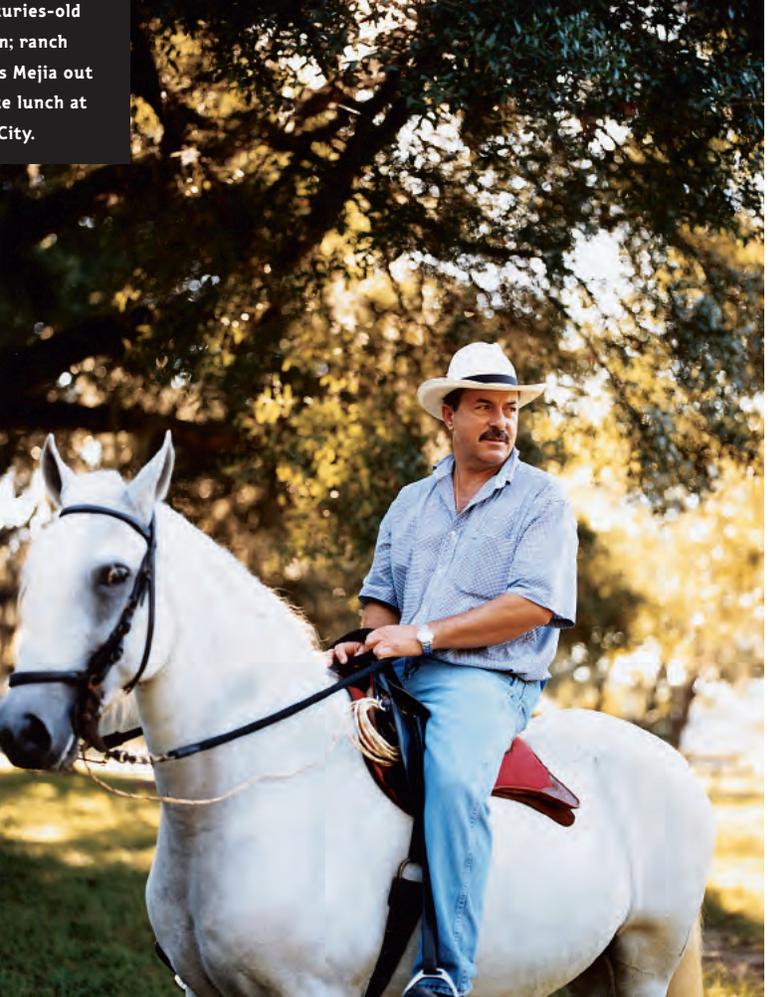
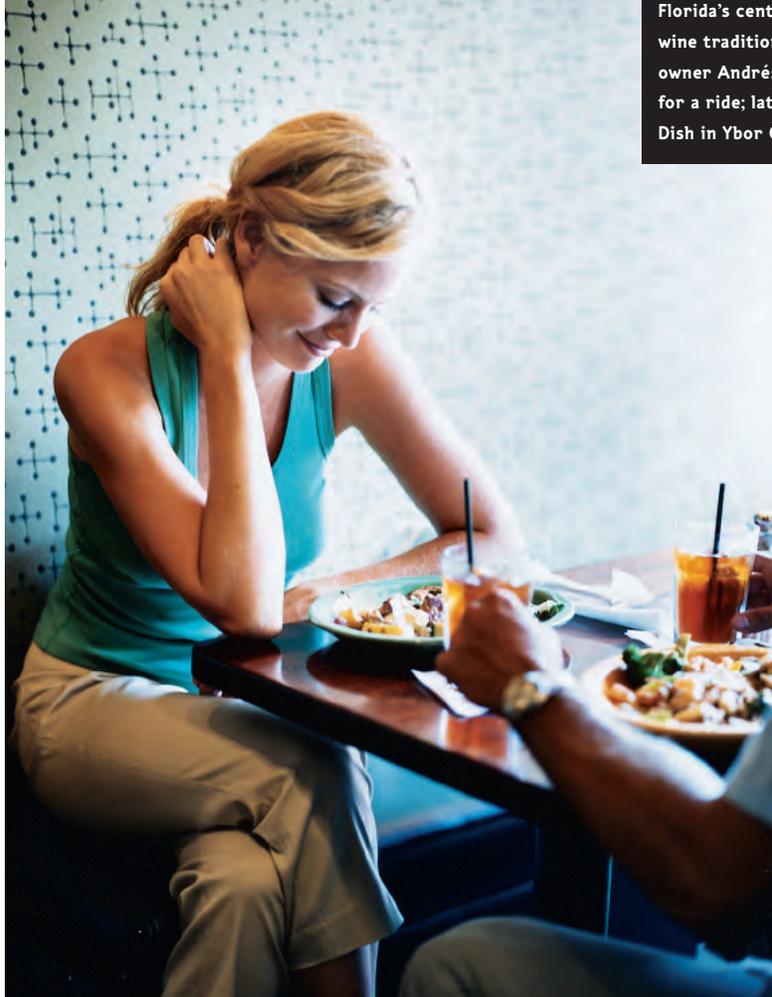


CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: Outside the Columbia Restaurant in Ybor City; relaxing in the lobby of the Don Vicente Inn; cigar makers lived in casitas like these at Ybor City Museum State Park; hand-rolled cigars await trimming and pressing.





CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: an Acura TSX at El Juncal Paso Fino Ranch; Clermont's Lakeridge Winery continues Florida's centuries-old wine tradition; ranch owner Andrés Mejía out for a ride; late lunch at Dish in Ybor City.



Ferdie Pacheco. The good doctor's paintings of streetcars and characters from Ybor City's early days hang alongside his depictions of his legendary charge Muhammad Ali.

With the day coming to an end, our thoughts turn to dinner. Centro Ybor has several casual eateries to choose from. For example, we're tempted by Dish's unique invitation to concoct our own mix of seafood or meats, sauces, and vegetables, which we can watch being cooked on a circular, 26-foot grill. My love of microbreweries prompts us to take a quick one-block walk to check out the Tampa Bay Brewing Company, which offers a dozen original ales and lagers on tap—from reds and ambers to stouts and German *hefeweizens*—along with a delightfully varied beer-infused menu.

But our mission to savor the traces of Spain leaves only one real choice: the Columbia Restaurant.

Opened in 1905, the Columbia is Florida's oldest continuously operating restaurant. Elaborately painted Spanish ceramic tiles adorn its 11 dining rooms, which consume an entire city block. Run today by fourth- and fifth-generation descendants of its founder, the restaurant serves Spanish cuisine that is consistently rated among the finest in the region. As if the wonderful food were not enough, an in-house flamenco troupe treats diners to the sounds of thundering heels, clattering castanets, and the furious gypsy rhythms of Spanish guitars. The effect of the dancers' pounding feet combined with the rich saffron scents of paella is positively intoxicating.



## The Road East

THE NEXT DAY WE HEAD NORTH UP I-75 toward the horse country of Brooksville. Driving through the luxuriant green landscape, it's difficult to imagine what traveling across this land must have been like for those first adventurers. Beautiful to look at from the interstate, the thick growth is exceptionally inhospitable, hiding a host of nature's treacheries. Rattlesnakes curl under the palmettos; in the explorers' day, panthers hid in the shadows while bears stalked about. The greenery itself is no kinder. Tangled vines and sharp-spiked plants have aptly descriptive names, like saw grass or Spanish bayonet.

My musings end as we reach our destination, El Juncal Ranch, which is set amid the moss-draped oaks of Brooksville. Here, three generations of the Mejia clan breed and train champion Paso Finos, descendants of the same horses the conquistadors rode.

As I slip into the saddle of a spirited 8-year-old stallion named Hierro Rojo, Andrés Mejia explains that these proud animals are born with a natural fire and vigor, and a distinctive drum-rolling hoofbeat like the chugging of an onrushing train.

## Ybor City

Area code is 813.

### WHERE TO STAY

#### ■ DON VICENTE DE

**YBOR HISTORIC INN** Built by Ybor City's founder in 1895, this Mediterranean Revival jewel is now a 16-room hotel.

From \$139. 1915 Avenida Republica de Cuba (also known as 14th St.), 241-4545; [www.donvicenteinn.com](http://www.donvicenteinn.com)

#### ■ HILTON GARDEN INN

The comforts and familiarity of a worldwide chain in the heart of the entertainment district. From \$109. 1700 E. 9th Ave., 769-9267; [www.hiltonybor.com](http://www.hiltonybor.com)

### WHERE TO EAT

#### ■ COLUMBIA RESTAURANT

A must, serving award-winning Spanish/Cuban cuisine since 1905. Flamenco dancers perform six nights a week. 2117 E. 7th Ave., 248-4961; [www.columbiarestaurant.com](http://www.columbiarestaurant.com)

■ **DISH** Grab a bowl, select a sauce (40 and counting), and load up your raw ingredients for dinner, then watch it get cooked in five minutes flat. 1600 E. 8th Ave., 241-8300; [www.diningatdish.com](http://www.diningatdish.com)

#### ■ TAMPA BAY BREWING

**COMPANY** Housed in a 100-year-old stable, this brew pub offers a constantly changing selection of original ales and lagers produced on site. 1812 N. 15th St., 247-1422; [www.tampabaybrewingcompany.com](http://www.tampabaybrewingcompany.com)

### WHAT TO DO AND SEE

■ **CENTRO YBOR** An entertainment, shopping, and dining complex. 1600 E. 8th Ave., 242-4660; [www.centroybor.com](http://www.centroybor.com)

■ **LA CASITA** One of the modest cottages Don Ybor built to house his cigar-factory workers. It offers an exceptionally detailed look at the everyday life of the area's early settlers. [www.ybormuseum.org/sp.html](http://www.ybormuseum.org/sp.html)



■ **LA SÉTIMA** Home to historic social clubs and cigar stores, this street was once the center of Spanish culture. Today it's a hub for nightlife.

#### ■ TECO LINE STREETCARS

These year-old canary-yellow trolleys are updated versions of the ones that transported millions until 1946.

Stops along 8th Ave. at 20th, 16th, and 15th Sts.; on 7th Ave. at 13th St.

254-4278; [www.tecolinestreetcar.org](http://www.tecolinestreetcar.org)

#### ■ YBOR CITY MUSEUM

**STATE PARK** See how cigar-making immigrants lived and built Ybor City, then buy a hand-rolled robusto in the gift shop. Ask for a walking-tour guide. 1818 E. 9th Ave., 247-6323; [www.ybormuseum.org](http://www.ybormuseum.org)

## Brooksville

#### ■ EL JUNCAL PASO FINO

**RANCH** See and ride the mounts of the conquistadors, bred and trained by descendants of those same Spanish warrior-explorers. Call for tours or riding lessons. 6140 Spring Lake Hwy., (352) 799-6676

## Clermont

#### ■ LAKERIDGE WINERY

The largest winery and vineyard in Florida. Varieties include a sweet and fruity red that's pressed from the same muscadine grapes French settlers used to make the New World's first wine. 19239 U.S. 27 north, (800) 768-9463; [www.lakeridgewinery.com](http://www.lakeridgewinery.com)

“They are born with the step,” he says. “The only thing we do is polish it a bit, give it elegance.”

When I nudge Hierro Rojo, he springs forward, and I can immediately tell how Paso Finos have earned their name (it means “fine step”). These horses are famous for a ride so exceptionally smooth and bounce-free that it’s said a rider wearing a flat-topped hat could set a glass of wine on the crown and ride without spilling a drop.

We don’t try that, but the image gets us thinking about our next stop, Lakeridge Winery, less than an hour away. From Brooksville, we point the car east and head out State 50, a country road that rambles past cattle ranches as it rises into rolling hills. In the town of Clermont, 30 minutes west of Orlando, we reach our destination.

Lakeridge Winery’s adobe-style building sits on a rise overlooking the road. Neat, even rows of twining vines stretch like a green carpet over the slopes behind it. Come harvest time, workers and mechanical harvesters will take to the vineyards to pluck the fat black muscadine grapes for pressing into wine.

“Grapes are native to Florida, but only certain varieties will grow here,” says Keith Mullins, the winery’s general manager.

We join a winery tour and learn how a combination of indigenous grapes and hybrids bred in the 1970s yields dry reds and whites, sweeter blends that remind us of sangria, and effervescent sparkling wines meticulously produced using *Methode Champenoise*.

From Clermont, we take U.S. 27 north to State 19 north, which winds past the sky-blue pools that dot Florida’s lake country. At State 40 we turn east and drive to I-95, which we take north to exit 289. Our pace slows when we reach State A1A. Even though it’s slower going than I-95, we choose this coast-hugging two-lane route for the last northern leg of our trip because it weaves through the grassy dunes at the water’s edge, offering spectacular views of snowy-white egrets roosting atop the thick tangles of mangroves that line the way.

## The Oldest City

THE ROAD TAKES US PAST THE STONE WALLS of Fort Matanzas and the inlet it once guarded. And then, at St. Augustine Beach, we hug the shoreline and follow the road past a black-and-white lighthouse to the Bridge of Lions and our final destination.

Crossing into St. Augustine, we pass the two white stone guardians that give the bridge its name. A bronze statue of Ponce de León looms on a granite pedestal just beyond,

pointing north toward the Fountain of Youth he sought.

Ponce de León may have been the first European to set foot in Florida, arriving in 1513, but it was Pedro Menendez de Avilés who founded St. Augustine more than half a century later. A 208-foot-tall steel cross erected in 1965 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Menendez’s landing towers over the spot where he touched shore. Reportedly visible from 30 miles at sea, the cross also marks the site of the nation’s oldest Spanish mission, the Mission de Nombre de Dios, where Menendez and his men held the first mass in America.

As the nation’s oldest city, St. Augustine naturally boasts dozens of other “firsts.” Luckily, its compact layout allows us to walk comfortably to most of these, as well as other sights, in a single day. The Government House, the seat of colonial rule from 1596 until 1821, sits on King Street. Across the street, an obelisk marking the reading of Spain’s 1812 constitution rises over the Plaza de la Constitución.

Nearby is the Cathedral of St. Augustine, which was restored by the same architect who designed St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York.

The cathedral’s west side faces St. George Street, now closed to traffic so that pedestrians can roam freely. A series of authentic historic Spanish colonial homes lines the street, intermingled with the requisite contingent of gift shops.

At the northernmost end of St. Augustine, my wife and I step through the original city gates, two stone pillars flanking what once was the only entrance to the then-walled city. Then, turning right, we face the most impressive structure of all: the Castillo de San Marcos.

The massive fort has stood guard over St. Augustine since 1695. Built on the site of nine former forts, it took 25 years to complete. Its 33-foot-high, seashell-speckled coquina stone walls stand 14½ feet thick at the base, with cannons guarding every approach.

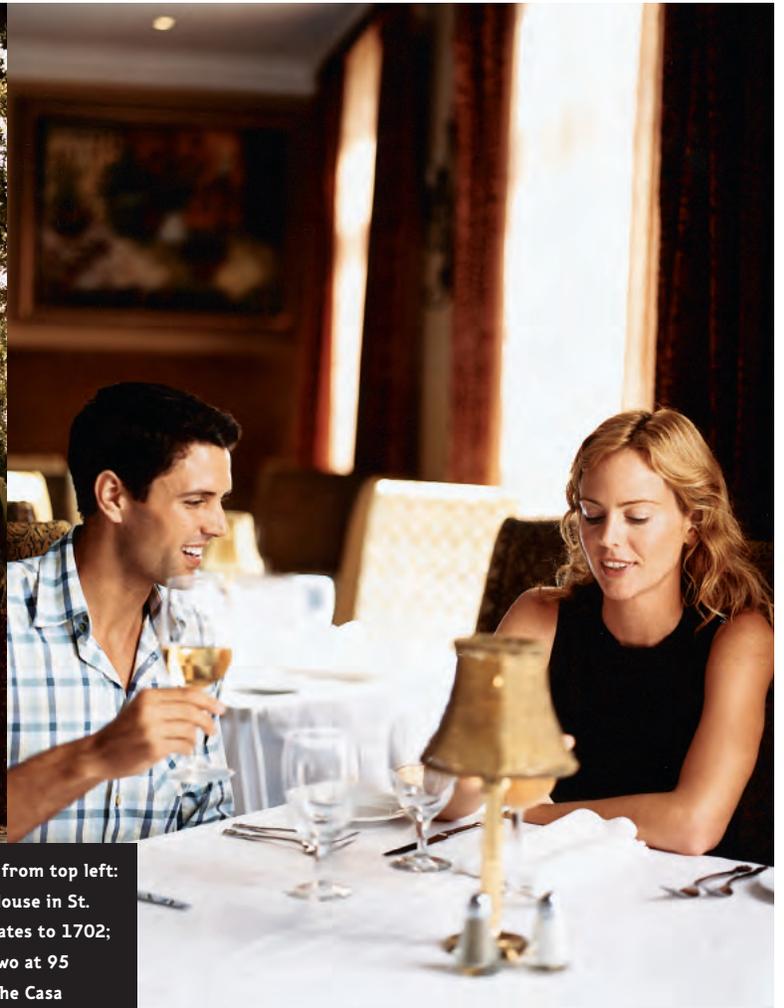
Stepping across the drawbridge leading inside, we are greeted by volunteer Frank Suddeth, a lifetime resident of St. Augustine, who tells us that he used to dig up bullets and arrowheads while playing hide-and-seek at the fort as a child.

We arrive just in time to see the cannon-firing reenactment (held on weekends throughout the summer). Volunteers dressed like 1740s Spanish *soldados* gather atop the northeastern battlement, load and aim their six-pound cannon toward the water, then fire with a thundering roar that echoes across the bay.

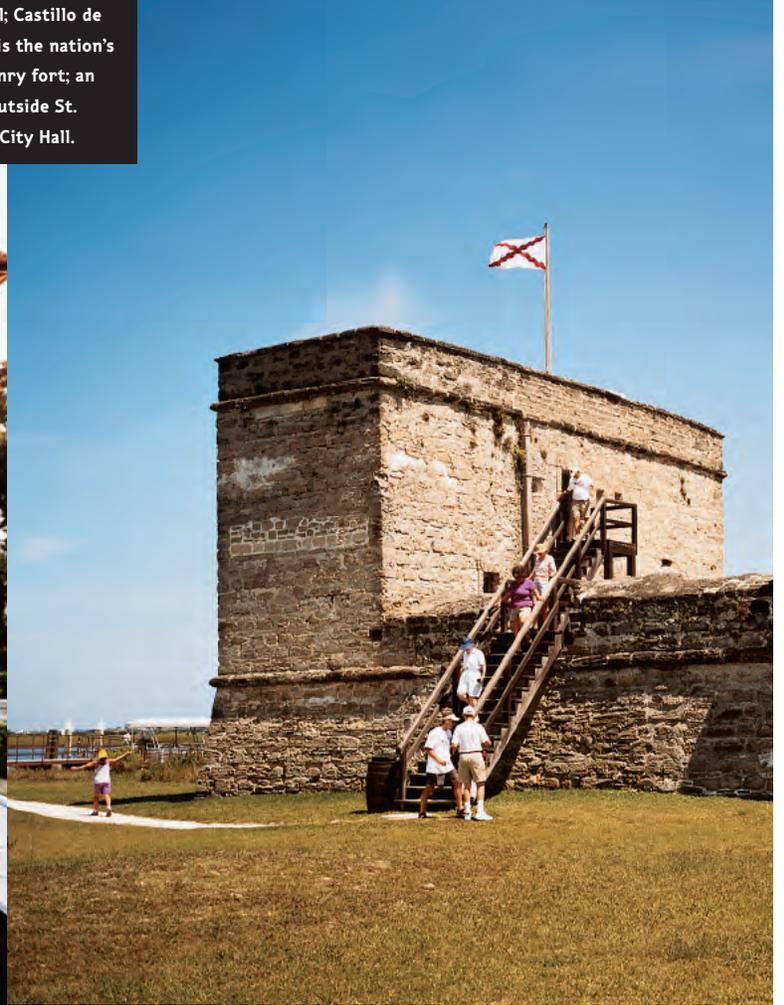
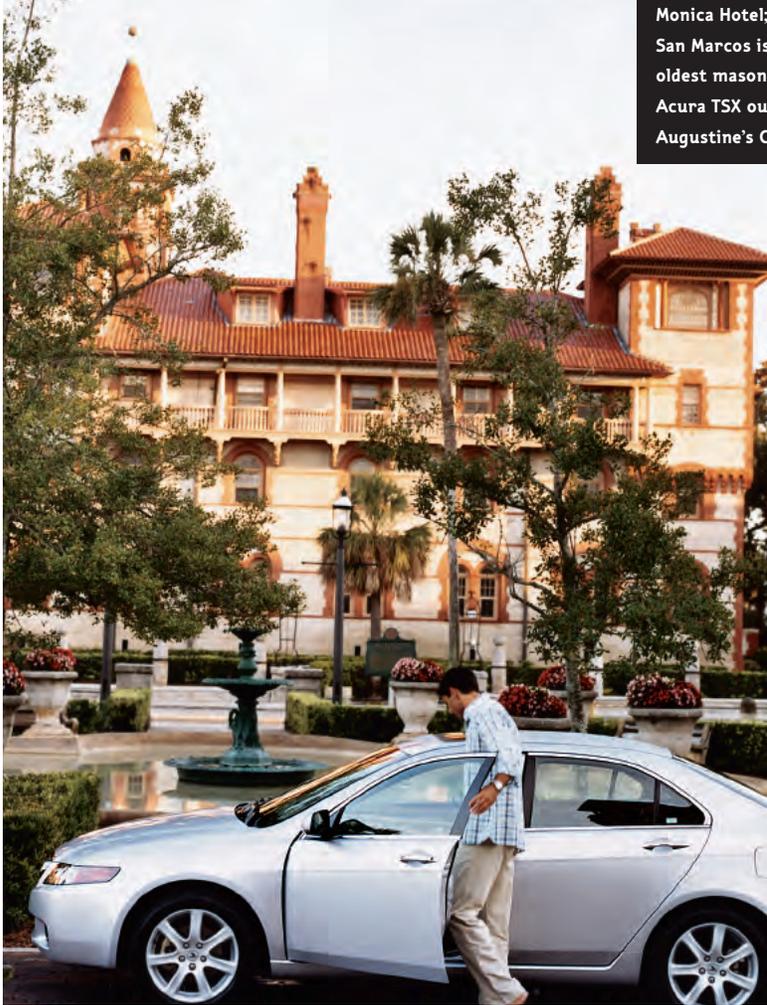
With the day slipping away, we decide that a horse-drawn carriage ride is the best way to see the rest of the city before dark. The white carriages line up by the water’s edge along

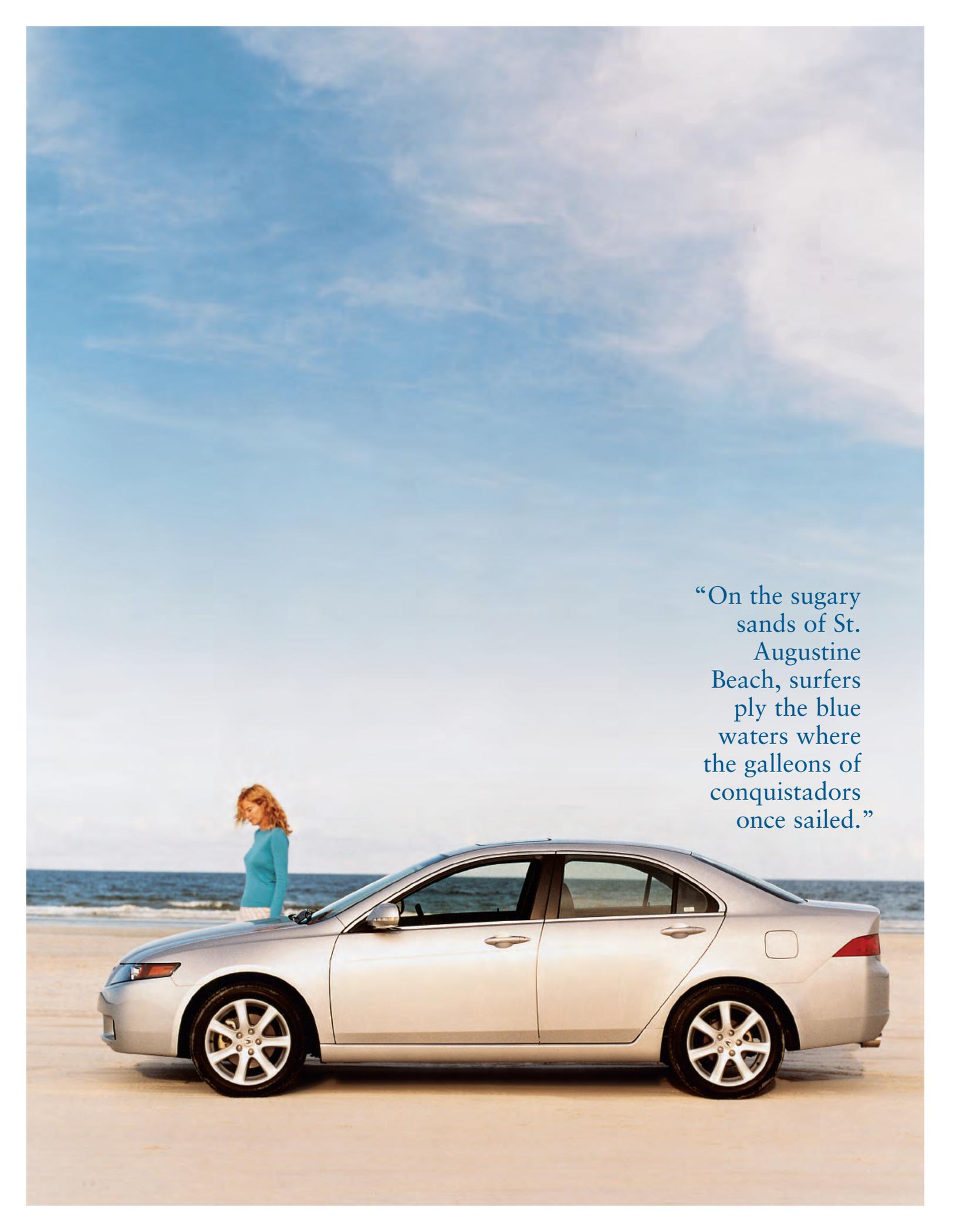


**CASA MONICA:** This stunning St. Augustine hotel features one- to four-story suites.



CLOCKWISE, from top left: The Oldest House in St. Augustine dates to 1702; dinner for two at 95 Cordova in the Casa Monica Hotel; Castillo de San Marcos is the nation's oldest masonry fort; an Acura TSX outside St. Augustine's City Hall.



A silver sedan is parked on a sandy beach. A woman with long, wavy hair, wearing a teal long-sleeved top and light-colored shorts, stands by the front driver-side door, looking down. The background shows the ocean and a vast, blue sky with light, wispy clouds. The overall scene is bright and serene.

“On the sugary  
sands of St.  
Augustine  
Beach, surfers  
ply the blue  
waters where  
the galleons of  
conquistadors  
once sailed.”

Avenida Menendez. Looking very much like a young Leon Redbone in his white hat and whiskers, our driver introduces himself as J.J. and jokingly attests to the benefits of drinking from the Fountain of Youth.

“I moved here when I was 62,” he says. “Been drinking the water for 78 years.”

Accompanied by the slow clapping of the horse’s hooves, J.J. tells us about railroad magnate Henry Flagler’s lasting impact on the city. Pointing out Flagler College, he informs us it was originally the Ponce de León Hotel, an exclusive, invitation-only resort for the richest of the rich (Louis Tiffany himself did the decorating). The hotel was open only three months out of the year, and guests had to sign up for the entire season at the then-exorbitant rate of \$27 a night—about two month’s pay for the average worker.

Immediately upon the hotel’s completion in 1888, Flagler built the Hotel Alcazar across the street, with a casino, Russian baths, and, at the time, the world’s largest indoor pool. Today, it houses the Lightner Museum’s collection of Victorian objects and furniture.

Next door, a competitor built the Casa Monica, but soon sold it to Flagler. Of the three hotels, it’s the only one still operating as a luxury hotel, with stunning, one- to four-story suites individually decorated with antique furniture.

On Cordova Street our carriage stops by the Lover’s Tree, which is really two trees in one—an oak that has grown around a palm so that they appear to be embracing. According to local legend, when two people kiss there, their love will last 100 years. Then we continue past the Gonzalez-Alvarez “Oldest House” and the charming, flower-filled St. Francis Inn, which is St. Augustine’s oldest inn (built in 1791, it is one of 27 bed-and-breakfasts in the city).

With the dinner hour approaching, we debate about whether to dine at the acclaimed 95 Cordova in the Casa Monica Hotel or at the Raintree Restaurant, which is housed in a century-old Victorian. Either would be a good choice, but we are drawn to the water, so instead we choose the Santa Maria Restaurant, which sits on pilings over Matanzas Bay and offers unparalleled views of the Bridge of Lions.

Later, after night falls and a new moon rises over the city, we walk through the streets we had ridden through earlier in the day. Facing east, we look once again toward Spain. The footprints of the conquistadors may have washed away long ago, but it’s the same salty air that blows and tousles our hair. ④

*Carlos Harrison lives and writes in Florida. His credits include articles for Coastal Living.*



**GUARDIAN:** An architectural detail at Castillo de San Marcos.

## St. Augustine

Area code is 904 unless noted.

### WHERE TO STAY

■ **CASA DE LA PAZ BED & BREAKFAST** The seven ornate rooms of this 1915 Mediterranean inn offer spectacular views of the waterfront, the Bridge of Lions, and St. Augustine Lighthouse. From \$130.

22 Avenida Menendez, (800) 929-2915; [www.casadelapaz.com](http://www.casadelapaz.com)

■ **CASA MONICA HOTEL** Built in 1888, this majestic hotel features elegant dark wood and a Spanish tile fountain in the lobby. No two suites are alike. From \$200.

95 Cordova St., (800) 648-1888; [www.casamonica.com](http://www.casamonica.com)

■ **ST. FRANCIS INN** This house built by a Spanish infantry sergeant in 1791 boasts 17 elegant rooms.

From \$89. 279 St. George St., (800) 824-6062; [www.stfrancisinn.com](http://www.stfrancisinn.com)

### WHERE TO EAT

■ **95 CORDOVA** Standouts include calamari with pesto. Try the six-course tasting menu. 95 Cordova St., 810-6810; [www.95cordova.com](http://www.95cordova.com)

■ **RAINTREE RESTAURANT AND STEAKHOUSE** Award-winning food in a historic Victorian setting. A Wine Spectator Grand Award or Award of Excellence recipient since 1981. 102 San Marco Ave., 824-7211; [www.raintreerestaurant.com](http://www.raintreerestaurant.com)

■ **SANTA MARIA RESTAURANT** Go here for great seafood and views of Matanzas Bay. 135 Avenida Menendez, 829-6578; [www.oldcity.com/sites/santamaria](http://www.oldcity.com/sites/santamaria)

### WHAT TO DO AND SEE

■ **CARRIAGE TOURS** One of the best and most romantic ways to see the city.

Carriages line up on Avenida Menendez near Hypolita Street. 829-2391; [www.staugustinetransfer.com](http://www.staugustinetransfer.com)

■ **CASTILLO DE SAN MARCOS** Perched on the water guarding the city’s entrance, it’s the nation’s oldest masonry fort. 1 South Castillo Dr.; 829-6506, ext. 234; [www.nps.gov/casa/home/home.htm](http://www.nps.gov/casa/home/home.htm)

■ **FLAGLER COLLEGE** Originally the Ponce de León Hotel, the college is probably the only institution of higher learning with Tiffany glass windows in its student cafeteria.

74 King St., 829-6481; [www.flagler.edu](http://www.flagler.edu)

■ **FLAGLER MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH** Built in memory of Henry Flagler’s only daughter after she died in childbirth, it cost a then-staggering \$1 million to build in 1890. 36 Sevilla St., 829-6451; [www.memorialpcusa.org](http://www.memorialpcusa.org)

■ **LIGHTNER MUSEUM**

Another of Flagler’s former luxury hotels, it’s now a showcase for mechanical musical instruments and Tiffany glass. 75 King St., 824-2874; [www.lightnermuseum.org](http://www.lightnermuseum.org)

■ **THE OLDEST HOUSE** British attackers burned the city’s first house in 1702. Soon after, the Gonzalez-Alvarez house was rebuilt and is now the oldest house in Florida. 14 St. Francis St., 824-2872; [www.oldcity.com/oldhouse](http://www.oldcity.com/oldhouse)



**ST. GEORGE STREET:** Cycling and sights in St. Augustine.