

Discovering Amelia Island: Northeast Florida's two-in-one vacation spot



The Palace Saloon is Florida's oldest continuously operating bar, dating from 1903. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*



The Addison on Amelia Island has won numerous awards for excellence as a bed-and-breakfast. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*



The Omni Amelia Island Plantation overlooks some of the 13 miles of Atlantic Coast beaches on Amelia Island, Florida. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*



A lobster roll and shrimp basket are popular lunch choices at the casual Timoti's Seafood Shack in Fernandina Beach, Florida. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*



Julie Rodriguez whips up a Spanish Coffee at the bar in the Florida House Inn. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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I'm a sucker for buy-one-get-one-free deals when I'm shopping, but I never expected to find the same sort of offer in a vacation destination.

Then I discovered Amelia Island.

Tucked just below the Georgia border in Northeast Florida, this island the size of Manhattan splits into two types of vacation spots: a historic district on the north end, a resort area on the south. At just 13 miles long and a maximum 4 miles wide, I found it easy to dip a toe into each experience.

Blame Thomas Jefferson

Amelia Island ranks among the oldest settlements on the U.S. mainland. The first Europeans, French Huguenots, arrived in 1562 but were driven out by Spanish forces just three years later. The British came along next, naming the island for the daughter of King George II. Amelia ping-ponged between colonial powers for several years but remained a sleepy outpost until U.S. President Thomas Jefferson convinced Congress to pass the Embargo Act of 1807.

It backfired spectacularly.

With foreign trade prohibited, smugglers flocked to this northernmost port of Spanish Florida and used Native American trails to transport goods into the "back door" of the United States. That put Amelia on the map and the population boomed. Colorful characters, from ruthless pirates to uppity Victorian socialites, came and went on the only U.S. destination to exist under eight flags.

In the oldest section of the island, the harbor town of Fernandina Beach has 50+ blocks on the National Register of Historic Places. Gingerbread-laden bed-and-breakfast inns line residential streets, visitors walk past the old courthouse and customs house and may poke into old-school

Fernandina Fantastic Fudge and The Book Loft where author John Grisham, an Amelia Island resident, might be signing his most recent novel.

Drink up history with a cocktail

Florida's oldest continuously operating bar, the Palace Saloon, sits on a prominent corner. Constructed in 1878, the building housed a haberdashery until 1903 when a new owner switched to booze. His friend, the founder of the Anheuser-Busch Brewery in St. Louis, helped oversee the installation of the saloon's 40-foot bar with hand-carved mahogany caryatids. Sea captains and Rockefellers visiting from nearby Cumberland Island crossed its inlaid mosaic floors to sit below its embossed tin ceiling.

I stopped at the Palace during the Amelia Island Cocktail Tour, a bar crawl led by a guide who tells the backstories behind each establishment as well as the history of the island. On my tour, Fernandina Beach Mayor Johnny Miller was working his gig as the Palace's bartender. He whipped up a batch of Pirate's Punch with generous pours for all in our group.

We moved on to the Florida House Inn. Built in 1857 as a boarding house, it bills itself as the state's oldest hotel. We hunkered down in its Mermaid Bar known for classic prohibition-style cocktails and original libations such as its Mermaid Slap. Thankfully, we were spared such abuse by the mixologist who served us flaming Spanish coffees instead.

Cruising into Georgia

After a restful night and home-cooked breakfast at The Addison, a 14-room boutique inn comprising three antebellum-style homes surrounding a courtyard, I strolled down to the marina to catch my excursion on Amelia River Cruises.

We motored past shrimp boats, a sea captain's house used in the film "The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking" and Fort Clinch, restored to its appearance during the Civil War.

After we cruised over the Georgia border, we skirted the coast of Cumberland Island National Seashore. I spotted some of the feral horses grazing on this 36,416-acre wilderness, more than three times the size of Amelia Island. Guide Bob Chase spun stories about the Rockefeller and Carnegie families who tried to outdo each other in an outlandish show of wealth. I caught just a glimpse of the Carnegie's Greyfield Inn, a grand old hotel still overseen by the family.

Beachfront playgrounds

The accommodations on the south end of Amelia Island can't boast such a colorful history but show off with the modern amenities of upscale beach resorts.

The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island has an 18-hole championship golf course, four clay tennis courts, and a spa where one of the signature treatments is the Heaven in a Hammock massage combining touch therapy, gentle rocking and the illusion of zero gravity to echo the movements of the tide. For children, Ritz Kids has a program of supervised activities. Adults can take a kayak tour through Intracoastal Waterway salt marshes and a bike tour through American Beach, founded in 1935 as a summer escape for Blacks in the days before desegregation. Ray Charles and Louis Armstrong performed in its nightclub.

The Omni Amelia Island Plantation also has a spa, a kid's camp, kayak tours, 23 clay tennis courts, and mini-golf. Serious golfers choose between two highly rated courses, one designed by Pete Dye, the other by Tom Fazio. At the resort's Amelia's Wheels, guests can rent bicycles and Island Hopper golf carts to explore the grounds. I chose a Segway tour passing salt marshes and spreading oak trees hung with Spanish moss. At the Sunken Forest Overlook the climb up the steep stairway was worth the view of the long stretch of beach.

Amelia Island, the southernmost of the Sea Island chain of barrier islands running north into South Carolina, claims 13 miles of sandy Atlantic coastline. Beach time is a big-time activity. When not sunbathing or jogging along the edge of the surf, beach bums hunt for shells and

fossilized shark teeth, carefully avoiding the nests of sea turtles that migrate to the same spot of sand every year.

Foodie island

An established foodie destination, Amelia Island's more than 90 restaurants range from seafood shacks to fine-dining spots overseen by award-winning chefs.

On the south end of Amelia, I dined on refined Southern fare at Pogo's Kitchen named for the Pogo newspaper comic strip set in Okefenokee swamp. I saw nothing swamp-like in the décor and, instead of gator, the menu was heavy on a medley of modern flavors from Executive Chef Alan Heckman who has worked his culinary magic at New York City's James Beard House.

At Lagniappe nearby, I enjoyed the cornmeal-crust ed catfish with hoppin' john, crawfish etouffee and pickled collard greens. Chef/owner Brian Grimley, an Englishman who fell in love with Southern cooking, creates dishes influenced by cuisines in Charleston, New Orleans and Savannah.

Up north in Fernandina Beach, Espana Restaurant & Tapas makes paella from pans it imports from Spain, but I filled up on some of its hot and cold tapas washed down with homemade sangria.

It was a shorts and sandals day when I ordered at the counter at Timoti's Seafood Shak just off the main drag in Fernandina Beach. The staff patiently waited while I weighed my options of shrimp, fish tacos, oysters and clams before I finally chose a lobster roll. When my name was called, I picked up my order and headed to a table on Timoti's vintage red-brick patio. That first bite of lobster roll is one I still dream about.

- Information for this article was gathered during research trip sponsored by Amelia Island Tourist Development Council and Visit Florida.

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IF YOU GO

Amelia Island Tourist Development Council: (904) 277-0717, ameliaisland.com

Getting there: A two-hour drive from Savannah, 30 minutes from Jacksonville airport

Where to stay:

The Addison on Amelia Island, (904) 277-1604, addisononamelia.com

The Ritz-Carlton Amelia Island, (904) 277-1100, ritzcarlton.com/en/hotels/florida/amelia-island

Omniameliaslandplantation.com, (904) 261-6161, omnihotels.com/hotels/amelia-island

Cocktail tour: Amelia Island Downtown Tasting Tours, 888-446-1712, ameliaislanddowntowntastingtours.com

Amelia River Cruises: (904) 261-9972, ameliarivercruises.com

Where to eat:

Pogo's Kitchen, (904) 432-8483, pogoskitchen.com/welcome

Lagniappe, (904) 310-6049, lagniappeamelia.com/home

Espana Restaurant & Tapas, (904) 261-7700, espanadowntown.com

Timoti's Seafood Shak, (904) 310-6550, timotis.com

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