

Stepping back in time at Mission San Luis

Living history brings the past alive; the right guide can help spark a child's interest

Just off of Tennessee Street is a place where you can do a little time travel. Mission San Luis sits on a low rise at the corner of Tennessee Street and Mission Road. Once you've paid the entrance fee and crossed through the double doors, you leave the 21st century far behind – except for small reminders such as recycling bins and fire alarms that appear throughout the complex. The Mission allows visitors to explore a period in Florida's history when Spanish settlers and the indigenous people, The Apalachee Indians, lived and worked together. Several buildings representing the period have been reconstructed on the site.

The first thing you see when you step onto the curving path that takes you through the park is the large council house with its thatched roof. The large log and thatch circular building is where the Apalachee held meetings, prepared for war, and did ceremonial dances, among other activities. The building is five stories tall and 125 feet in diameter. When the Apalachee were using it, it could hold between 2,000-3,000 people at a time. It is the largest native historic period structure found to date in the Southeast.

Throughout the complex, there are buildings representative of the Spanish and Apalachee period. There is a Spanish house, the mission church, and friary. Smaller structures such as the blacksmith's shop, gardens, and an open cooking area provide visitors with a glimpse of the daily life in the Mission. Also on the grounds is a house built in the 1930s. There are many benches under shady trees throughout the grounds, so visitors can enjoy a cool drink and soak in the surroundings.

The focal point for my kids was the fort. *El Castillo de San Luis*, was built in the 1690s and burned to the ground in 1705 (the soldiers burned the fort so that invading British and Creek armies could not take it in their sweep of Spanish territories in North Florida). Part of the reason the boys enjoyed the fort is their interest in military and war history, but the guide on duty, Steve Kurisko, did a great job of engaging them.



Photos by Ginger Riggs
At left, Mission San Luis Interpreter Steve Kurisko shows a young visitor different types of arrowheads that were used by the Apalachee tribe.

Above, a hand with musical notation painted on the Friary wall.

"Have you soldiers come to eat?" a voice called out as the boys were looking at the items on the table—bowls of corn, beans, hard tack, cups and hollowed out horns, playing cards, etc.

The guide came into the dining area dressed in period clothes. He picked up a piece of hard tack (similar to a biscuit), stirred a bowl of dried beans and asked my sons again if they were hungry.

"How would you like to have this for supper?" he asked.

Both boys shook their heads and refused to sample a soldier's meal.

"Do you guys have questions for him?" I asked. I pointed to a polished cow horn on the table and nudged my younger son. "You wanted to know what that was used for didn't you?"

He nodded.

Kurisko picked up the horn and looked down inside it. He turned the horn for my younger son, Gilani, to look down into.

"It's hollow isn't it?" he asked and Gilani nodded.

"You could put something in there,

couldn't you? What do you suppose they put in that?"

"Water?" Gilani guessed and looked up at him.

"Water? Maybe." Kurisko pointed to the cups on the table. "They had cups. They *could* put water in it, but these were likely used for gunpowder."

He put the horn back on the table and then pointed to a mattress lying on a raised platform behind the table.

"That's where you're sleeping tonight, soldier," he said. Kurisko led the boys over and lifted the wool blanket and showed them how it was stuffed with moss. He explained that the early settlers of Florida tried to get rid of the bugs that live in moss by burying it for a while before using it in mattresses. A small wooden box no bigger than a computer hard drive sat on the platform next to the mattress.

"Could you fit all of your things in that?" Kurisko asked the boys. "That's an officer's box. A regular soldier wouldn't

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have had enough things to put in that box.”

He let Gilani try ringing the dinner bell and gave him a quick lesson on how sound waves travel by holding the triangle from its hook and letting the sound ring out and then showing him how holding the triangle itself dampened the noise.

Kurisko showed us the officer’s quarters, the supply room, and some of the munitions. He showed the boys the variety of materials arrowheads would have been made with during this period. Gilani and his big brother, Omar, both tried on the helmet he offered them. It was too small for Omar and too big for Gilani.

“They only came in one size,” he told them. “You just had to make due.”

Kurisko took the time to explain a little bit about the living conditions for the soldiers and the periods of both tension and cooperation between the Spanish and the Apalachee, giving us a much better understanding than we might have simply reading the signs that mark each building and area of interest. After we had explored the fort, he walked us out to the grounds and showed the boys one of the cannons on display and pointed out the numbers engraved in the iron.

“That tells you the weight of the cannon,” he said and explained that knowing the weight was necessary for transporting the cannons or fitting a ship so it wouldn’t be too heavy.

Kurisko walked us to the path that would take us over the moat. We said our goodbyes, passed by the Spanish flag, and went back down the path to the friary.

We went on a quiet day where there were only a few guides, but we did get a sense of the lives of the people who had lived there. The mission often has special events where visitors can see displays of military equipment, artisans, or reenactments. In addition to the buildings and demonstrations, there is a nature trail that features Florida wildlife and native plants and a gallery with art representative of the time period and pieces found on the site. Mission San Luis also offers a summer camp for school-age children.

For more information on Mission San Luis, including hours, admission prices, and events, please see:

<http://www.missionsanluis.org/>

— Ginger Riggs



Colonial Crafts

From Noon to 2:00 p.m. on the First



Saturday of the month, children are invited to participate in making crafts that they can then take home. Colonial Crafts is free

with admission.

- June 4: Clay pinch pots
- July 2: Beaded Bracelets
- August 6: Animal Masks
- September 3: Corn Husk Dolls
- October 1: Blessing of Animals Event
- November 5: Painted Majolica Tiles
- December 3: Pomanders

Source: <http://www.missionsanluis.org/>

Top: The interior of the Apalachee Council House. The Apalachee used the council house for many things including political and social events. **Center:** A cabinet in the Spanish house with pottery and dishes. **Bottom:** the interior of the fort. **In the information box:** The Spanish flag as it looked in the colonial era hangs outside the fort.

Photos by Ginger Riggs