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## TRAVEL

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

### Southern exposure

#### Florida is more than Disney World

By: Lindor Reynolds  
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TALLAHASSEE, Florida — The history of Florida did not begin when Walt Disney built his tourist magnet nor when the first car was driven at Daytona Beach. The state has a rich backstory, one that gets plenty of play in this southern area, a region where accents are sensual and proud tales told with more vigour than they would be up north.

Tallahassee, the improbably located state capital, is part of the Forgotten Coast, a vibrant city that boasts both a Spanish mission dating back to 1656 and the legacy of Luella Knott, a society lady who fought hard (and successfully) for prohibition at the turn of the last century.

History isn't told in neon lights or pastel buildings here.

The freshly renovated 24,000-square-foot Mission San Luis visitors' centre sets the stage for history of the region. It was an active mission from 1656 to 1704, home to Apalachee Indians and Spanish residents. There are reconstructed buildings, costumed interpreters and archaeological displays.



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'There's a sense that forever waits on the other side of the horizon'  
(LINDOR.REYNOLDS@FREEPRESS.MB.CA)



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Alligators lurk on the road to St. Mark's lighthouse.  
(LINDOR.REYNOLDS@FREEPRESS.MB.CA)



Indians and Spanish residents. There are reconstructed buildings, costumed interpreters and archeological displays.

In a wonderful Florida touch, the "wooden" fence around the garrison is actually a weatherproof Disney design.

Unusual for these sort of living-history museums, the interpreters are really working. The blacksmith makes nails; the cook is preparing soup from the vegetables in her gardens and eggs from the chickens that run through her yard. It's completely charming.

The historical theme continues at the Museum of Florida History, a 52-acre centre that blends nature, wildlife and culture. You'll be introduced to the story of Prince and Princess Murat, a tale that causes some native Floridians to snicker. You can choose to believe any version but the official word is the honorary prince was born in Paris, exiled to Austria, and eventually moved to the United States. He ended up in Florida.

His future wife was the great-grandniece of George Washington.

Murat was a man-about-town, sometimes considered a rogue and desired because of his tenuous link to royalty. He ultimately became the namesake of the one-star Prince Murat Motel. Online reviews are not kind.

The museum began as an attraction for schoolchildren, with its birds, animals and interactive displays. But the 150,000 annual visitors now span all age groups interested in what Florida looked like before they paved the swamps and caused the indigenous people to disappear.

Most here claim the Indians welcomed the Spanish.

"I think it gives people a grounded sense of places," museum spokesman Russell Dawes says. "People forget that this is what Florida used to look like."

Even more impressive is the drive out of town to St. Mark's lighthouse, a palmetto-lined road where alligators lurk. For the adventurous, there's a 14-mile bike trail. A swamp waits on either side of the narrow road and a spit of beach invites you to watch the sun set. There's a sense that forever waits



[Enlarge Image](#)

St. Marks Wildlife Refuge. (MARK LANE PHOTO)

## IF YOU GO

### TALLAHASSEE

#### Where to stay:

Hotel Duval, 414 N. Monroe St. (850 224-6000)

New management has transformed a pedestrian joint into a stylish boutique hotel. The main gimmick? Floors have different colour themes with matching scents piped into the hallways. The rooms are large, the bathroom features a soothing rain shower and pebbled flooring. The rooftop bar is lively.

At an average of US\$129 a night, this place is a steal.

#### Where to eat:

Harry's Seafood, Bar and Grille, 301 S. Bronough St. (850 222-3976)

Harry's is a seven-restaurant chain that hasn't sacrificed quality for volume. The crab cakes and red beans and rice let your mouth know you're in the South.

Kool Beanz, 921 Thomasville Road

It's small, it's crowded, it's loud and they don't take reservations. None of that matters in this lively restaurant, filled with a mix of university students and people who could be their parents. The rare tuna steak is exquisite.

### PANAMA CITY BEACH:

#### Where to stay:

The Legacy By The Sea Resorts: There's nothing spectacular at this place except the size of the suites and the price. OK: and the full kitchen and waterfront location. Business has been slow due to the economy and there are price breaks. A two-bedroom penthouse suite that

on either side of the narrow road and a spit of beach invites you to watch the sun set. There's a sense that forever waits on the other side of the horizon.

At St. Mark's Smokehouse and Oyster Bar, Bethany Pyles slaps down a dozen lightly steamed oysters and a beer. She has advice for shellfish virgins.

"They're good in all the months that has a 'y' in them," she claims.

Note to self: Avoid June, March, April, August, September, November, December. Second note to self: Never try to prove your toughness by eating many nearly raw things accompanied by cold beer.

Back in town, the Florida State Museum is a wonderful, cockeyed place where the relationship between dinosaurs and the state is explained, the impact of coral reefs, hurricanes and pirates covered, and Florida's agricultural history summarized.

It's a fun place. There's a stack of orange crates covered in advertisements. There's an explanation about how the auto industry began to boom but the first tourists had no hotels, bathrooms or gas stations. The museum has a Tin Can camper, a vehicle with a built-in bed and cans for food. It's the earliest Airstream.

Tallahassee, as previously mentioned, is the state capital. Depending who you talk to, the location was chosen in the spirit of compromise, dumb luck or mischance. In fact, it was halfway between St. Augustine and Pensacola, then separate capitals.

As part of that fateful decision, an official capitol building was built in 1845 and renovated in 1902. The distinctive red and white awnings were added. The building has now been restored.

Under the guidance of Andy Edel, the tour is fascinating. There are the shoes worn by the late governor Lawton Chiles as he walked across the state. There's a former bathroom door marked "White Ladies." There's a room devoted to the antipathy that arose during the Bush/Gore election debacle.

A two-bedroom penthouse suite that would hold a large family is US\$229. Rooms can be had for as low as \$79 in the off-season.

**Where to eat:** Pier 77, 3016 Thomas Drive

This is one of those insider places that doesn't look like much from outside (or inside, for that matter) but has some of the best food you'll find.

Owner Sandy Arnold feels free to guide your order. Listen to her. The she-crab soup is a wonderful blend of chunks of crab, cream and spices. The cheese grits are lovely and warm. The broiled grouper is rightfully famous. Best of all? The main courses are almost all under \$20. If you get there early, they'll feed you a twilight special for 10 bucks.

For more information:  
[www.VISITFLORIDA.com](http://www.VISITFLORIDA.com)

The "new" capitol complex, with a 22-storey executive tower and domed House and Senate chambers on the north and south, began construction in 1970. Locals swear there's a phallic appearance to the structure. This is not something you would mention in polite company.

If you're interested in more Florida history, tours of the Governor's Mansion are available. Carol Beck, the most gracious host any of us could meet, welcomes the chance to further explain the history of her state and this grand house. It's now home to Gov. Charlie Christ and first lady Carole Rome.

The mansion is 13,000-square-feet set on five acres. There are three floors, with only the first accessible to the public. The formal dining room is used "constantly," Beck says. "Mansions really do tell a lot about our country," she adds.

If you can tear yourself away from the culture, universities, football and history of Tallahassee, Panama City Beach is an

easy drive away. The town is exactly how we stereotype Florida: gun shops, tattoo parlours, cheap booze and free crabs with every T-shirt purchased.

There's mini-golf. We can't forget mini-golf.

But there's more to it than the tacky tourist demands. There's a lovely beach suitable for strolling, sunbathing and gentle body surfing. And there's a real Panama City Beach, a historic main centre with gingerbread houses and commerce. That's where they keep the locals. It's a 30-minute drive from the beach area.

The biggest listed attraction is Pier Park, a 900,000-square-foot mall. If shopping's not your thing, the Russell Fields City Pier is right across the street. People gather at sunset to thank their lucky stars.

St. Andrews National Park is a chance to get up close and personal with nature. The beach is great and deer wander across the roads.

Best of all for Canadians, the new international airport will offer direct flights from Canada.

"Our branding is 'real, real fun beach.'" says Dan Rowe, CEO of the Panama City Beach convention and visitors bureau. "You can have a really fun time here. Our philosophy here is more Alabama and Georgia than Florida. The Southern hospitality is something you will find here. It's alive and well here."

Here, and in Tallahassee.

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