



Pensacola Bay on the Gulf Coast



Flagler College's courtyard in St Augustine

# Viva tourism!

To celebrate 500 years of European history this year, Florida has launched Viva Florida 500. *Katherine Lawrey* heads north of the state on the history trail

Used to think US history began in Jamestown and Plymouth in the early 1600s. But the origins go back further than that to 1513 when Juan Ponce de Leon was the first European to set foot on US soil. His convoy of Spanish explorers came ashore north of St Augustine and named the area "La Florida".

This year Florida is marking this event in a big way, with the state wide initiative, Viva Florida 500.

To learn more about the 500 years of history that followed the arrival of the Spanish, I make my way across north Florida, from St Augustine to Pensacola via Tallahassee. From the

UK it's possible to fly with Delta via Atlanta to Jacksonville, which is a 40-minute drive to St Augustine.

The north of Florida is different from the south, which is more known to Brits because of Orlando and Miami. Valeria Palmertree from the Pensacola Bay Area Convention & Visitors Bureau tells me: "The further north you go in Florida, the closer you get to southern hospitality." This makes sense given that New Orleans is a three-hour drive from her city.

## La Florida

St Augustine is the oldest European settlement to be continuously

occupied in continental US, founded by Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1565. Dana Ste Clare, director of the St Augustine 450th Commemoration, jokes: "When the pilgrims landed in Plymouth, St Augustine was up for urban renewal."

Today St Augustine is a charming small city, with historic houses and

romantic pubs. During the holiday season (November 17 to January 31) the city twinkles with thousands of white lights, which makes my night time tram tour a starry-eyed experience. One of St Augustine's most notable buildings is Flagler College, a luxury hotel from the late 19th century and now a private educational institution. It's open for tours so I pop into the grand-looking dining room, where the students are tucking into brunch. The main college door never closes - a tribute to founder Henry Flagler **Turn to 38**



Three Conquistadors re-enact Juan Ponce de Leon's landing



## TTG Features Florida

### Updates

Orlando offers from **Getabed** include Orlando Disney Area Executive Villas, starting from £16pp per night on a room-only basis (based on four adults sharing) and free welcome packs worth \$65 at select Orlando villas (including Disney Area Villas).  
 ■ [getabed.co.uk](http://getabed.co.uk)



**Greater Fort Lauderdale CVB** distributed 10,000 giveaways of ice scrapers, sunglasses and lip balms at Canary Wharf in London (above) last month to encourage workers to defrost their swimsuit and head for the sunny climes of Fort Lauderdale. Alfredo Gonzalez, vice-president of international sales, reported that UK arrivals increased by 4% in 2012, compared with 2011.  
 ■ [sunny.org](http://sunny.org)

With seven types of convertibles, German and US cars available, **Affordable Car Hire** has deals from just £15 a day in Florida. Sunshine State Specials include free additional driver, upgrades and one-ways hires, zero excess and on or off-airport pick-ups.  
 ■ [affordablecarhire.com](http://affordablecarhire.com)

All agents making a booking to **Legoland Florida** with **Attraction World** by March 31 will be entered in a prize draw to win a pair of Merlin Annual Passes.  
 ■ [attractionworld.com](http://attractionworld.com)

who wanted everyone to feel welcome at his hotel.

Across the street is Villa Zorayda, built in 1883 as the winter residence for Franklin Waldo Smith, a wealthy Bostonian. It is now owned by Marcia Byles, the grand daughter of another previous owner, Abraham S Mussallem, who has taken great care to restore the Alhambra Palace-inspired villa. Marcia and husband James show me around the building, which is packed with treasures from around the world, including the 2,400-year-old "Sacred Cat Rug", made from the hairs of cats that roamed the river Nile. It's said to possess a curse for anyone who walks on it - luckily for me, it's pinned to the wall.

I also visit the St Augustine Pirate Museum, a treasure chest of blood-curdling stories and interactive exhibits, such as an original Jolly Roger flag and one of the world's



Grits a Ya Ya is a Southern special



St Augustine Pirate Museum



After 177 steps the views from Pensacola Lighthouse are immense

oldest "most wanted" posters. But I'm shocked to discover that English hero Sir Francis Drake was viewed as a pirate by the rest of the world!

### On a history mission

St Augustine has beaches and golf courses, but I continue on the history trail to Tallahassee, three hours' drive away. It would be easy to dismiss this city as simply a state capital, and for some the lure of Gulf Coast beaches will be too great, but those who tarry a while will find an authentic city being regenerated.

**In Tallahassee I visit Mission San Luis, which was home to more than 1,400 Apalachee Indians and Spaniards between 1656 and 1704. Florida had more than 100 Spanish colonial missions but this is the only one that has been reconstructed and is open to the public. Living history interpreters in period costume show me around the site, which includes a big round thatched Apalachee council house, a Franciscan church, Spanish residential area and a military fort. There are also blacksmithing demonstrations and I shoot arrows at the archery range - but I'm not up to the Apalachee's standard of 20 arrows a minute.**

In the centre of town, Tallahassee's Museum of Florida History starts with the Ice Age and a skeleton of a giant mastodon, and takes visitors all the way up to the Second World War and the origins of tourism in the state. It's very visual for children, with reconstructions of a 16th century Spanish ship, an early 1900s Florida riverboat and citrus-packing house, and a vintage "Tin Can" camper among other exhibits.

I check into Hotel Duval, a historic boutique property with one of the best views in town - the rooftop open-air Level 8 Lounge. After a sundowner here, I have dinner five minutes' walk away at the funky Avenue Eat & Drink, which offers a Southern-inspired menu relying on local produce, and end the night with live music at Mockingbird. If your clients are only passing through Tallahassee, make sure they know about Paisley Cafe, which operates on the rule of seven **Turn to 40** ▶



## TTG Features Florida

ingredients or less. I will dream about the Lobster Benedict and Guinness Chocolate Cake I eat here for a long time.

### Gulf coastal delights

One of north-west Florida's biggest draws is its white sand beaches lining emerald waters and in Pensacola, history gives me the perfect vantage point for the Gulf coastline. The Pensacola Lighthouse, first lit in 1859, is located on Naval Air Station Pensacola, but anyone can drive on the base, provided you show a passport or driving licence. It's 177 steps to the top of the lighthouse and the view is immense. If you time it right, you might even eyeball a pilot taking off on a training mission as tours can be booked when the Blue Angels (the US equivalent of the Red Arrows) are on practice. The site also houses Fort Barrancas and the National Naval Aviation Museum.

Pensacola was actually founded earlier than St Augustine, in 1559, but growth was thwarted by wars



Stylish suites at the five-star Hotel Duval in Tallahassee

and hurricanes. I take a walking tour of Historic Pensacola Village, a collection of buildings and museums, many with clues to life in bygone days. The 1805 Lavalle House has a bed with springs made of rope and the 1871 Dorr House human-hair artwork.

Pensacola's resort area is an island reached by a three-mile long bridge - I'm unpacking at the Hilton Pensacola Beach when I'm stopped in my tracks by a ruby orange sun slowly sinking into the sea.

My final meal in Florida is a feast at Pensacola's dockside Fish House and, as I tuck into pecan-crusted

mahi mahi and smoked Gouda cheese grits, I'm grateful to Juan Ponce de Leon and his Spanish compatriots for their pioneering ways. Like the fish on my plate, north Florida definitely has me hooked.

**Book it:** America As You Like It offers a seven-night package to northern Florida from £1,225pp, based on two sharing. Price includes Delta Air Lines flights from Heathrow, car hire, three nights at the Hilton St Augustine, one night at Hotel Duval, Tallahassee and three nights at the Hilton Pensacola Beach.

■ [americaasyoulikeit.com](http://americaasyoulikeit.com)

## 60 SECONDS WITH...



### ANDY TRAVIS

National sales manager, Funway Holidays



### HOW IS FUNWAY'S FLORIDA PROGRAMME DEVELOPING?

We have just split our Florida programme into Orlando and Florida Beaches brochures, so we can give our beaches programme more focus.

### HOW ARE FLORIDA SALES?

Florida is doing well this year - sales at the end of January were 45% up on the same time last year.

### ANY TRADE INCENTIVES?

Yes, any agents who make Florida beach bookings before the end of March can earn up to £100 in Love2Shop vouchers. Email booking references to [agencysales@funway.co.uk](mailto:agencysales@funway.co.uk).

### UPCOMING CAMPAIGNS?

We are partners with Disney for a 'Monster Deals' campaign, with savings on hotels, Disney Dining Plans and Ultimate Tickets ahead of the release of Monsters Inc 2.

### WHAT'S THE BENEFIT OF TIPTO FOR YOU?

Funway doesn't have a huge sales team, so it's about the volume of agents we see at events and our ability to place adverts and offers on [tipto.co.uk](http://tipto.co.uk)

## KEY VIVA FLORIDA 500 DATES

### Picasso: Art & Arena Exhibition

Collection of dozens of Picasso originals, including many that have never been seen in the US. The exhibition is on display at the St Augustine Visitor Information Center until May 11.

■ [staugustine-450.com](http://staugustine-450.com)

### Re-enactment of the landing of Juan Ponce de Leon

On Tuesday April 3, costumed interpreters will land on Melbourne Beach from a replica ship. They will be followed by an Air Force flyover, with 21-gun salute. A sculpture installation of Ponce de Leon will be unveiled to mark the landing place.

■ [floridashistoriccoast.com](http://floridashistoriccoast.com)

### Re-enactment of Sir Francis Drake's raid on St Augustine

English raiders under Sir Francis Drake's command will rampage through the streets of St Augustine



on June 2 in a re-enactment of Drake's attack (*above*) in 1586 when 2,000 Englishmen fired canons on the city, stormed through the streets and burned St Augustine to the ground.

■ [drakesraid.com](http://drakesraid.com)

### St Augustine's Fourth of July Celebration

Spectacular fireworks will burst above the ancient Castillo de San Marcos and reflect in the waters of Matanzas Bay. The show will be accompanied by a soundtrack of patriotic music. For the best view head to the bay front

between the Castillo and the Bridge of Lions.

### Giving Thanks: 17th-century Apalachee & Spanish Foodways

On Saturday November 30, learn how foods from the New and Old Worlds came together to create a cross-cultural cuisine. There will be demonstrations of food preparation by interpreters in period dress (*below*).

■ [missionsanluis.org](http://missionsanluis.org)

