Examples of St. Augustine's varied architecture include the Spanish-style Cathedral-Basilica of St. Augustine (top); the dramatic Flagler Memorial Presbyterian Church (center left and bottom right); the late seventeenth-century Castillo de San Marco (center, second from right); and the ornate former Ponce de León Hotel, which now houses Flagler College (bottom left).

Spires, Steeples, & Stucco

On the trail of St. Augustine's architectural jewels

by Chelle Koster Walton

I browsed splendid art-glass creations in a Spanish Colonial–style home on St. George Street. Across the way, I toured a shrine devoted to the history and heritage of St. Augustine's Greeks in North America's earliest surviving house of worship, built circa 1735. I later shopped for antiques and had lunch in the deep end of what was once the largest indoor pool in America. I then toured a college that occupies a former Spanish Renaissance–style grand hotel. After paying respects in a heavily ornate Venetian Renaissance Presbyterian church, I had dinner in a hotel built in 1888 to imitate Moorish architecture, sipped in a winery occupying a circa-1923 building, then lay my head down in a Victorian home–turned-inn built in 1918.

St. Augustine architecture is remarkable enough for its sheer magnitude and range, but even more so for its accessibility. In America's oldest city, you get to live the past rather than just admiring it from afar. For lovers of architecture, the experience compares to a sugar addict's visit to a sweets shop. There's eye candy to behold at every step, from the ancient dwellings and fortifications of the Spanish, who first settled the city in the sixteenth century, to the Gilded Age and Victorian gems that sparked its architectural renaissance.

One can find nearly every element of architecture along the old, unevenly cobbled lanes of the earliest bayside settlement and the newer streets on the historic district's west side, where railroad builder Henry Flagler single-handedly made the most enormous contribution to the town's architectural legacy. Turrets, parapets, battlements, quatrefoils, dentil molding, shake siding, jigsaw trim, columns, pilasters, fanlights, rose windows—it's a veritable living architectural lexicon.

Stroll the narrow streets in the footsteps of Spanish soldiers, British pirates, corseted wenches, Minorcan laborers, resplendent Victorian dames, handsome sea captains, blacksmiths, fishermen, and weavers. Don't be spooked if you spy some of these characters out of the corner of your eye. Yes, St. Augustine bears a reputation for ghosts, but these apparitions are flesh and blood, reenactors who walk the streets and demonstrate at the Colonial Spanish Quarter Museum and Castillo de San Marco.

Life and architecture in St. Augustine began well before the building of Castillo de San Marco, the coquina (or coral limestone) fort that has withstood the onslaughts of man and nature since the late 1600s. Pedro Menendez de Aviles and his entourage settled here as early as the mid-1500s, planting a cross at Mission of Nombre de Dios and building America's first chapel. (Bishop Augustin Verot, Florida's first bishop, later rebuilt the current stone version of the chapel in 1875.) Early Spanish thatch-and-wood structures, however, were blown away by hurricanes or burned down during attacks from Sir Francis Drake and other British marauders. Thus, the building of the massive fort. Twenty years ago, historians estimated that if one were to have constructed the same fort during the 1980s, it would have cost more than $80 million to build.

To properly begin an architectural tour of the Old City, one starts here, at the northeast point of the district. The fort's trademark turrets strongly resemble its contemporary bastions built in Puerto Rico and Cuba. Exhibits within the fort's walls illustrate one of St. Augustine's most volatile
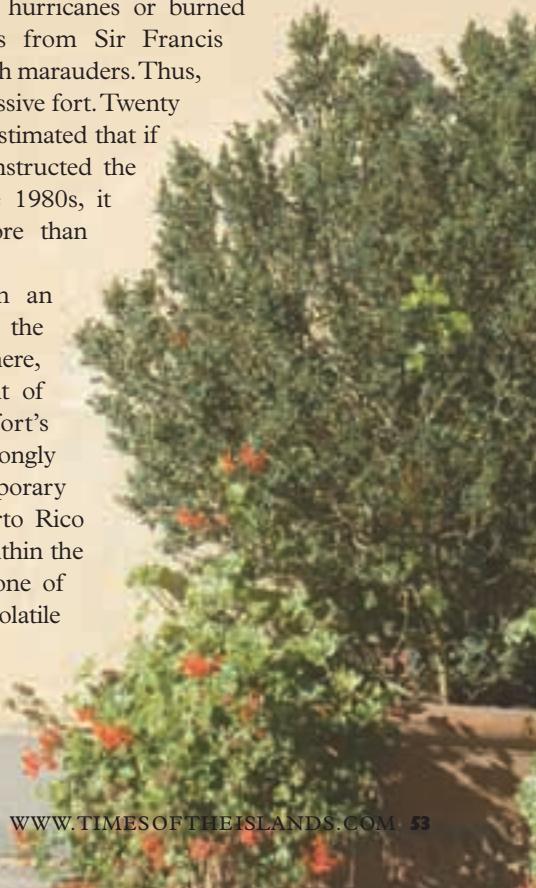
periods, when British troops from the Carolinas made steady attacks on the town's impenetrable fort and city walls, the gates of which still stand nearby. (The living museum at the Spanish Quarter takes you to that era—the 1740s—through its reconstructed and historic structures, from thatched huts to original colonial homes.)

With the building of the fort, the colonial era in St. Augustine entered its Coquina Age, and about thirty of the structures built around the turn of the eighteenth century have survived, among them the so-called Oldest House, where you can step into a different time and place to learn how a one-story, two-room Spanish home evolved over the eras.

The Brits finally did get their hands on the coveted little colony of St. Augustine, but not by war strategies. They traded the Spaniards Cuba for St. Augustine and promptly occupied the town for twenty years, between 1763 and 1784.

While in town, they turned an old Franciscan monastery into the St. Francis Barracks, today headquarters for the Florida National Guard. They took over the coquina and stucco Spanish homes built to replace the first batch of wood-and-thatch buildings. To the structural elements, the British added fireplaces, glass windows, and second stories with balconies. As in the Oldest House, known also as the Gonzalez-Alvarez House, the layers of St. Augustine history are reflected in the architecture. Every house along these streets has at least two stories to tell, and their names usually describe the most important in the home's lineage of owners. During Britain's short reign, the key contribution to the architectural landscape (unless you consider the forty pubs built then as "key") was Trinity Episcopal Church, whose most notable features are its floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows, one of which Louis Comfort Tiffany crafted.

Then the Spanish, who had migrated to Cuba, returned, and most of the historic district's colonial architecture sprang from their reign of 1784 to 1821, during the days before Florida became a U.S. territory. A remnant from that page of St. Augustine history is the Oldest Schoolhouse, the town's oldest surviving wood-frame building now put to use as a museum attraction geared toward children. The most important construction of the era, the Cathedral of St. Augustine, survives in part. Much of it burned in 1887 and was reconstructed with the current bell tower, pilasters, and mission facade of Spanish Colonial Renaissance style under the direction of architect James Renwick, who also designed New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral.

The year 1887 marks, too, the genesis of St. Augustine's architectural renewal, when Standard Oil partner Flagler came to town to honeymoon with his second wife and to retire. Instead, at age fifty-four, he began a second career as a developer of railroads and grand hotels. At the time, he was impressed by a new home built by Boston architect Franklin W. Smith and modeled after a wing of the Alhambra Palace in Spain. Villa Zorayda, as it was called, was the first in St. Augustine constructed of a new material called poured concrete, which was made to look like the local coquina buildings at a fraction of the cost.

At the same time, Smith was building Casa Monica Hotel, and Flagler was again intrigued by its exotic Moorish Revival architecture. He commissioned young architects Thomas Hastings and John M. Carrere to build across the street the Ponce de León Hotel, a marvel of Byzantine spires, red tile–roofed gables, elegantly arched windows, chimneys, domes, loggias, Tiffany windows and chandeliers, and balconies fashioned in Spanish Renaissance style. And St. Augustine's Gilded Age and Florida's first fancy resort town were off and running.

Flagler's Alcazar Hotel, next to the Casa Monica, quickly followed, and shortly after he purchased the Casa Monica to add to his collection. On the hotels' heels, Flagler and his interests erected the baroquely rich Flagler Memorial Presbyterian Church (where Flagler, his wife, and daughter lie at rest), the Grace United Methodist Church in the same Spanish Renaissance style as Ponce de León Hotel, and, in Romanesque Revival style, the rotund-towered Ancient City Baptist Church.

The African-American craftsmen Flagler brought to St. Augustine to create his visions had their own impact on residential architecture. The Historic Lincolnville District, a few blocks from Flagler's hotels, is being recognized and painstakingly restored for the Victorian and arts-and-crafts vernacular homes the craftsmen built for their families. Beau Redmond, one in a burgeoning community of local artists, captures the spirit and architecture of the district in his edgy paintings.

With St. Augustine firmly established as an architectural treasure trove, building in the old city continued along classic

Castillo de San Marco has anchored St. Augustine since the late 1600s (top and bottom left); Henry Flagler admired and imitated the Moorish Revival style of the Casa Monica Hotel, which once again offers elegant accommodations (bottom right and opposite right); the Victorian-style Carriage Way bed-and-breakfast dates from the 1880s (opposite left).

Constructed of red cedar and cypress, the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse was built during the early 18th century (top); a canopy of old magnolia trees arches over the aptly named Magnolia Avenue (bottom); the Flagler Memorial Presbyterian Church is an example of the Venetian Renaissance style (opposite left); the circa-1868 waterfront Plaza Building is home to the A1A Ale Works restaurant (opposite right).
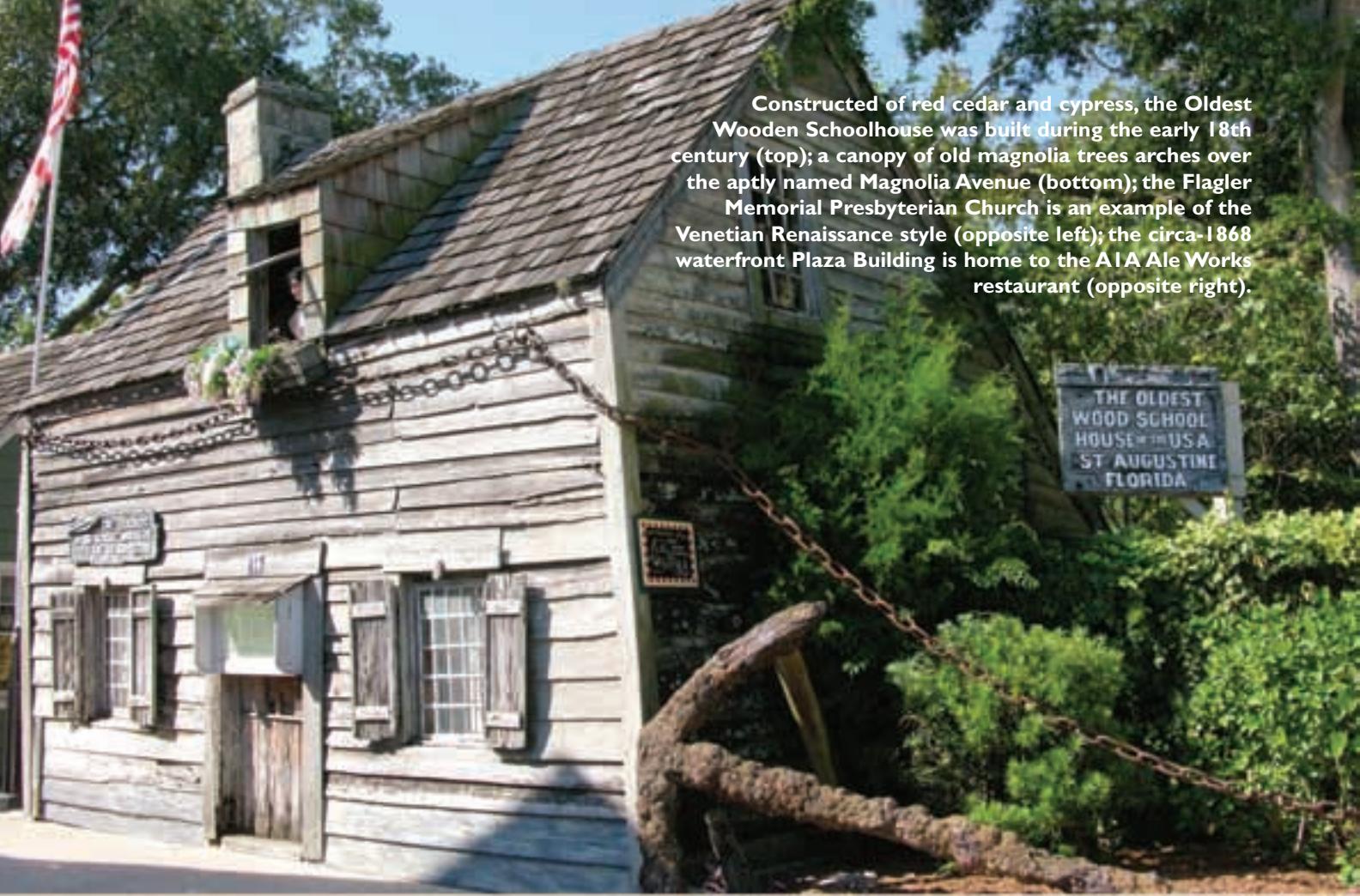
If You Go

Attractions

Cathedral-Basilica of St. Augustine, 904-824-2806
Colonial Spanish Quarter, 904-825-6830, www.historic staugustine.com/csq/history.html
Oldest House, 904-825-2333, www.staugustinehistoricalsociety.org
Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, 888-653-7245, www.oldest woodenschoolhouse.com/index.htm
Old Florida Museum, 800-813-3208, www.oldfloridamuseum.com
Old St. Augustine Village, 904-823-9722, www.old-staug-village.com
Ripley's Sightseeing Trains, 800-829-6545, www.redtrains.com
San Sebastian Winery, 888-352-9463, www.sansebastianwinery.com
St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine,
904-829-8205, www.stphotios.com

Accommodations

Bayfront Westcott House, 800-513-9814, www.westcotthouse.com
Casa Monica Hotel, 800-648-1888, www.casamonica.com
Inn on Charlotte, 800-355-5508, www.innoncharlotte.com
Inns of Elegance, www.innsofelegance.com
St. Francis Inn, 800-824-6062, www.stfrancisinn.com

Dining

95 Cordova, 904-810-6810, www.95cordova.com
Café Alcazar, 904-824-7813
Columbia Restaurant, 904-824-3341, www.columbiarestaurant.com
Palm Café & Bakery, 904-825-4065
Prince of Wales Restaurant, 904-810-5725
Spanish Bakery, 904-471-3046

BOTTOM PHOTO BY THERESA MCKEON; OTHER PHOTOS BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

lines, with flashes of Queen Anne, French, Greek Revival, and Mediterranean style. Today, as you zigzag along the pedestrian way of St. George Street, main thoroughfare King Street, and through backstreets and alleys, it's like leafing randomly through an architectural tome. With all the gems treated as everyday buildings, the result is a European flavor one finds nowhere else in Florida.

Many of the vintage buildings along St. George Street hold one-of-a-kind shops, galleries, and eateries. Ponce de León Hotel is now home to Flagler College, and the Alcazar holds the eclectic Lightner Museum Gilded Age collection and its indoor swimming pool–turned–retail complex containing Café Alcazar. Casa Monica has been restored and reopened to its original use as elegant accommodations, but it is definitely not the only place where modern-day visitors can fall asleep in past tense.

Nearly thirty bed-and-breakfast inns have taken up residence in buildings as old as the circa-1791 Spanish Colonial St. Francis Inn, which claims to be the city's oldest lodging, and in newer gems such as the Victorian circa-1880 Bayfront Westcott House and the vernacular Inn on Charlotte, built in 1918. The inns impart a true sense of the past fused with the utmost conveniences of the present. A subgroup of seven B&Bs known as the Inns of Elegance in particular heighten the St. Augustine experience with luxury from both the then and now—claw-foot bathtubs, working fireplaces, flat-screen TVs, jetted tubs, and gourmet breakfasts.

Dining out, too, can bring a sense of place in ways that go beyond historic settings. Taste the Spanish in St. Augustine's heritage, for instance, at the Spanish Bakery, where cooks use heirloom recipes, and at Columbia Restaurant, where you can relish Spanish food in a Spanish-style courtyard. If you'd rather, dine in the British tradition on beef and Guinness pie or fish and chips at Prince of Wales Restaurant. Modern American cuisine is easy to find, and 95 Cordova at Casa Monica excels on the fine side. One of the newest bright spots on St. George Street is Palm Café & Bakery. In addition, French, Italian, Greek, Mexican, Low Country, Cajun, and Florida Cracker influences flavor the cuisine scene in and around the Old City.

Plan on spending a few days walking St. Augustine, recently selected by AAA travel editors as one of the ten most "walkable" cities in North America. Or take a sightseeing tour for a quick overview and to help plan how to budget your time in a destination where there are centuries-worth of things to see. The sightseeing train allows you to de-board and reboard at will. Walking tours specialize in subjects such as colonial settlement, women in history, the Flagler era, and the city's ghostly reputation. For romance, try a horse-drawn buggy tour.

If you are architecturally avid, a number of sights qualify as musts, and many of the ancient homes are open to touring. My highest recommendations: the Ponce de León Hotel tour (conducted by Flagler College students), the Lightner Museum, the Oldest House Museum (which contains several historic structures), Castillo de San Marco, and Old St. Augustine Village (occupying a city block and covering several eras).

Families will want to hit the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, the hands-on Old Florida Museum, Ripley's Believe It or Not! Museum (this is the original Ripley's attraction, lodged in a vintage hotel once owned by novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings), and the interactive Colonial Spanish Quarter.

Engage kids in learning the extreme architecture of St. Augustine with "treasure hunts" for architectural elements. Review them ahead—http://architecture.about.com/library/bl-glossary.htm is a good reference Web site—or have them take pictures and identify them in a book or online after your travels.

No matter what your age, it's easy to get caught up in the excitement of what's old in a place where the past lives, breathes, and so aptly lends itself to the here and now. ✾

Times of the Islands travel and cuisine editor Chelle Koster Walton *has written thousands of articles on Florida travel, history, arts, and cuisine for publications and organizations such as* The Miami Herald, St. Petersburg Times, *Away.com, and Visit Florida. She is author of eight travel guidebooks.*