

TRAVEL

First
in

COURTESY OF JACKSONVILLE AND THE BEACHES CONVENTION VISITORS BUREAU

In the zoo:
The 61-acre Jacksonville Zoological Park in Jacksonville, Fla., is home to more than 700 animals and birds, including Chilean and American flamingos.

FLORIDA

Enjoy Jacksonville's uncrowded beaches year-round

BY RUTH REJNIS
NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE

Although 2.6 million visitors poured into the city last year — many of them through the two dozen entrances into Jacksonville from Interstate 95 — the city has never had the cachet of the tourist meccas farther south.

About 25 miles south of the Georgia border, Jacksonville is 350 miles north of Miami and does not have that area's tropical climate; it felt none of the fury of Hurricane Andrew.

In winter the temperatures can be a little nippy for snowbirds, even if the chill lasts only a few weeks and certainly isn't cold by northern standards.

The flip side to having motorists barrel right by you is that sunning and bicycling can be enjoyed year-round on the area's wide, clean and uncrowded beaches and, though summer is the high season, there is usually ocean bathing through October.

Fall and winter can be good for golf. Average lows in the winter months are 42 degrees, with highs

in the mid- to upper 60s. There is a sense of the real Florida here too, devoid of theme parks and traffic jams. The area is rife with state parks, nature trails, pine wilderness and, especially, water.

The St. Johns River, at 275 miles the longest river wholly in Florida, bisects the city, and there are numerous other rivers, creeks and streams as well as, of course, the ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway.

Jacksonville and St. Augustine, about 30 miles south, are often referred to as the First Coast. First because this area is often a motorist's introduction to Florida. But there is also its history.

Jacksonville, named in 1822 for Gen. Andrew Jackson, was first inhabited by the Timucua Indians who lived along its waterways. In 1564 the Huguenots built Fort Caroline, the first Protestant colony in the United States here. The French soon lost that foothold in America, however, to the Spanish, who destroyed the fort.

In 1605 the Spanish built the

colony of St. Augustine, which became America's first permanent European settlement, now usually called America's oldest city.

Jacksonville, known here as Jax, is spread over 834 square miles and is the nation's third largest city in area after Juno and Anchorage, Alaska.

Called by some Florida's business center for its many insurance and banking offices and headquarters, the city's population grew by almost 25 percent over the last decade, thanks to business expansion and the many new companies moving into the area.

The city also has several well-regarded hospitals and medical centers, including one of only two branches of the Mayo Clinic outside Rochester, Minn.

Three military installations, including the Mayport Naval Station, home of the aircraft carrier Saratoga, round out a diverse economy, and a variety of attractions that include a jazz festival.

Sights

The Jacksonville Landing of-

fers retail shops, sit-down restaurants, a food court and several pushcart vendors. There's often live music in the evening and at lunch hour.

On the west side of the city, along a portion of St. Johns Avenue, The Shops of Avondale offers about 60 specialty stores and restaurants in restored buildings.

There is an abundance of high-end antique and gift shops here, the latter featuring an interesting array of furnishings for warm-weather climates. While there, old-house buffs can admire the many handsome homes of this historic district, most of which date from the early days of the century.

On the south bank of the St. Johns, across from Jacksonville Landing, is the Riverwalk, a 1.1-mile boardwalk offering magnificent views of the city's skyline. Behind the boardwalk are office buildings, restaurants and a few shops. The Museum of Science and History, 1025 Museum Circle, (904) 398-7022, and the Alexander Brest Planetarium, 1025

Museum Circle, (904) 398-7827, are at the western border of the Riverwalk. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for senior citizens and children from 4 to 12 years of age. That covers entrance to both the museum and planetarium. Hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday 1 to 6 p.m. The museum is scheduled to be closed until Sept. 25 for annual repairs.

Sixty-seat water taxis running every 20 minutes offer visitors a breezy ride from the Landing to one of three stops along the Riverwalk. Round trip: \$3.

About 10 miles north of the downtown area the 61-acre Jacksonville Zoological Park — 8605 Zoo Road, (904) 757-4460, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily — features rides on a miniature train around the grounds, a boardwalk through Florida wetlands, a petting zoo and a high wooden boardwalk above an "African" veld, an 11-acre savannah that includes ostriches, gazelles and antelopes. Among its more than 700 ani-

mals are rare scimitars and one of the few families of marabou storks raising offspring in captivity in this country. Admission: \$4 for adults; \$2.50 for children 12 and under; \$3 for senior citizens 65 and older.

The beach communities of Atlantic Beach (somewhat arty), Neptune Beach (residential) and Jacksonville Beach (the largest), and a mix of both, plus the usual food stands, surf shops, etc., known as the Beaches, lie 12 miles east of downtown and run about 15 miles along the ocean.

North on A1A from the beach communities is Fernandina Beach, at the Georgia border and about 35 miles from downtown Jacksonville. Once a popular tourist spot and boom town, Fernandina Beach lost most of its bustle when Henry Flagler built his railroad down through Florida and bypassed it.

What remains today is a 50-block downtown area that is on the National Register of Historic Places for late Victorian architecture.

It's better in the Bahamas for senior citizens

BY GENE MALOTT
AND ADELE MALOTT
NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE



There is more than one way to visit the senior-friendly Bahamas.

Some mature travelers like to arrange a Bahamian homestay. Hundreds of local families are volunteer hosts for visitors in a well-organized government plan called People-to-People.

The visit may include dinner, stayovers, attending church, going to tea, taking a tour or whatever the hosts and guests arrange.

On a recent trip to the islands we joined the program, with about a dozen other visitors, and had dinner at the Nassau home of Valerie Barrett, 62.

She lives in a fair-size pink Georgian home on about one-third acre of scenic land at the edge of town.

Barrett has been a People-to-People volunteer since the program began almost 10 years ago. She can entertain groups of up to 40 tourists at once.

We shared a cozy evening — with no resemblance to the commercial tone of tourist lodges.

To help fix dinner and host the group Barrett invited her aunt, who is retired, as well as some neighbors. All of us ate Eleuthera

chicken, a delicious Bahamian specialty.

After the meal we sat around Barrett's comfortable parlor and talked about shrubbery, birds, local politics, what ails Barrett's big dog Bradley and other such subjects.

"Yes, I do it to show how Bahamian people really live and just because I like to have folks in," says Barrett. "But I kinda like to hear how people live in other places too. I guess we've all got about the same kind of problems."

To participate in the People-to-People get-togethers visitors should contact the tourist ministry at least three weeks before leaving the States.

Travelers are asked to fill out a form that includes age, occupation, club affiliations, church affiliation, hobbies and other general interests. The Ministry of Tourism makes the match with a volunteer host family.

For further information, including a sign-up form, contact the Ministry of Tourism, P.O. Box N-3701, Nassau, Bahamas.

It's also possible to sign up for the program once in Nassau at any Tourist Information Center.

A similar program exists in Freeport, the Bahamas' second major city.

Yet another — perhaps more traditional — way to visit the Bahamas is to stay at a good hotel.



COURTESY OF GEM PUBLISHING GROUP

Out in the streets: Senior vacationers tour the streets of downtown Nassau from horse-drawn carriages.

Using senior discounts and other breaks, two people age 49 or older can spend a week on vacation there for little more than \$1,000, including airfare.

Good hotels in the Nassau area range from \$90 to \$300 per night (often single or double occupancy), depending on the season. Prices go up in mid-December and return to normal in mid-April.

But mature travelers can stay for as little as \$60 per night at many choice tourist-area hotels offering special senior discounts.

Here are a few examples:

■ **Comfort Suites on Paradise Island:** This all-suite property is connected by bridge or water taxi to downtown Nassau.

Paradise Island is a private resort island whose big draw is Griffin's Paradise Island resort and casino.

Comfort Suites participates in Choice Hotels, Senior Saver program, offering 10 percent off to AARP members (age 50 and older) and other guests age 60 and older.

Their suites (based on single or double occupancy) start at \$149 in high season and \$110 in low season. They cost only \$77 a night for seniors.

For further information contact Comfort Suites, P.O. Box SS 6202, Nassau, Bahamas or call (800) 228-5150 or (800) 221-2222.

■ **Sheraton Grand Hotel & Towers:** This resort takes part in the Sheraton hotel chain's senior-discount program, giving AARP members and other guests age 60 and older 25 percent off regular rates.

That means, in low season, mature travelers pay \$97 to \$142 per night (based on single or double occupancy) for rooms that regularly cost \$129 to \$189. In high season seniors pay \$104 to \$149 per night for rooms that regularly cost \$139 to \$199.

For further information contact the Sheraton reservations center at (800) 325-3535.

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