



Looking for places with fascinating stories for your next excursion? The small towns and beach towns of St. Johns County offer just that – remarkable sites to visit, the best scenic drives, countryside to explore and great ways to relax. This guide offers up a variety of small town experiences near the beach and in rural settings with things to do and iconic restaurants to savor along the way.

(Be sure to check these destination websites during COVID 19)

St. Johns County A1A Scenic Byway

For one of the best scenic drives in northeast Florida, enjoy a leisurely drive on the A1A Scenic and Historic Coast Byway along the Atlantic Ocean, exploring beach towns and their stories. For more information visit scenicala.org.

Ponte Vedra Beach

Ponte Vedra was developed in the early 1900s during World War I. The National Lead Company bought the rights to the valuable minerals discovered in the local sands. The area was named Mineral City. In 1922, the National Lead Company built a nine-hole golf course for its workers. Eventually, the demand for minerals ended. A resort community was planned and Mineral City was renamed Ponte Vedra Beach in 1928. Today, golf, tennis, and beach activities continue to thrive here. It is the home of the Ponte Vedra Inn & Club, the PGA TOUR, and many wonderful, iconic restaurants. Be sure to visit the amazing Guana River State Park while you're here.

Things to do nearby:

- **Guana River State Park and Guana Research Reserve** Discover the rich natural scenery and abundant wildlife of Guana River State Park and Research Reserve. Hike, walk or paddle your way through this teeming-with-life destination.
- **Bird Island** Designed by architect Bobby Weed, the charming park illustrates the ecosystems of northeast Florida and highlights native flora and fauna with its dune and wetland areas and interactive art sculptures.
- **Cultural Center of Ponte Vedra Beach** Enjoy exhibitions of local, regional and national artists in a variety of media.

Restaurants nearby:

- [Restaurant Medure](#)
- [Lulu's Waterfront Grille](#)
- [Pusser's Caribbean Grille](#)
- [Palm Valley Fish Camp](#)

Vilano Beach

Colonial maps called this location “Punta Quartel.” It was where the Spanish built a small watchtower to scout out enemy ships. By the 1920s, Nobel prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis rented a bungalow in Vilano Beach. Here, he developed ideas for his novels, including his most popular novel “Elmer Gantry” in 1927.

Today, Vilano Beach is a charming beach town with unique architecture from its 1920s cottages, the Art Deco designs of the Thirties and Forties and up to post-World War II.

Things to do nearby:

- **Red Boat Tours** – Get a new perspective of St. Augustine. Located at Vilano Beach, these tours take you on the Intracoastal waterway to see unique views of the oldest city in the nation.
- Enjoy a stay at one of the charming Vilano Beach cottages, like the **Beachcomber Cottages**.



Beachcomber Cottages on Vilano Beach

Restaurants nearby:

- [Beaches at Vilano – Caribbean Connection](#)
- [Aunt Kate’s](#)
- [180 Vilano Grill](#)
- [The Reef](#)
- [Caps on the Water](#)

St. Augustine Beach

In 1911, Anastasia Island was selected as the site of a summer “Chautauqua” – an event that began in 1874 at Chautauqua Lake, NY and became immensely popular. Held outdoors under tents, these events included speakers, teachers, musicians, showmen, preachers and specialists of the day. No surprise then that in 1911, Henry Flagler donated 200 oceanfront acres for a summer Chautauqua in Florida and named the location “Chautauqua Beach”. Nearly 50 years later, the area was incorporated into the City of St. Augustine Beach. Today, St. Augustine Beach enjoys a pleasant small town atmosphere with plenty of things to do.

Things to do nearby:

- **St. Augustine Lighthouse & Maritime Museum** – Experience 450 years of maritime history at Florida’s first lighthouse, the Keeper’s House and its multiple historical artifacts. And enjoy awesome views of the coast from the top.
- **Alligator Farm Zoological Park** – Beginning in the late nineteenth century as a small exhibition of Florida reptiles, the park soon became a quintessential Florida attraction. Today, it functions as a modern zoo serving the public and scientific community.
- **Anastasia State Park** – Observe wildlife along the beach from a canoe or kayak, or on the Ancient Dunes Nature Trail. Enjoy the abundant wading birds as they hunt for food along Salt Run, the osprey and eagles who rule the skies, and the painted buntings and warblers who flit about the hammock forests.
- **St. Johns County Pier** – Take a stroll out on this wonderful newly refurbished pier. Visit the gift shop and visitor information center, which are open to the public every day during the summer season.

Restaurants nearby:

- Santiago's Florida Kitchen & Craft Bar
- Beachcomber St. Augustine
- The Conch House
- Sunset Grille
- Llama Peruvian Restaurant
- Gypsy Cab Company
- Blackfly
- Gas Restaurant



St. Augustine Lighthouse & Maritime Museum

Butler Beach

South of St. Augustine Beach, Frank A. Butler, an African American educator, purchased a strip of property and established Butler Beach in 1927. Butler developed this beach for African Americans as there was no other place along the coast available to people of color. He built bathhouses and a motel, and installed a merry-go-round and picnic facilities. Butler Beach stayed popular through the 60s. Though Frank Butler died in 1973, the legacy he built as one of Florida's first successful African American businessmen remains. Today, Butler's remaining property is divided into two county parks: Frank Butler Park East and Frank Butler Park West. For more information visit floridashistoriccoast.com.

Things to do nearby:

- **Frank Butler County Park** – Visit Butler Park East's historic beach to enjoy easy access to the ocean and Butler Park West's great views of the Intracoastal Waterway. Each park has amenities such as free parking, beach access, restrooms, showers, BBQ grills and picnic pavilion.



Courtesy of Visit St. Augustine

Restaurants nearby:

- Back 40 A1A
- Purple Olive
- World Famous Oasis
- Viola's Italian Bistro
- Redfrog and McToad's

Crescent Beach

Crescent Beach is a community where old Florida resort homes built in the 1920s can still be seen. One of the town's most distinguished residents was Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings who was very enamored with Florida. In 1940, with the proceeds from *The Yearling* (for which she received a Pulitzer Prize), Rawlings bought a cottage on the dunes in Crescent Beach. She lived and worked here for many years.

Things to do nearby:

- **Fort Matanzas, Anastasia Island** – This park and historic site offers a glimpse into history as well as scenic trails and shoreside access for fishing and collecting shells.



Fort Matanzas National Monument

Restaurants nearby:

- [The Commander's Shellfish Camp](#)
- [The Elkhouse Eatery](#)
- [South Beach Grill](#)
- Coming soon: [Safe Harbor Seafood Restaurant](#)

St. Johns County's Agricultural Corridor

Another of north Florida's best scenic drives is through St. Johns County's rural farmland. Explore stories going back to the late 1800s in this interesting corridor of small towns. While there, experience its iconic restaurants.

Hastings

In the 1880s, Henry Flagler needed a source for fresh vegetables and fruits for his St. Augustine Hotels. He asked his cousin, Thomas Horace Hastings, to start a farm. In 1890, Hastings and his family settled on 1,569 acres owned by Flagler's Model Land Company and a railroad depot was constructed. By 1920, the town of Hastings was thriving with stores, a bank and hotel. However, changes in the regional transportation network eventually brought Hastings' boom period to an end. During World War II, the railroad's connection was severed and by 1970, Interstate 95 siphoned traffic off the highways serving these small towns. For more information [see here](#), and check out these historical [photos](#).

Happily, there are plans for the rebirth of Hastings. In 2019, the River-to-Sea Loop/Bike Trail completed its Palatka-to-St. Augustine trail with the section that runs right through Hastings' town center. For more information, see river2sealooop.org.

Things to do nearby:

- **Bike Trail in Hastings** – While you're here, stroll or ride a stretch of the new St. Johns County River-to-Sea Loop section recently completed in Hastings.
- **The annual October MAZE** – Sykes and Coopers Farm, Elkton, FL – This annual fall maze is fun for all ages. At the entrance, fill out a "passport" with ten questions that will help guide you through the maze.
- **Spuds Farm, Elkton FL** – Stop by for homemade jams, jellies and pies.

Restaurants nearby:

- [Norma D's Kitchen](#)
- [Sweet & Smokey's Barbecue](#)
- [Jim's Place](#) – Elkton

St. Johns County West

Wander through the countryside of Northwest and West St. Johns County. Explore small towns along the St. Johns River and Bartram Scenic Highway gems as you work your way south. Experience the remarkable Wildlife Refuge and enjoy a stop at World Golf Hall of Fame.

Fruit Cove

Fruit Cove was named for the orange groves that once filled this region. Here St. Johns County's William Bartram Scenic Highway begins at the county line. The Rev. Theophilus Wilson Moore was the early settler who named Fruit Cove after he established an orange plantation here in 1873. The plantation was a success, and the area has continued to grow ever since. Fruit Cove is not only the gateway to the scenic highway, but a wonderful place to explore.

Things to do nearby:

- **Beluthahatchee Park, Fruit Cove – 1501 S. R. 13 North, Fruit Cove, FL, 32259. Part of the Bartram Trail.** – The homestead of activist, conservationist, and author Stetson Kennedy, this magical four-acre park is part of the 70-acre tract of land purchased by Kennedy in 1948. Kennedy created restrictive covenants setting aside the land in perpetuity as a wildlife refuge. Experience Kennedy's home and enjoy park amenities including a picnic pavilion, canoe dock, access to the Beluthahatchee Lake and use of the two wildlife observation platforms. For more information visit visitstaugustine.com.



Courtesy of Visit St. Augustine

Restaurants nearby:

- Twisted Compass Brewing Co. Coffee
- Vito's Italian Restaurant
- Blackstone Grille
- Back 40 Urban Fresh

Switzerland and Orangedale

Switzerland sits just below Fruit Cove on the St. Johns River. Historically, Switzerland was one of the most essential areas in the early settlement period, with former Swiss citizen Francis Phillip Fatio establishing a 10,000-acre plantation at Switzerland Point. Today, the area continues to appeal to folks with its natural charm.

Things to do nearby:

- **Alpine Groves Park - 2060 State Road 13, Switzerland, FL, 32259** - This picturesque 54-acre park on the St. Johns River features a late 19th-century homestead and shed containing the grove's machinery, used to process the fruit. Another two-story board and batten framed structure contains curios collected from around the country. The park also includes a citrus grove, butterfly garden, nature trails and a dock for fishing. For more information visit visitstaugustine.com.



Orangedale was named after orange groves, once a major part of the local economy. It continues to be a source of the rustic, agricultural and outdoor aspects that make the William Bartram Scenic & Historic Highway appealing. One location that embodies the spirit of the scenic corridor is Shands Pier, a draw for anglers seeking to continue the centuries-old tradition of fishing in these waters. Another is the iconic Woodpecker's Backyard BBQ.

Things to do nearby:

- **Shands Pier** - Grab a Fishing Pole or just watch the sun set over the St. Johns River. The pier is free and open to the public.



Courtesy of Visit St. Augustine

Restaurants nearby:

- [Woodpecker's Backyard BBQ](#)

St. Augustine West

Enjoy a leisurely drive down rural FL-16 E to two iconic venues – the St. Augustine Wild Reserve and World Golf Hall of Fame

Things to do nearby:

- **St. Augustine Wild Reserve, 5190 Farm Creek Road, St. Augustine, FL, 32092** – The remarkable reserve is a sanctuary for exotic animals. Enjoy a guided tour of the 7-acre animal compound, where you'll meet white tigers, orange tigers, a very rare golden tabby tiger, lions, liger, servals, lynxes, leopards, jaguars, hyenas, and a host of wolves ranging in color from black to white. Tours by appointment only. For more information visit visitstaugustine.com.
- **World Golf Village, 1 World Golf Pl, St. Augustine, FL 32092** – Enjoy activities in the Village with your whole family. Dine at the famous Caddyshack Restaurant, owned by Bill Murray and his five brothers. Take in a Hollywood Blockbuster or engaging documentary at the World Golf Hall of Fame IMAX Theater or enjoy shopping at the nearby Premium Outlets. For more information visit worldgolfvillage.com.



Activities at the World Golf Village:

- **World Golf Hall of Fame** - The Hall of Fame offers engaging, interactive storytelling and exhibitions featuring artifacts, works of art, audio, video and photography significant to the history of golf.
- **Slammer & Squire Golf Course** - This 18-hole, 6,939-yard course was designed by architect Bobby Weed along with World Golf Hall of Fame Members, Sam Snead (the “Slammer”) and Gene Sarazen, (the “Squire”).
- **King & Bear Golf Course** - The 18-hole King & Bear course gets its name from both designers. Palmer earned the nickname “The King” during his playing career, while Nicklaus adopted the “Golden Bear” moniker. The two put the spotlight on their decades-old friendship, rather than their storied rivalry, to create the co-design.

Restaurants at the World Golf Village:

- Murray Bros. Caddyshack Restaurant
- Legends Grille at the Slammer & Squire
- Champions Grille at King & Bear
- Villagio Italian Grille

Places to stay at the World Golf Village:

- Renaissance Resort
- Holiday Inn
- The Residences
- Grande Villas