

An Outdoor Adventure along Northeast Florida's Atlantic Coast

Birders, nature enthusiasts and just plain fun-lovers will delight in the natural beauty found in *St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra and The Beaches*. Plan your trip to include some of these not-to-be-missed sites and adventures:

Early morning bird watching

An early morning stroll among the dunes and marshes at Anastasia State Park is the perfect way to start your visit here. Located just one and a half miles from downtown St. Augustine off A1A (Anastasia Blvd.), the park features five miles of wide beach bordered by sand dunes, and a lagoon surrounded by rich tidal marshes. Trek across the dunes to the pristine sandy white beach and you'll see gulls, sandpipers, willets, terns, pelicans and sanderlings. Late in the morning red-shouldered hawk, bald eagle and osprey take flight searching for a meal. The marshes and sea meadows are home to a varied bird population as well as further back in the coastal hammock and along the park's campground roadside. You can expect to see a variety of herons, egrets, white ibis, wood stork and roseate spoonbill.

After a morning strolling the beach at Anastasia Park, prepare yourself for more birds at St. Augustine Alligator Farm **Zoological Park** – it's just across A1A. You will not need binoculars at this rookery; close encounters are guaranteed. A variety of roosting birds build their nests just feet above the boardwalks, knowing the alligators below will protect them by discouraging dangerous tree-climbing predators such as raccoons, opossums and snakes. These birds show little fear of people and often perch in trees and shrubs at eye level. Look to the large live oaks to the north and east of the swamp for nesting great egrets, and in the treetops for wood storks. The lower elderberry bushes host snowy egrets, tri-colored herons, little blue herons and cattle egrets.

Enjoy a waterfront lunch with a view

Deciding on lunch is difficult; just across the Bridge of Lions, St. Augustine's Bayfront has several restaurants that provide a view to Matanzas Bay and the massive Castillo de San Marcos, a fortress built by the Spaniards in the 17th century.

Get a natural education

Travel north of St. Augustine along the A1A Coastal Highway for a visit to the newly opened GTM Reserve Environmental Education Center at the Guana Preserve. The Center is a surprising treat where visitors are greeted by life-size models of a North Atlantic right whale mother and calf, manta ray and cobia, along with a variety of other ocean animals. The Center's aquariums, hands-on exhibits, displays and programs and experiences allow visitors to learn about the importance of the estuary and the animals that call it home. The Guana Preserve has several nature trails and naturalists are on hand to provide interpretive tours on the weekends.

Fresh Catch for dinner

Cap's on the Water is further north, but offers dining in an Old Florida setting, away from the crowds, under the oak trees and on the Intracoastal Waterway. Head north on A1A for about five miles, turn left at the castle (3rd Street) and right on Myrtle. The restaurant blends New World elements with traditional Southern dishes like an authentic Florida gumbo of crawfish, crab, shrimp, okra, peppers, onion and garlic.

End an eventful day with pirate adventures

Augustine to board the Schooner Freedom for a look at life aboard the blockade runners that cruised the area in the 19th century. It's a 72-foot topsail replica that offers romantic evening sails, and a ghost cruise (with the Ghost Tours of St. Augustine).

If you go:

Anastasia State Recreation Area Park is located at 1340A A1A South; 904-461-2033. St. Augustine Alligator Farm Zoological Park is just across the street at 999 Anastasia Blvd (A1A); 904- 824-3337, www.alligatorfarm.com. GTM Environmental Education Center is located at 505 Guana Rd., at the GTM Reserve, off Coastal Highway A1A between St. Augustine and Ponte Vedra, 904-823-4500, www.gtmnerr.org. Cap's on the Water is two miles north of the Vilano Bridge at 4325 Myrtle Street; 904-824-8794, www.capsonthewater.com. The Schooner Freedom is located at St. Augustine Municipal Marina at 111 Avenida Menendez, 904.810.1010.

For more information visit www.Getaway4Florida.com