

BY KATHLEEN WALLS

# NEW FUN IN AMERICA'S OLDEST CITY

A popular destination full of history  
and charm, St. Augustine is more enchanting  
than ever with a growing list of attractions.

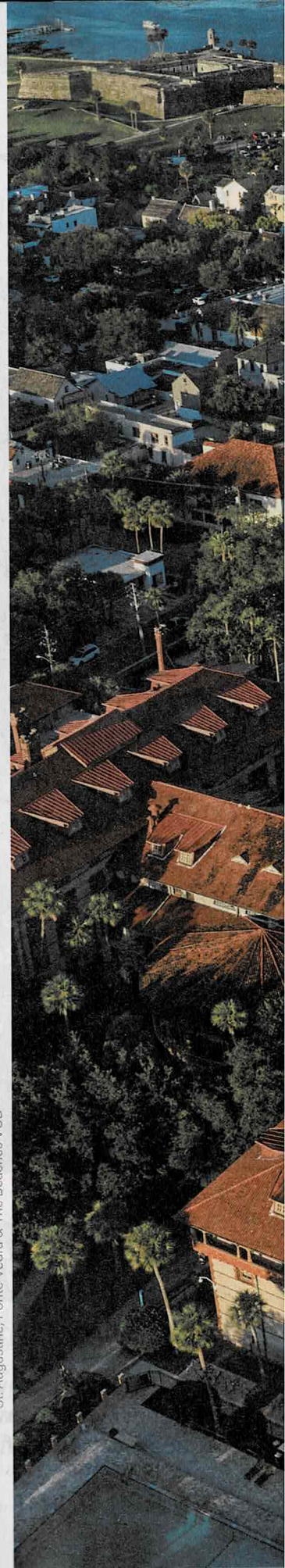
**T**here's a reason *U.S. News & World Report* ranked St. Augustine, Florida, number four for Best Weekend Getaways in the South and number seven for Best Small Towns To Visit In The USA. Tripadvisor placed it 12th on its list of Top 25 U.S. Destinations. If you haven't been to St. Augustine in over a decade, you may be surprised by the number of newer attractions that have sprung up. Actually, since the city is more than 455 years old, I'll call anything established in the 21st century "new." Here's a sampling.

## MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

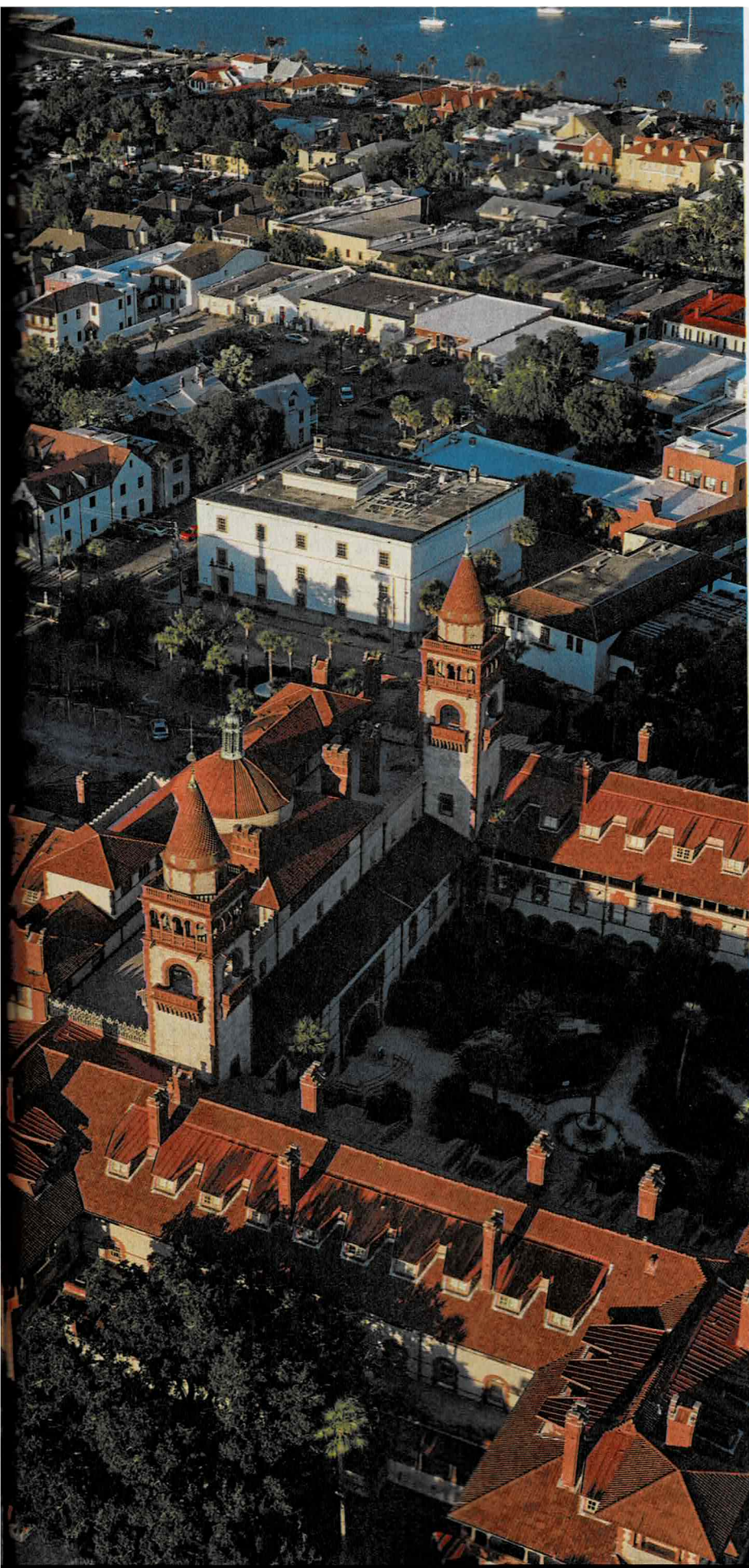
**Classic Car Museum of St. Augustine** opened in June 2020. The 30,000-square-foot facility is filled with cars and pickup trucks that date back to the late 1800s. The collection includes a Batmobile replica and a 1957 Cadillac convertible once owned by Elvis Presley. Those of us of a certain age may spot the dream car from our youth. Young folks will marvel at the big-engine, fin-tailed beauties and the inventiveness of the antique cars.

The **Medieval Torture Museum** features more than 100 unique implements and devices on display. Movie prop builders created the exhibits using pieces of real medieval torture equipment, such as the rack, iron maiden, pillory, and many more. Live actors posed to create the realistic wax figures. The walls are covered with illustrations and information about the use of the instruments. Many of these implements are interactive, letting you play the role of either torturer or tortured — but no, they won't let you guillotine your enemy. I wasn't sure what to expect when I first visited, but I understood founder Eugene Grach's point: It's not to

St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches VCB







← St. Augustine, a historic city on Florida's northeastern coast, is known for its Spanish Colonial architecture and waterfront location (left). The Marine Studios Exhibit at the Oldest House Museum Complex (below) spotlights the film and conservation heritage of Marineland, a popular local attraction. The Classic Car Museum sports decades of vehicles, including this Batmobile replica (bottom).



Kathleen Walls



Kathleen Walls





## NEW FUN IN AMERICA'S OLDEST CITY

glorify torture but to remind people never to forget the darker side of life so as to avoid repeating it.

Shawn and Kathy Hiester, founders of the **St. Augustine Aquarium**, share their passion for marine biology at this facility, which offers interactive guided tours. During my visit, I was introduced to its inhabitants — sea creatures with names. The Touch Tank lets you handle starfish, urchins, horseshoe crabs, and more. To get even closer, you can snorkel among the fish. The aquarium provides the gear; you bring your swimsuit and towel. The aquarium also is strong on education and offers camps and classes for school-age children.

**St. Augustine Pirate & Treasure Museum** takes visitors on a trip through time, back to the “golden age” of piracy. It boasts the only known authentic pirate treasure chest in the world and one of three authentic Jolly Roger flags known to exist. Kids and adults will love it.

The **Lincolnvile Museum and Cultural Center** is housed in the historic Excelsior School. It walks you through African American history with a focus on events that happened in St. Augustine, such as the arrest of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. One exhibit struck a particular chord with me: a section of the original Woolworth counter in St. Augustine where several high school students staged a sit-in. They were arrested. This took place just before President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

**ACCORD Civil Rights Museum** offers more reflection on what happened in St. Augustine in the 1960s. It opened on July 2, 2014, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act. One of my favorite

items was a hat that belonged to Katherine “Kat” Twine, who was active in the movement along with her husband. Kat knew they would be arrested many times and forced to stand in line before being put in jail, so she carried the hat for protection from the sun. The museum is open by appointment only.

### ENHANCEMENTS TO OLD FAVORITES

The Oldest House Museum Complex is a real treat, but several newer museums add to its glory. These include the **St. Augustine Surf Culture & History Museum**, an interactive facility that interprets local surfing history stories. It opened in 2021 in the Tovar House, which is part of the complex. Images, surfing films, and local artifacts are offered for viewing. I particularly loved the historic surfboards, showing their evolution over the years.

**Marineland's Marine Studios Exhibit** is also in the Tovar House. It provides insight into Marineland, another St. Augustine attraction, which has hosted film making, marine conservation, and dolphin encounters throughout its 80 years as the world's first “oceanarium.”

The **Oldest Store Museum** in the Old Jail Complex re-creates a 1900s general store. See a sales-clerk demonstrate items to visitors, such as a goat-powered baby rocker and an authentic gramophone, or watch a snake oil salesman show his wares. It's a hoot.

### OLD BECOMES NEW AGAIN

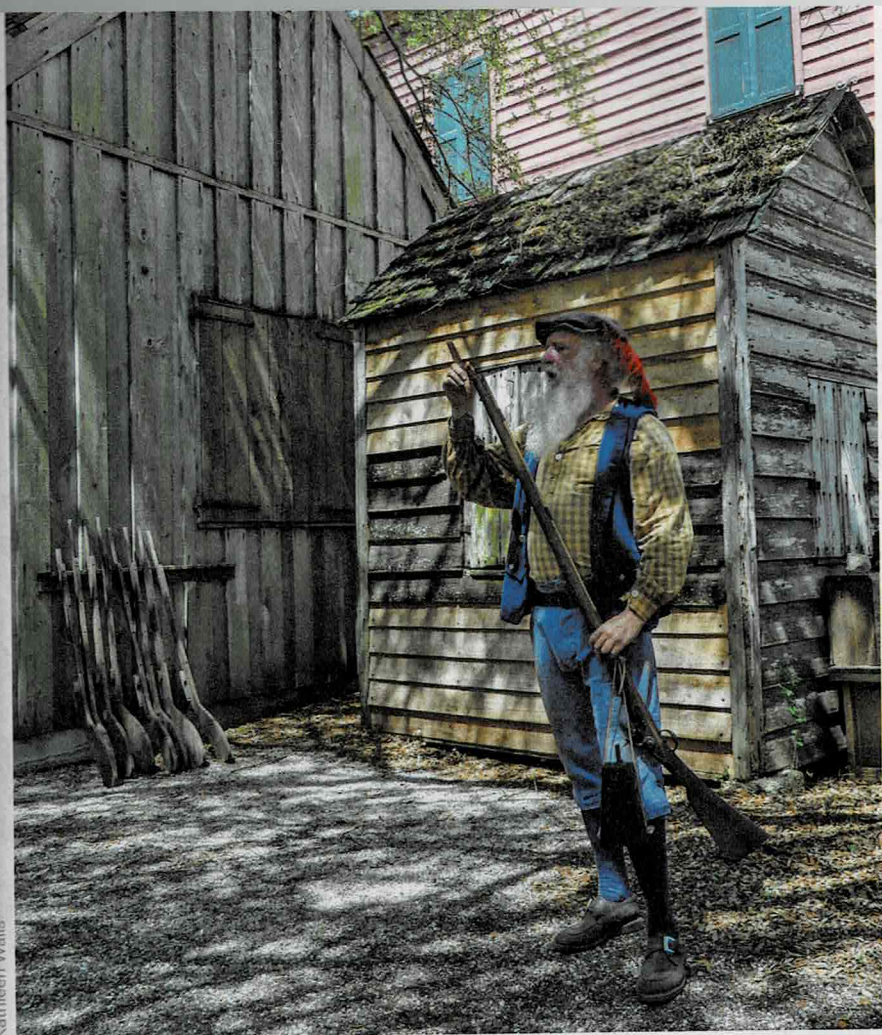
Other venerable attractions have geared up with upgrades. One is the **Colonial Quarter** living history museum. Originally the Colonial Spanish Quarter, it depicted life

in St. Augustine in the 1700s when the town was under Spanish rule. Today, the Colonial Quarter covers several centuries and includes options for wining, dining, and entertaining. During the Colonial Experience tour, view the black-powder musket demonstration as a docent in period costume goes through all the steps of loading the gun and then fires it. Learn about blacksmithing, and walk through the 1740s De Mesa-Sanchez House and other Colonial buildings.

Restaurants at the Colonial Quarter include the Bull & Crown, Taberna del Caballo, and the St. Augustine Seafood Company. In addition, Colonial Oak Music Park offers an outdoor entertainment venue with free music on many nights.







Kathleen Walls

St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches VCB



⬅ Clockwise from left: A docent in period dress demonstrates the process of musket loading at the Colonial Quarter living history museum. "Captain Mayhem" leads a tour at the Pirate & Treasure Museum. The St. Augustine Aquarium invites visitors to learn about seahorses and other ocean creatures. The newly opened Surf Culture & History Museum celebrates the Oldest City's rich surfing legacy.



Kathleen Walls



Kathleen Walls





## NEW FUN IN AMERICA'S OLDEST CITY

**Potter's Wax Museum**, touted as America's oldest wax museum, opened on King Street in the late 1940s. Eventually, it was relocated to the Old Drugstore in St. Augustine's historic district. The characters depicted range from Old World movers and shakers like Leonardo da Vinci to modern-day celebrities such as Britney Spears and Daniel Radcliffe as Harry Potter. U.S. history is covered well. Rooms include likenesses of Civil War generals, World War II figures, and Civil Rights movement leaders, as well as Elvis, Ray Charles, and other entertainers.

The St. Augustine Amphitheatre was built in 1965, commemorating St. Augustine's 400th birthday. A newly remodeled amphitheater opened in August 2007. Nicknamed **The Amp**, the facility has seating for 4,100 music fans, a large plaza, and an elaborate arboretum with walking trails. Today, it consistently ranks in the top 50 best amphitheaters in the world, according to *Pollstar Magazine*.

Incidentally, the land for **The Amp** was once part of **Anastasia State Park**, the perfect spot for your temporary home while visiting St. Augustine. It's about two miles from the Bridge of Lions, which leads to the historic section of town, and a short walk from the beach. The campground offers 139 sites with electricity, water, a picnic table, an in-ground grill, and a fire ring. Four-legged friends are welcome. The only downside: The maximum permitted RV length is 38 feet. However, other area campgrounds can accommodate larger units.

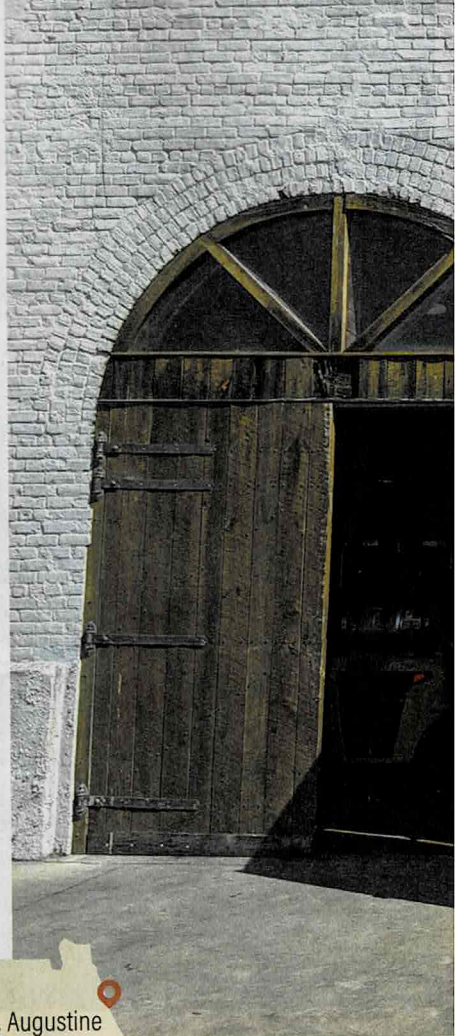
### FOOD AND DRINK

St. Augustine has become a foodie hot spot. **St. Augustine Distillery** and its companion restaurant,

**Ice Plant Bar**, are located in one of the city's historic buildings, a 1905 ice/power plant, where much of the original features remain. The exterior entrances are steel factory doors from the 1930s. The windows resemble the ice plant's original ones. The tap-room bar top dates from the 1880s. The floors come from historic 1860s Georgia homes, as does the bar's grand staircase at the entrance. In the distilling area, you can see a wall from the power and ice plant dating back to 1917. Today the distillery makes vodka, rum, gin, and bourbon using local ingredients. Learn more at a small museum located in the entranceway, where visitors gather for a free tour.

The attached **Ice Plant Bar** serves lunch and dinner with craft cocktails in an atmosphere reminiscent of the old ice plant factory. Hanging over the bar is the original bridge crane on rails that once picked up huge blocks of ice.

**Ancient City Brunch Bar** is one of the most innovative restaurants I have seen. Twins Emily and Sophia Schroeder conceived the idea as a high school project. They offer a "bruncharcuterie" — an array of individual food choices served on a beautiful olive wood board. Their mother, Melissa, helped to open the cozy restaurant, which serves breakfast and lunch in the heart of the historic downtown. You can choose what food items to include on your board, with a lovely message written on it. My chicken salad on a croissant, with fresh fruit and a chunk of the best cheese I ever tasted, was perfect.



St. Augustine

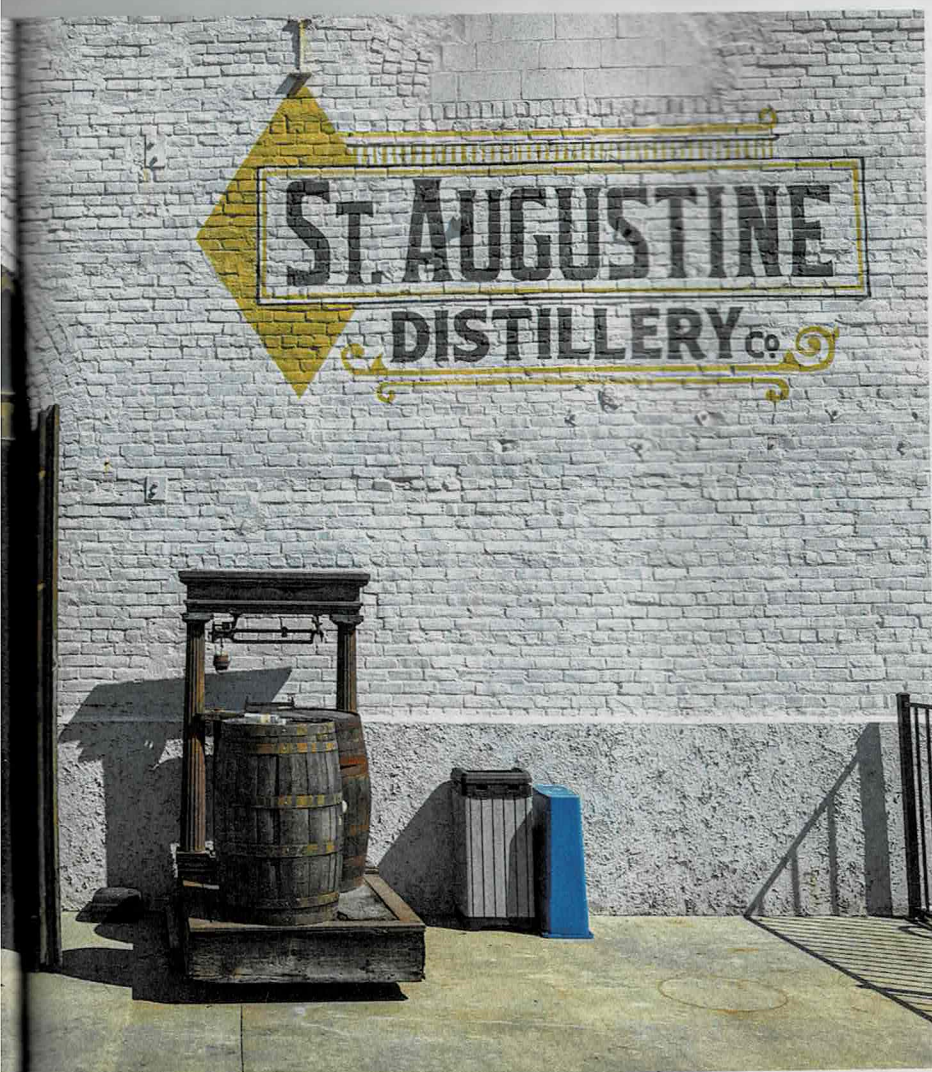
FLORIDA

The **Witty Whisker Cat Café** opened in June 2020. It's a place where you can relax and enjoy

a soft drink, coffee, beer, or wine while you munch on a tasty bakery treat in the company of some adorable adoptable kitties.

Oldies but goodies are not forgotten. The **Columbia Restaurant** embodies the Spanish flavor of Old St. Augustine. **Harry's** traditional New Orleans-style food is still a favorite. Today **The Floridian** offers contemporary Southern fare, including vegan options, using local and sustainable food sources. **Cap's On the Water** lets you savor a typical Florida sunset while you dine on local cuisine. Other great restaurants abound as well.





St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches VCB

Other spirits thrive in the Oldest City. **San Sebastian Winery** offers daily tours. Breweries are multiplying like the old Star Trek tribbles. Among them are **Ancient City Brewing** and **Bog Brewing Company**. **A1A Ale Works** offers a rotating menu of craft beers to pair with its scratch-made menu. **Dog Rose Brewing Company** serves hand-crafted ales and lagers in historic Lincolnville between ACCORD and the Lincolnville Museum.

#### BEST WAYS TO SEE THE ANCIENT CITY

As you may have guessed, as the number of St. Augustine's attractions has increased, so has the traffic in the historic section. I have two suggestions to see more with less hassle.

First, take the trolley. Companies include **Old Town Trolley Tours** and

**Ripley's Red Train Tours**. Their knowledgeable drivers typically impart a lot of information about the attractions.

Second, a boat tour gives you a different view of the city. We took the **St. Augustine Scenic Cruise** and enjoyed the captain's narration about the city's history from the water. We even spotted a few dolphins in their natural habitat.

Whether you've been to St. Augustine before or are looking to plan your first visit, you'll find the nation's oldest city teeming with timeless features, countless new additions, and enough beauty and charm for an experience that is truly memorable.

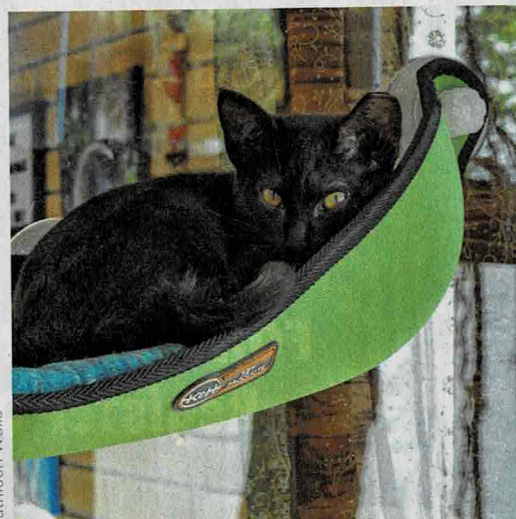
#### MORE INFO

Visit St. Augustine  
[www.visitstaugustine.com](http://www.visitstaugustine.com) ●

◀ The St. Augustine Distillery operates in a 1905-era ice and power plant (left) and is open for self-guided tours. Originally constructed to stage a symphonic outdoor drama that detailed the city's history, today The Amp hosts musical artists of all genres (below). Patrons can spend time with — or even adopt — felines that hang out in a "cat lounge" at the Witty Whisker Cat Café (bottom).



Kathleen Walls



Kathleen Walls