St. Augustine | Ponte Vedra on Florida’s Historic Coast

More about How to Experience 500 Years of Spanish History in St. Augustine, Florida

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Every American educated child in North America was taught that while searching for the Fountain of Youth, Juan Ponce de León was the first European to land on the North American continent.

Ponce de León
In 1493, as a young man, Ponce de León was aboard one of the fleets of Spanish ships in what became known as Christopher Columbus’ second voyage. The expedition established a permanent Spanish colonial presence in the New World. As a prominent Spaniard, Ponce eventually was named Governor of Puerto Rico by King Ferdinand in 1511. Then in March 1513, under a license the King granted him to explore and discover of lands reputed to lie to the north of Hispaniola and the Island of Bimini. Ponce set sail with two caravels, Santiago and Santa María de la Consolación; and a galley like craft, the bergantín San Cristóbal.

The myth of the fountain of youth is actually a Taino Indian legend about a spring that was said to exist on the island of Bimini and a river, in what became known as Florida that would restore youth to those who bathed in their waters. Ponce’s quest was not to settle the new land, but to explore for gold and riches.

Scholarly studies indicate that Ponce de León first sighted and named the land La Florida on Easter Sunday, March 27, 1513. On April 2, according to a surviving navigational fix from his voyage, Ponce’s three-ship fleet was at 30 degrees, 8 minutes north latitude – just south of present day Ponte Vedra Beach. Ponce and his landing party first came ashore in La Florida the following morning, April 3, 1513.

For generations, residents of St. Augustine, founded by Spanish Admiral Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1565, have been hosting celebrations commemorating Ponce de Leon’s discovery of La Florida and the North American continent.

Pedro Menendez de Aviles
In 1565, Admiral General Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles received orders from King Phillip to sail for Florida to scout La Florida from the Keys as far as its northern boundary in present-day Canada, to report on its coastal features, and to set up a permanent colony. He was told to drive out any settlers or corsairs who were not subjects of the Spanish crown. The King then declared all earlier claims by Spanish explorers to be void and that Menendez and his descendants would rule La Florida. On the feast day of St. Augustine, August 28, he sailed through the inlet and named the area after the saint.

On September 8, 1565, Menendez, his accompanying troops, men, women and children came ashore and participated in the first Christian Mass, lead by Farther Lopez, to take place on the North American continent and participated in a feast of Thanksgiving with the native Timucuan Indians. The first permanent European settlement was established on that day.
St. Augustine Historic Moments
In 1586, England and Spain were at war and the English corsair Sir Francis Drake was likely to attack on his way home. St. Augustine was fired upon on June 6. The English fleet was huge, forcing then Governor Marquez and his people to flee. Immediately, Indians looted the town. When the English arrived, they took what the Indians left behind, and it is said the killing of an English soldier by the Spanish rearguard prompted Drake to issue his dreadful orders - "burn the town!"

As soon as Drake and his fleet set sail, Governor Marquez summoned help from Cuba. News of the disaster led to increased support in Spain for the struggling colony. St. Augustine was given the status of a "presidio" – a city that served as an official military fortress of the Spanish Empire and fulfilled one of its major roles – serve as a haven for the treasure fleets on their way home to Spain.

In 1609 and 1611, scouting parties from St. Augustine revealed reports regarding the English intrusion into La Florida. During the mid-1600’s, roving bands of previously unknown Indian tribes, forced southward by the expanding English colony, began raiding Florida and murdering missionaries. St. Augustine’s pleas to strengthen the town’s garrison and fortifications went unanswered. In 1665, King Charles II of England announced that a new province named Carolina was to be created south of Virginia. The fact that the boundaries of Carolina included St. Augustine left no doubt about the ambitious extent of the English plans.

The English privateer Robert Searles captured a Spanish ship headed for Cuba from Florida. He heard from a French doctor onboard that a large amount of silver was being stored in St. Augustine. Searles sailed back up the coast of Florida in May of 1668 and went on a rampage through the town. The pirates helped themselves to the salvaged silver and ruthlessly murdered sixty residents of the town, including children. The Searles Raid awakened the Spanish monarchy to the serious threat of the English colonies. In 1669, Queen Mariana ordered the Viceroy of Mexico to pay for the construction of a massive stone fortress to be as fortified as the most important cities of the Spanish Empire.

St. Augustine and all of Florida continued under Spanish rule until 1763, when Great Britain acquired Florida from Spain by a stroke of the pen, under the terms of the Treaty of Paris at the end of the French and Indian War.

The British saw their new possession as a land where a plantation economy could flourish. Trade and commerce got off to a good start, and the population grew when 600 Minorcans sought asylum from Dr. Andrew Turnbull's repressive plantations at New Smyrna. They and their descendants remain an integral part of St. Augustine's culture and economy.

After a brief 20 years, in a 1783 pact, the British returned the peninsula to Spain. The new United States hungrily eyed the foreign presence at its southern border. Tentative Spanish-American negotiations coincided with intermittent armed incursions from the north until, in 1821, a peaceful transfer from Spain brought Florida into the United States as a territory.

Monuments:
In front of St. Augustine’s Plaza de La Constitución and across Avenida Menéndez from the Bridge of Lions stands a bronze statue of Juan Ponce de León. An identical statue and pedestal stands before the Cathedral of San Juan on the Island of Puerto Rico.

Gifted to the City of St. Augustine by sister city, Aviles Spain, there is a statue of Pedro Menendez de Aviles, the city’s founder that stands in front of the former Alcazar Hotel, now St. Augustine City Hall and Lightner Museum at 75 King Street.

More....
In 2012, Spain and most Spanish-speaking countries will celebrate the Bicentennial Anniversary of the Spanish Constitution, penned in 1812. Although short-lived, the decree of the Spanish Constitution two centuries ago is recognized as one of the most pivotal events in the shaping of governments worldwide. In March 1812, Spain called for all towns throughout the Spanish Empire to honor the constitution with monuments and by renaming their main plazas *La Plaza de la Constitución*. Completed in 1813, St. Augustine’s Constitutional Monument is the only known remaining Spanish Constitution Monument in the world.

Celebrating Spanish American Heritage at St. Augustine Attractions:
The world-famous **Ponce de Leon’s Fountain of Youth Archeological Park** is located on 15 acres of waterfront in St. Augustine. The park is documented to be the site of what was once a Timucuan Indian village and also original St. Augustine. It’s been the site of archeological studies since the 1930’s.

Recent archeological field studies at the park have targeted the Spanish colonial era, and a "Discovery Globe" exhibit traces the routes Spanish explorers took across the Atlantic Ocean. The park also has a Planetarium exhibit featuring the stars in the night sky as they appeared in 1513, when Ponce landed and claimed the land for Spain. In the Discovery Globe it is explained that Ponce claimed all of North America, up to present day Newfoundland, for the Spanish crown. Florida was much bigger back then.

**New in 2012:** The Fountain of Youth Park in conjunction with the St. Augustine Maritime Heritage Foundation and the St. Augustine Lighthouse are building a replica of the type of ship Ponce sailed on is being built. The new boat building operation, called a *Haustiras*, is located on the Fountain of Youth grounds, just across the Matanzas River from Salt Run Inlet where the Lighthouse is located. The *Haustiras* is a replica of an early piece of St. Augustine waterfront in the Spanish era, which began in 1565 when the city was founded on land where the Fountain of Youth sits today. For more, visit fountainofyouthflorida.com

A bastion of the largest empire ever created, the **Castillo de San Marcos** was built to protect and defend Spain’s claims in the New World. Though caught in the whirlwinds of colonial warfare and intrigue, it was never defeated in battle. Its scarred walls still stand witness to over 330 years of history and culture.

The Monument site consists of 20.5 acres and includes a reconstructed section of the walled defense line surrounding the city of St. Augustine incorporating the original city gate. Built between 1672 and 1692, the *Castillo de San Marcos*‘ architecture and detail are distinctive and unique. It is the oldest masonry and only extant 17th century fort in North America.

The *Castillo* comes alive through a diverse range of programs which include Ranger talks, museum exhibits, historical weapons demonstrations, living history reenactments, and special events. For more information, visit NPS.gov/casa.

The St. Augustine **Government House Museum** exhibits illustrate the age of exploration of Florida’s early years and five centuries of St. Augustine's history from early native settlements, through European, to the turn of the century. Gold and silver pieces from Spanish shipwrecks off the Florida coast, artifacts from archaeological digs, military and religious influence and much more are presented in a fascinating and entertaining introduction to the long and colorful history of St. Augustine. For more information, visit staugustine.ufl.edu.

In 1888, co-founder of Standard Oil and railroad magnate, Henry Flagler, opened his luxurious hotel **The Ponce de Leon**. Designed in the Spanish Renaissance style by the New York architects John Carrere and Thomas Hastings, the Ponce was constructed entirely of poured concrete. The hotel also was wired for electricity at the onset, with the power being supplied by D.C. generators supplied by Flagler's friend Thomas Edison.
The building and grounds of the hotel are today a part of Flagler College. Today, the college offers tours of the opulent hotel. For more information, visit legacy.flagler.edu

There are dozens of other sites and attractions in St. Augustine where visitors can experience Florida’s Spanish history. For a complete list of these experiences, visit FloridasHistoricCoast.com

Celebrations:
St. Augustine has a history of Ponce de León celebrations, beginning in 1883. These events were sporadic and did not occur annually. Examples of the years the town celebrated include 1907, 1908, 1909 and 1913. Generally, the town tended to close shop for the celebration, though the events and time devoted toward the celebration varied. The city would decorate the town and citizens would wear costumes resembling English, Spanish, French and Indian styles. The celebration occurred in early spring, either in late March or early April and was typically a multi-day event. Today, through-out the year there are myriad events that celebrate the important Spanish American heritage found on Florida’s Historic Coast. For a complete calendar of events, visit FloridasHistoricCoast.com

Located midway between Daytona Beach and Jacksonville, Florida’s Historic Coast includes historic St. Augustine, the outstanding golf and seaside elegance of Ponte Vedra, 42 miles of pristine, Atlantic beaches – the same beaches that greeted Ponce de Leon in 1513 when he discovered and named La Florida, an area whose boundaries encompassed what would later become the eastern United States. For more information on events, activities, holiday getaway and vacation opportunities in St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches, go to the Visitors and Convention Bureau website at www.FloridasHistoricCoast.com, become a fan on Facebook at http://on.fb.me/13Sx56 or call 1.800.653.2489.