





A GILDED STATE

While Florida's warm oceans and natural beauty are typical draws for Canadians visiting the Sunshine State, why not consider its history and culture offerings by exploring its oldest city: St. Augustine? After hearing the fascinating stories from Northeast Florida's Gilded Age, you'll soon discover the region is worth a day or weekend away from the beach.

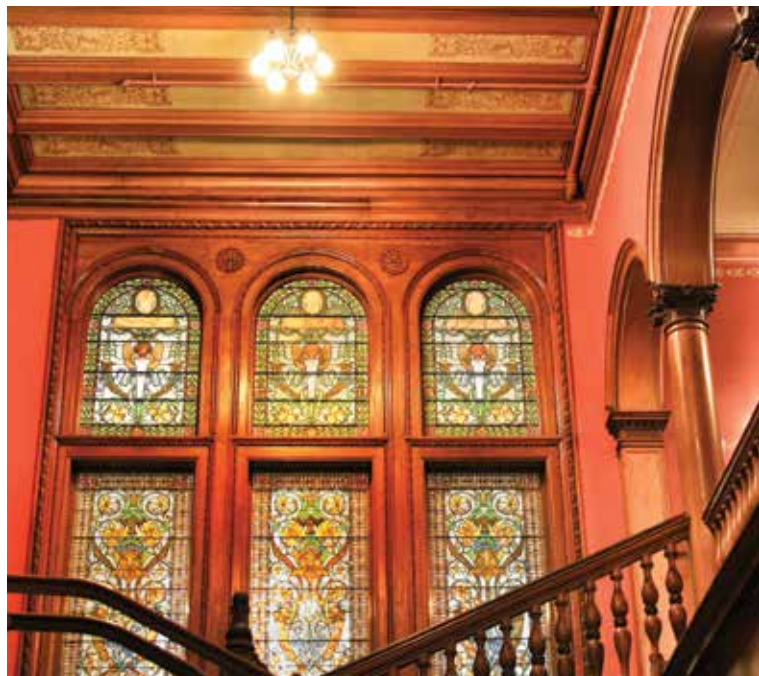
BY **ANDREA YU**

I'M STANDING UNDER AN ELABORATELY painted dome of the former Hotel Ponce de Leon, paintings of goddess-like figures looming above, detailed with plenty of gold leaf embellishments. This is the meeting point where a guided walk through the property is scheduled to commence, so I'm a bit surprised when a woman in a Downton Abbey-esque floor-length dress energetically bounds towards our group.

"Have any of you seen Mr. Flagler?" she asks us, looking elegant in black lace and pearls, despite her frazzled state. "He's always late."

Moments later a greying gentleman, decked out in equally refined attire (complete with a waistcoat and bowler hat), appears from the end of the hallway. As it turns out, there are two special guests joining our tour today: oil magnate Henry Flagler and his wife Ida Alice – or rather, two professional re-enactors depicting the aforementioned historical figures.

Under the glorious Floridian sun and in the sweltering heat, the Flaglers and their period costumes appear out of place. Just the same, this history-themed visit to the



Top: Flagler College Tiffany glass

Bottom: Flagler College Rotunda, High Tea at the Lighter Museum



Maya West, Visit St. Augustine



Sunshine State is contrary to the type of experience one might expect from a destination better known for its heat, sand and theme parks. But there's no better place to fulfil my inner culture and history geek than St. Augustine – the continent's oldest city...or, more accurately, the "oldest permanently occupied European settlement" of America, founded in 1565.

My three days in St. Augustine are unfortunately too short a time to delve into the entire history in detail so this visit is focusing on what I'm told is its most fascinating – the Gilded Age, from 1870 to 1900 – which is what brings me to the Hotel Ponce de Leon and the couple standing in front of me.

IT WAS DURING THE GILDED AGE that Mr. and Mrs. Flagler first vacationed to St. Augustine. They were drawn to the region's warm climate, which offered much-needed reprieve from the brisk winters of their native New York City. Convinced that the well-to-do set of America's northeast would enjoy a similar balmy escape, Mr. Flagler constructed the lavish Hotel Ponce de Leon, which was completed in early 1888; you might say the Flaglers and their guests were the first modern-day snowbirds.

The building still stands today, but as of 1968, has been operating as Flagler College, where 2,500 liberal arts students are studying. It happens to be frosh week as we wander through the historic hallways in wide-eyed



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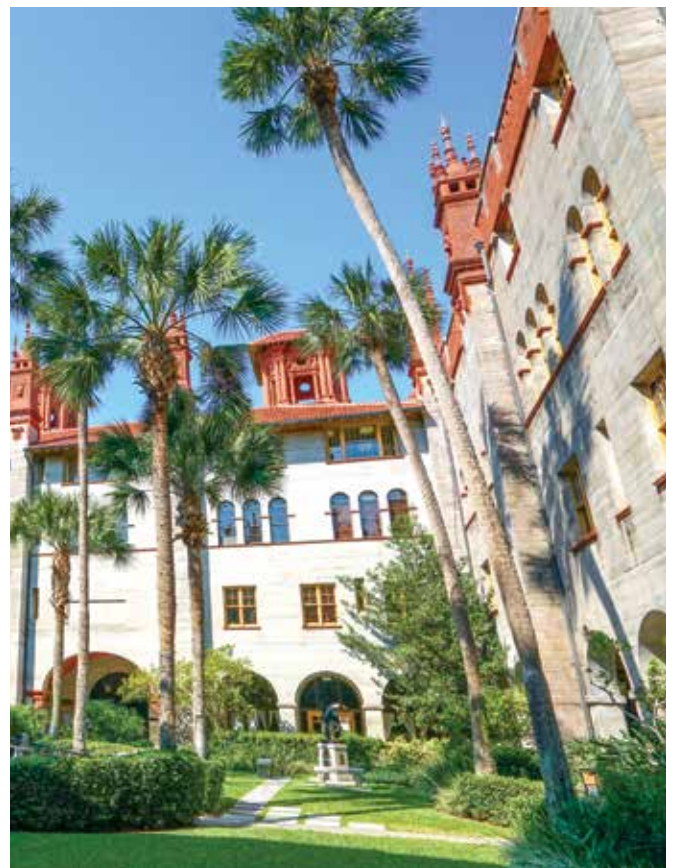
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Top: Lightner Museum Lobby, Lightner Museum Towers at Dusk
Bottom: Alcazar's indoor swimming pool, Lightner Museum courtyard



Visit St. Augustine

wonderment, so groups of first-year college students decked out in their new Flagler College-branded shirts become part of the sightseeing. Considering my run-of-the-mill university experience, I'm envious of the unique environment they are immersed in for their studies.

The check-in desk, where guests would have first been greeted (many of whom were business and social acquaintances of the Flaglers), is now a campus security office – a dramatic change from the place where, long ago, reservations were booked and fees were paid.

Guests would dine in an elaborate dining hall – which it continues to be, only for a much different clientele – draped in mythological paintings matching the ornate style of the dome where we first started. An impressive 70 Tiffany stained glass windows add to the grandeur of the hall (fun fact: the Ponce de Leon houses the world's largest collection of Tiffany stained glass windows) and one can only imagine the conversations that took place here all those years ago.

As the sunlight through these Tiffany works of art casts a colourful glow on the group, our Henry Flagler lists off the esteemed guests that have graced his dining hall, from former American presidents (Theodore Roosevelt, Grover Cleveland) to famous authors (Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway). But as he enlightens us to a time he really only knows through history books, the modern-day kitchen staff is prepping for the impending lunch rush. It's bizarre to think that Flagler students would soon be eating pizza slices and spaghetti bolognese in such opulent surroundings.

Our time with the Flaglers concludes with the tour, but that's not the end of hearing about their impact on St. Augustine; in fact, the story continues just a few steps across the road where Henry Flagler constructed his second property, the Hotel Alcazar, which was open for business just short of a year after the Ponce de Leon.

While built to accommodate the overflow of guests from his first hotel (which proved to be an enormous success), the Alcazar also served as a recreation hub that appealed to the hotel's trendy clientele. While well-to-do parents and grandparents might be situated at the Ponce de Leon, their privileged children – think of them as the millennials of the early 20th century – would check-in here.

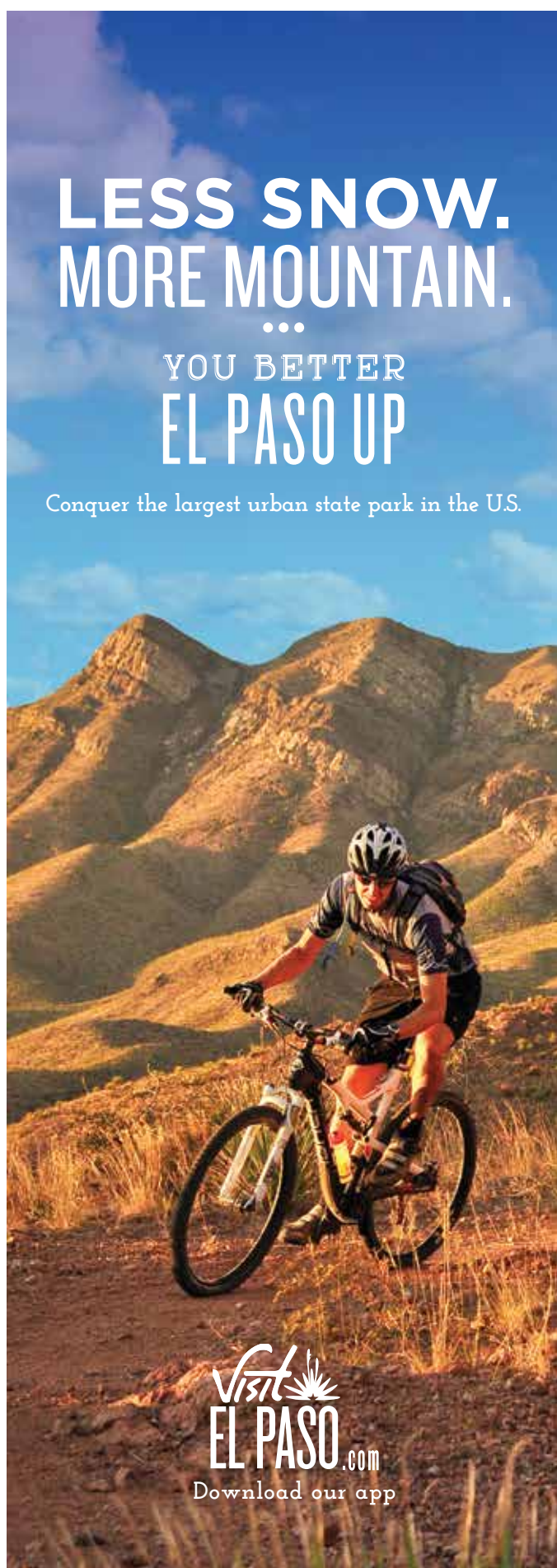
Elizabeth, our guide at the Alcazar (which also operates as the Lightner Museum today), walks us through how a visitor of the hotel in its heyday might experience the property. Our first stop is the spa, complete with a steam room, massaging spray showers and a sauna. As we sit on the sauna's bleacher-like raised seating, Elizabeth tells us that the room was nicknamed "The Senate" for the important business deals and handshake agreements that were inevitably passed here between its elite – albeit sweaty – guests.

But the most impressive part of the Alcazar's recreational amenities is definitely its indoor swimming pool, which was advertised as the world's largest at the time. It's easy to be mesmerized by the succession of columns and curving arches, imagining how the space ➤

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St. Augustine town square and fountain.

was once filled with naturally-warmed sulfurous water. A ladder along the side of one wall, where guests could climb up to a trapeze, still remains.

There are a few parts of the hotel that we're unfortunately not able to tour because the Alcazar's former guest rooms today largely function as St. Augustine's City Hall. Alongside curious tourists, the mayor might be deciding on the next year's budget or residents could be submitting applications for municipal employment. The city's ability to repurpose historic buildings for everyday use while keeping doors open for the public to visit and admire is impressive. This seamless integration might be why there's an affable sense of pride among the locals for St. Augustine's history; these structures are part of their past, present and future.

And that is just as cool as any beach vacation. **CT**

When You Go

WHAT TO DO: Touted as the "oldest street in the U.S.," the main stretch of **Aviles** now operates as St. Augustine's central strip. Granted, this pedestrianized street is heavy with tourist traps but, in between, you'll discover historical gems like the Spanish Military Hospital Museum and the St. Augustine Historical Society Research library. Historical plaques make it easy to spot these sites and learn more about the city's history at your own pace.

WHAT TO BUY: The spice that graces many of St. Augustine's signature dishes is the Datil pepper. These small but powerful capsicums, which have a similar heat level to the habanero, grow year-round here. You'll find plenty of local purveyors incorporating the Datil into their own creations, from mustards to jellies and hot sauces. Our favourite comes from **Hot Shot Bakery & Cafe**, which also hosts an annual Chocolate Dipped Datil Pepper Eating Contest.



WHERE TO EAT: The Spanish were the first to settle in St. Augustine in 1565, making the Latin focus of **Michael's Tasting Room** an appropriate place to dine in the city. Alongside their food menu – which combines local, seasonal ingredients with Spanish recipes (the hanger steak shouldn't be missed) – an impressive wine list includes plenty of prized bottles in the triple digits if you're in the mood to splurge.

WHERE TO DRINK: The Best Craft Gin Distillery in America of 2016, as named by readers of USA Today, makes a fitting spot to enjoy a tipple or three. Free tours of **St. Augustine Distillery** happen every half hour, leading guests through the distillation process of their signature gin as well as bourbon, vodka and rum. Afterwards, head to the adjacent **Ice Plant**, a prohibition era-themed restaurant and bar with a small but attentive menu that flaunts Florida's proximity to fresh seafood. Appropriately, each item on its excellent craft cocktail menu details the ice cube specially chosen to best enhance the beverage's characteristics.