

# A1A DRIVING TOUR

## Roll down the windows and let the salt air breeze whisk your cares away

By Laura Hampton

There are many ways to experience the beach culture in St. Johns County, but a road trip down A1A Scenic & Historic Coastal Byway is a quintessential East Coast Florida experience.

Famous worldwide as the center of beach culture in the U.S. (think Spring Break in Daytona Beach), the 338-mile expanse of highway runs from the northern end of Florida in Fernandina Beach to the southern tip of Florida in Key West.

In St. Johns County, A1A is mostly two-lane roadway and begs for off-the-beaten path exploration.

Though A1A is lined with artist's and artisan's shops, restaurants and tourist attractions, the well-preserved natural green spaces in St. Johns County make our section of the historic roadway special.

Technically, you could drive the 55 miles of oceanside highway in an hour, but we recommend a much more leisurely pace.

Our two-day A1A driving tour highlights some pretty cool spots on this scenic coastal road, but we bet you'll discover many more treasures of your own.



Photo by Christina Kelso

*The Matanzas River meets the Atlantic Ocean on A1A just south of Fort Matanzas and north of Marineland. The Matanzas Inlet offers a unique view of coastal living with houses on stilts, white sand beaches, clear blue water and an abundance of shore birds.*

# DAY 1

See map on page 54



## Breakfast Metro Diner ★1

Serving up down-home Southern cuisine since 1938, Metro Diner wins awards year after year for best breakfast and was featured in Southern Living's "Off the Beaten Path" cookbook.

Breakfast favorites include Fried Chicken & Waffle, Biscuits & Sausage Gravy and Yo Hala on the Square — French toast stuffed with bananas, brown sugar and cream cheese topped with a blueberry-strawberry compote and powdered sugar. Yum!

**Location:** Sawgrass Village Shopping Center, 340 Front St. #700

**Info:** 904-513-8422

## Cultural Center at Ponte Vedra Beach ★2

An 8,000-square-foot multipurpose facility crackling with energy, the cultural center's two galleries — the Scene and the Main — promote and foster local artists.

The facility is a hub for local artists and holds adult and children's art classes and workshops for beginner through advanced levels. Many students are nurtured right there in the center from beginner to exhibition-level artist.

The center presents eight exhibitions each year. The galleries are free and open to the public.

**Location:** 50 Executive Way, Ponte Vedra Beach

**Info:** 904-280-0614

## North Beach Access – Ponte Vedra Beach ★3

A statue of Juan Ponce de Leon watches over the Guana Wildlife Preserve at 30 degrees 8 minutes north latitude, also known as the North Ponte Vedra Beach Access. The site is believed by some historians to correspond with the offshore location where Ponce de Leon calculated his fleet's position when he first sighted Florida. Though this is debated, of course, a visit to this location with boardwalk access to the beach stirs the imagination. The site has been preserved in its natural condition and looks very much the same as it did in March 1513 when the Spanish conquistador came ashore to the New World.

**Location:** 7 miles north of Guana River Road



## Lunch GTM Research Reserve ★4

Pack a picnic for lunch in the coastal wetlands.

The Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve protects more than 73,000 acres of estuarine lands and waters. Miles of trails lead through freshwater marshland, a maritime hammock, mesic flatwoods and a tidal salt marsh. Facilities include picnic areas, informational kiosks, benches and a small boat launch.

Tip: If you forget to pack a lunch, stop at the Oceanfront Food Store, 2711 S. Ponte Vedra Blvd., for boiled peanuts and sweet tea — the quintessential Southern picnic.

**Location:** 505 Guana River Road

## GTM Research Reserve Environmental Education Center ★5

Spend a couple of hours learning about the many functions of the coastal and estuarine ecosystem and natural environment.

The center's exhibit hall is filled with different ecosystems including a ceiling-mounted life-size North

Atlantic right whale and calf, loggerhead turtle, bottlenose dolphin and manta ray. The hall includes three living exhibits (saltwater, brackish and freshwater aquariums), a bird viewing scope, a beach diorama and an estuary diorama. Open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day (except state holidays). Admission is \$2 for adults and \$1 for children 10 to 17. Children under age 10 are free.

**Location:** 505 Guana River Road

**Info:** 904-823-4500



## Francis and Mary Usina Bridge ★6

Spanning the Tolomato River, the bridge connects Vilano Beach to St. Augustine. The bridge is named after Captain Usina who skippered the sightseeing vessel Victory II in the early 1900s. Usina ferried guests to and from "North Beach" for Minorcan-style dinners, oysters, music and dancing.

A walk to the top of the bridge offers breathtaking views of the Intracoastal Waterway to the north and downtown St. Augustine to the south. For a different perspective, take the nature walk under the bridge and check out the coastal-inspired mosaic tile art.

**Location:** Vilano Beach

## Dinner Cap's on the Water ★7

New coastal cuisine in an Old Florida-style dining atmosphere, Cap's on the Water is consistently ranked high on the list of favorites for locals. Here, lo-





cal, fresh seafood is served with traditional Southern and Mediterranean flavors. Though a casual dining experience, romantic sunsets over the Intracoastal Waterway make dining here special-occasion worthy.

**Location:** 4325 Myrtle St.  
**Info:** 904-824-8794

### Magic Beach Motel ★ 8

A retro 1950s beach motel, Magic Beach's décor features bright colors, pink flamingos and neon lights. Originally named the Vilano Beach Motel, the name changed in 1999 when the series "Safe Harbor" was filmed here. The series starred Rue McClanahan and Gregory Harrison. Though it was cancelled after just 10 episodes, the motel's neon sign still bears the rabbits and hat that were added for the show. The property went through a major renovation in 2012 during which the motel was modernized with a vision of safeguarding its original character.

**Location:** 50 Vilano Road  
**Info:** 904-342-5263

## DAY 2

### Breakfast

### Mary's Harbor View Cafe ★ 9

A cozy cafe with a charming bayfront view, Mary's is known for fluffy golden biscuits. Northern, eastern and western omelets are made to order, and the Eggs Benedict sometimes gets the coastal treatment with fresh seafood.

**Location:** 16 Avenida Menendez

### Bridge of Lions ★ 10

Spanning the Intracoastal Waterway (or Matanzas River), the bridge connects downtown St. Augustine with Anastasia Island. Two marble lions guard the bridge on the west side. The lions, Firm and Faithful, have been a part of the structure since the original bridge was complete in 1927. Two sibling lions were erected on the east side of the bridge in 2015. The granite lions do not have official names.

**Location:** Downtown St. Augustine

### The St. Augustine Lighthouse & Museum ★ 11

Built in 1874, the St. Augustine Lighthouse is the oldest in the state of Florida and the 10th tallest in the U.S. The 219-step climb to the top is well worth the breathtaking view of the ocean and downtown St. Augustine.

**Location:** 81 Lighthouse Ave.  
**Info:** 904-829-0745

### Tom's Fruits & Gifts ★ 12

Opened in 1970 by father and son team, Tom and Bill Grohowski, Tom's Fruits & Gifts is an Old Flori-







da-style souvenir shop. Shells from all over the world and tropical-themed keepsakes cover every inch of the open air market. It's a fun place to stop even for locals.

**Location:** 1812 A1A South  
**Info:** 904-471-2355

### St. Johns County Pier ★13

Though many visit the pier to fish, it's also a great place to see the ocean from a different angle. Located on a 4-acre beachfront park with volleyball courts, a playground and splash park, the pier also has a gift shop that sells refreshments and beach items. Admission to the pier is \$1 for sightseers, \$2 for fishing residents and \$3 for non-residents.

**Location:** 350 A1A Beach Blvd.  
**Info:** 209-0326



### Lunch Stir it Up ★14

A cool beach vibe and healthy eats make Stir it Up a great lunch spot. Pitas, sandwiches and quesadillas are served with an emphasis on fresh, local food. Refreshing smoothies are also available for the sun-drenched.

**Location:** 18 A St.  
**Info:** 904-461-4552

### Ocean Hammock Park ★15

Located on 11 ½ acres near the Anastasia Island Publix, the park features a 1,700-square-foot wooden boardwalk to the beach. The walkway cuts through

green space preserved in its natural state. The marshland serves as home to cedar trees, live oaks, birds and other wildlife.

**Location:** A1A Beach Boulevard South

### Butler Beach Park ★16

Established by prominent local businessman Frank B. Butler in the 1920s, Butler Beach is steeped in African-American history. Butler took the lead in acquiring land on Anastasia Island where blacks could enjoy the ocean. Over time, he developed a residential subdivision, a casino, a motel and a beach resort in the area. By 1948, there were more than 10 African-American-owned businesses at Butler Beach, and it was a thriving tourist attraction. During segregation, Butler Beach was the only beach between Jacksonville and Daytona Beach open to blacks.

**Location:** Minnie Street, Butler Beach

### Fort Matanzas ★17

Constructed by the Spanish in 1742 to protect the southern entrance to St. Augustine, Fort Matanzas



was built with labor provided by convicts, slaves and additional troops from Cuba. Like the Castillo de San Marcos, the outpost was built with readily available coquina. After years of decay, the fort was resurrected in the 1930s as one of FDR's Works Progress Administration projects. Open to the public since 1939, Fort Matanzas National Park includes a visitor's center, nature trails and a shaded picnic area. Because of damage from Hurricane Matthew, ferry operations to the fort itself have been temporarily suspended, but the park still welcomes guests.

**Location:** 8635 A1A South  
**Info:** 904-471-0116

### Dinner Viola's Pizza, Pasta & Seafood ★18

Owner Andy Viola knows a thing or two about Italian food. He is a third-generation Italian from Long Island, New York, and grew up cooking in his grandmother's kitchen. He also knows a thing or two about restaurants. Viola's is the eighth St. Augustine restaurant Andy and wife, Helen, have owned. The 100-seat capacity restaurant (with pet-friendly patios) is packed almost every night with locals, and visitors coming back over and over again for the made-fresh-daily meatballs, lasagna, ravioli, breads, pasta, sauces, soups and desserts. Open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday–Thursday and 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

**Location:** 6149 A1A South  
**Info:** 904-471-2981