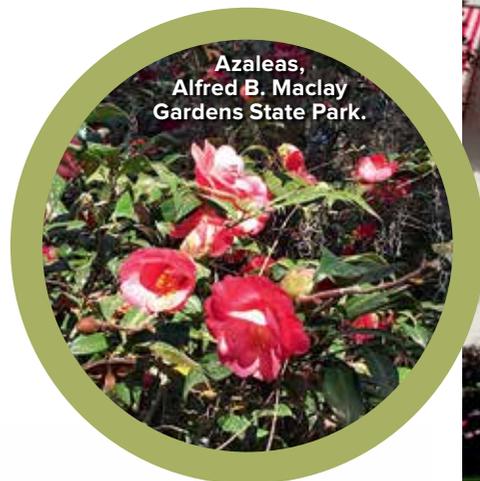


# Tallahassee

## DISCOVER SOUTHERN CHARM IN NORTHERN FLORIDA

By Rob & Wendy Lindsay



Azaleas, Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park.

**T**allahassee became the capital of Florida in 1824, just over 20 years before the territory became the 27th US state. But why was the spot—almost isolated in the north and not even a city at the time—chosen as the capital, when all the action is down south? History holds the answer.

In 1822, a year after the Spanish ceded the territory to the United States, only an east-west strip of northern Florida had been settled by Europeans. Pensacola was then the capital of West Florida, and on the Atlantic Coast, St. Augustine was the capital of East Florida. Getting together for an all-Florida meeting was an arduous task that took from 28 to 59 days, depending on the meeting point and the route. The story goes that each city sent out an overland party to meet in the middle and choose a common capital.



The House of Representatives chamber, Florida's Capitol Complex.

ida Territory, the largest of which was Mission San Luis, near an Apalachee village (the Apalachee were the local Indigenous people). From 1656 to 1704, Mission San Luis was the western capital of Spanish Florida. This history may also have influenced the decision about where to place the new capital.

The modern city of Tallahassee is only 22.5 kilometres (14 miles) from the Georgia state line. With its stately antebellum

Another version of the story has eastern and western delegates simply looking at a map together and choosing a spot in the middle.

In addition, during the 17th century, the Spanish had established numerous missions across what later became Flor-

homes, lovely gardens, and towering oaks draped with Spanish moss, the city definitely has a southern feel. This part of the Florida Panhandle has four distinct seasons—unlike what locals refer to as Tropical Florida to the south. It's usually cooler and rarely affected by the hurricanes that batter the rest of the state. Surrounded by natural areas on all sides, the city is a popular spot for hiking, mountain biking, canoeing, and kayaking, and it's one of the best places in Florida for birding.

### The Old Capitol

During our visit, we stayed at Hotel Duval for two reasons: its central downtown location and the great city view from its rooftop lounge. Housed in a refurbished 1950s building, the Duval is eclectically and artistically furnished.

On our first morning, after a hearty breakfast at our hotel, we visited the Capitol Complex, located near the heart of the city. It includes the Old Capitol, built in 1845 and now handsomely restored to its 1902 version. The Old Capitol stands on a hill overlooking Monroe Street and Apalachee Parkway. It's an impressive sight with its white columns glistening in the sun and red-and-white candy-striped awnings complementing the large American flag flying against the clear blue sky. The building today contains the Florida Historic Capitol Museum.

The rotunda reflects the stately elegance of a bygone era with a spectacular art-glass dome overhead and a broad staircase leading to the second floor. Visitors can wander freely, visiting the old Supreme Court Chamber

on the main floor and the old Senate Chamber and House Chamber on the second floor. All the furniture and the lovely carved wood panelling in the Senate and the House are original.

There are many historic artifacts, but the most unusual is in Room 113. A glass case displays a pair of well-worn boots with a hole in the sole. These are the boots of Lawton Chiles, who campaigned to become a senator in 1970 by walking the length of Florida, more than 1,600 kilometres (1,000 miles) from the panhandle to the Florida Keys. He estimated that he met more than 40,000 people along his route. Nicknamed Walkin' Lawton, he won election to the Senate and later became the governor of Florida.

The new legislature and offices are located behind the Old Capitol in



Florida's Capitol Complex.

Photos: Lindsay Editorial.

Photo: iStock/Aneesse

Florida's Capitol Complex. Top: Stained-glass dome of the Dome; middle: The rotunda; bottom row: Goodwood Museum & Gardens.



The boots of Lawton Chiles, who campaigned for the senate.



the modern 22-storey New Capitol, added in 1978. The top floor is an enclosed observation deck. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate are open to the public when in session, although security is extensive before entering either one.

Nearby we popped into Goodies Eatery bistro for more of the Tallahassee-brewed Lucky Goat coffee we'd discovered with our hotel breakfast. The waitress pointed out the special "iHeartTallyBlend" coffee, and it was good, too. When yet another takeout carafe full of Lucky Goat was being carried out the door, she joked that the House and Senate run on the coffee.

Our next stop was Goodwood Museum & Gardens. Set amid centuries-old draped oaks, it covers 20 acres (eight hectares) of what was originally a 2,400-acre (971-hectare) cotton plantation—a portion of the land grant given French Marquis de Lafayette as a thank you for his assistance in the Battle of New Orleans against the British. The 1830s antebellum mansion still showcases original family furniture, porcelain, glassware, and linens that history buffs and antique collectors will find fascinating. Outside, you can wander among 20 structures dating from 1835 to 1925.

After seeing the elegantly set dining room at Goodwood, we were in the mood for a great lunch and we found it at Food Glorious Food (FGF). Located on Thomasville Road, in the same part of town as Goodwood, the award-winning restaurant has been a local favourite for over 30 years. However, it's tricky to locate, being on the lower floor of a small plaza and with only two small signs. The menu changes daily, sometimes even twice a day if owner-chefs Kevin and Michelle Stout find more local ingredients to offer or, more likely,

have run out of something—the place is always full.

Although my Cobb salad and Rob's pork Cuban were both very good, the desserts were especially memorable. FGF's cakes and pastries are legendary, and it would be a crime not to at least share one—although choosing which one to order can be difficult. The sign above the door reflects this: RESTAURANT, FULL BAR, DESSERT.

### Cars and Gardens

Just off Interstate 10 at Exit 269A is the Tallahassee Automobile Museum—100,000 square feet of showroom featuring more than 165 trucks, antique cars, muscle cars, and movie cars. And that's not all: there are literally dozens of other collections of Americana—boats, outboard motors, Steinway pianos, pedal cars, brass electric fans, and the horse-drawn hearse that carried President Lincoln's body. There are collections of antique cash registers, baseball cards, pocket watches, and knives, both on display and for sale.

The collectibles are fine, but the cars are beautiful. Curator Jack Adkins researched the vehicles and designed a placard for each one, describing some of the main features. Glistening under the lights, each car looks to be in showroom condition, and some were in fact purchased new or with very low mileage.

The description of the 1931 Duesenberg Model J, for example, tells how E.L. Cord, who bought Duesenberg Motors in 1926, told co-founder Fred Duesenberg to "design an automobile that would be the best in the world, the biggest, fastest, and most expensive car ever made."

Walking this museum is to walk with your memories. In our case, for instance, a '67 Mustang Coupe in robin's-egg blue was a reminder of

Rob's first "new" car, and a white '61 Chrysler Imperial was like the one that Rob's buddy's dad would occasionally lend to him for a fun Saturday night. Nearby is the DeLorean from the film *Back to the Future*. A special section houses Batmobiles from the *Batman Returns* and *Batman Forever* movies.

Across the street from the museum is Backwoods Crossing, a farm-to-table restaurant where the menu changes every week with new "garden creations." After our hefty lunch at FGF, we decided to forgo another big meal, opting for appetizers and bowls of blue crab corn bisque, which were excellent.

The next morning, we headed north and followed Interstate 10 east



Top row: Tallahassee Automobile Museum; above: Backwoods Crossing restaurant.

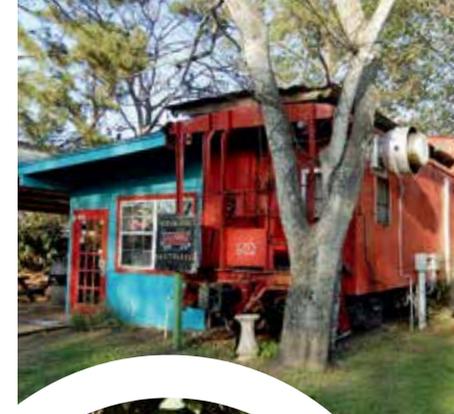
to Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park. The park is popular with gardeners and photographers alike, particularly during the winter and spring blooming season, which in that part



Photos: Lindsay Editorial; map: Getty Images/Photodisc.



Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park: The arched gateway gives a view onto the lake.



Railroad Square Art Park: From left, inside the Breezeway Market; Mark Dickson's studio and his cast-brass wind bells; Proof Brewing Company.



Pink azaleas.

Railroad Square Art Park: The Crum Box, housed in a vintage red caboose, left, and Breezeway Market, right.

Maclay and his wife, Louise; it was they who designed the gardens.

The stroll along the lakeside path towards the historic cottage was beautifully memorable. A canopy of oak branches arched overhead, the sun filtering through the Spanish moss, and beside us, banks of pink and white azaleas lined the brick walkway. After touring the house, it was fun to stand on the steps and look out towards the lake, enjoying the view the Maclays must have had. Near the house is one of our favourite spots—the Walled Garden. From the east end, an arched gateway gives a view towards the lake down a long reflecting pool. But viewed from the other end, like magic, the reflecting pool disappears. Wandering among the acres of gardens was wonderfully relaxing.

of Florida runs from January through April. We visited in early March, when camellias were still in bloom and azaleas were just starting to flower.

At the visitor centre, we were surprised to meet a fellow Canadian, Barry from Dartmouth, NS. He and his wife, Ann, have volunteered there for six winters. Barry explained that the land had once been the winter home of New York financier A.B.



A canopy of live oak arches above the brick walkway.



Tallahassee Museum: One of sculptor Jim Gary's 20th-century dinosaurs.



A black bear napping at the Tallahassee Museum.



Endangered Florida Panther.



Bellevue Plantation house.

One could easily spend a whole day at Maclay, for the state park now offers hiking and mountain-biking trails, bridle paths for horses, and canoeing, fishing, and swimming in Lake Hall. It's also a lovely spot for picnics.

Next we headed to the southwest of the city and the Tallahassee Museum, one of the most visited outdoor attractions in all of northern Florida. The 52-acre natural history museum has something for all ages. If you've never seen the endangered Florida panther, this museum is the place to go. It houses Florida's only collection of purely indigenous wildlife. There are black bears, red wolves, river otters, white-tailed deer, alligators, and bald eagles, all viewed from an elevated easy-access boardwalk above the pens, which minimizes human interaction with these rescued animals.

Another area reflects southern history, with a farm and 14 historical buildings including the Bethlehem Missionary Baptist church. The modest Bellevue Plantation house is on the US National Register of Historic Places, partially because the owner, Catherine Willis, was related to George Washington and her cousin by marriage was Napoleon III.

In another area are the ever popular zip lines through the trees. Keep your eyes peeled in the swampy areas and among the trees you may spy some of US sculptor Jim Gary's 20th-century dinosaurs, imaginatively created out of antique auto parts.

### Hobo Art

Back near downtown Tallahassee, nestled between the two universities—Florida A&M and Florida State—is Railroad Square Art Park, a unique and funky spot not to be missed. The

historic warehouse district has been transformed into an eclectic, colourful mix of arts, sports, and theatre. The site was originally a lumberyard but is now home to more than 50 local artists' studios, galleries, and small shops. It's a wonderfully creative space and a fun place to wander.

Manager Lillian Fowler guided us on a quick overview of its wide variety of offerings. At Mark Dickson's studio, we admired his cast-brass wind bells. Michael West showed us his sculptures in marble, alabaster, and bronze. A few doors down, Mika Fowler's small press takes you back in time to when lead type was hand-set.

His expertise in producing everything from unique business cards to one-of-a-kind art posters was fascinating.

There was a vintage clothes shop and a used bookshop. The Mickee Faust Club theatre is across the street from an old lumberyard building that is now Breezeway Market, housing about a dozen little shops. You can book a guided kayak tour with Harry Smith Outdoors, challenge your muscles at the climbing wall, or try your skill at one of 30 vintage pinball machines. For a snack, we stopped in at The Crum Box Gastgarten, housed in a vintage red caboose. Apparently "crum box" and "crummie" are hobo

Photos: Lindsey Editorial.



Cascades Park and The Edison Restaurant. Below: The 25-foot waterfall in the park.



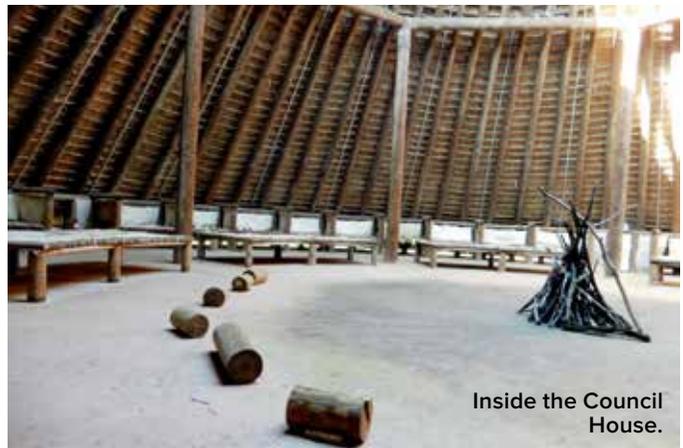
Mission San Luis: Reconstructed Mission church complex.



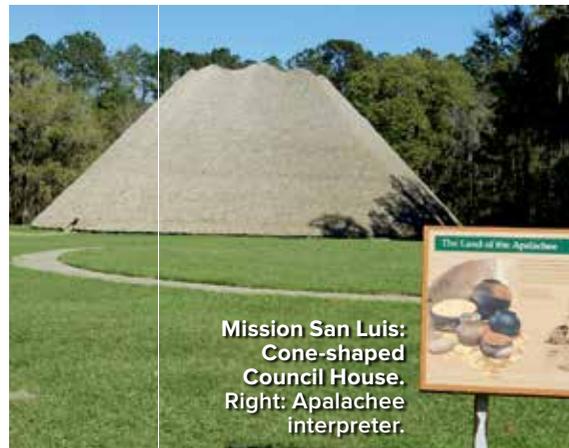
Mission San Luis: Franciscan church, interior. Right: Claudio de Florence playing the role of a Franciscan friar.



The front door of the Mission San Luis visitor centre.



Inside the Council House.



Mission San Luis: Cone-shaped Council House. Right: Apalachee interpreter.



slang for a caboose. The Crum Box is famous for its grind-to-grill sausage, and we found their hoagies good, too. While there, check out the hilarious hobo art on the bathroom walls.

Railroad Square is perhaps best known for its First Friday Gallery Hop—Tallahassee’s longest running monthly festival, now in its 19th year. There’s a festive air as streets fill with wandering shoppers and food trucks arrive to feed the happy crowds.

When we were there, Proof Brewing Company was the favourite watering hole and a hopping place on First Fridays. However, it has since relocated. After four years at Railroad Square, the first and largest independent brewery in Tallahassee moved downtown. Lead brewer David Kant-Rauch explained that the craft brewery had been very well received in Tallahassee and beyond, doubling its production each year. The company has taken over a 70-year-old former Coca-Cola bottling plant with a potential production capacity of 30,000-plus barrels. In addition, there’s room for an expanded tasting room, a retail store, a private event space, a kitchen, and a beer garden.

Kant-Rauch told us that he had

grown up in Tallahassee, left, and then returned in 2012. He had always felt that Tallahassee was a place people went for a degree or a legislative session and then left. However, he says, these days, more people are going in order to pursue a degree and staying to live and work in the city.

### A Spanish Mission

By this time, we were hungry once again and headed for Cascades Park and The Edison Restaurant. The Edison is in a former city electrical power plant, with exposed brick walls and high arched windows. There is an events room upstairs and a covered deck outside, looking out onto the park.

As we ate our meal (fried green tomatoes followed by Seminole short ribs and Boot Ranch pork chops), we learned more about the park.

The park’s 25-foot waterfall was apparently part of the reason those appointed to find a location for the capital back in 1822 chose to put the capitol building on the hill nearby. Much later, the town allowed a gasification plant and a landfill at the southern end of the valley, both of which produced dangerous residue.

The area was cleaned up over several years and the park was reopened in 2014. It now includes multi-use trails, an interactive water fountain, a play-scape called Discovery, and Capital City Amphitheater. Also located there is Florida’s Prime Meridian marker (the starting point for government surveys in the state), along with numerous historical markers.

Our visit ended where Tallahassee began—at Mission San Luis, a short distance west of Tallahassee’s city centre. The mission has been reconstructed on the spot where it stood those many years ago and is now designated a US National Historic Landmark. Although Spanish Florida had more than 100 colonial missions, San Luis is the only one that has been both reconstructed and opened to the public. It’s a fascinating place.

The modern visitor centre was built to resemble an old Spanish mission, with entry through massive wooden ceremonial doors hand-carved with Apalachee and Spanish themes.

As we walked out onto the 63-acre (25.5-hectare) site, we saw that the major buildings were gathered around a central plaza, as they had been in the

past. To the left was the mission church, large even by today’s standards. It was there that we met Claudio de Florence, in his brown homespun cassock, playing the role of a Franciscan friar. He explained the original plank-and-thatch church would have been built by the Apalachee and Spanish working together and become the focus of religious life for both societies. Friars like him would have trained a choir, taught school, and

aided with simple medicines, as well as leading the religious life of the community.

There was much to see—the friary, an Apalachee dwelling, a blacksmith’s forge, a Spanish house, and on the edge of the site, a fortified blockhouse.

But most intriguing was the immense conical Council House across the plaza from the church. “Friar” de Florence explained that the imposing five-storey thatched structure, 125 feet

in diameter, was practical as well as impressive, as it could accommodate up to 3,000 people for ceremonies. Another guide, Daija, who is of Seminole ancestry, described how the platforms around the circumference of the Council House would each have housed a family during ceremonies—the closer to the chief, the greater the prestige. As Daija described the large ceremonial gatherings, it was easy to imagine the cacophony of sound as hundreds of people filled the space—friends calling greetings, babies crying, young children running about, and elders gathered in small groups for serious discussion. However, now the central firepit was burning low and all was quiet—and it was time to leave the Council House. And Tallahassee. ■