

Historical Luxury in the Heart of the Oldest City

By Beth Graham





intricately hand-painted ceilings. Executive Chef Aaron Chavarria recently re-imagined the menu, which now offers guests tapas style dining, a throwback to his days of cooking as a child with his mother in his native Nicaragua. Everything was made with fresh, local ingredients paired with healthy tropical fruits and flavorful herbs, so Chef Aaron has brought this experience to 95 Cordova. The menu features Spanish- and Mediterranean-inspired small plates that are simple, yet elegant.

Chef Aaron wants guests to experience different flavors by offering small plates for sharing, such as conch Carpaccio topped with oil infused with St. Augustine's iconic datil pepper, tuna cured in cumin, a goat cheese medallion with pomegranate syrup over arugula, and salmon cured in Limóncello. Tapas are a great way to please all palates, and the Casa Monica certainly sees its share of international guests. Best of all, loyal local diners don't have to travel abroad to experience rich, exotic flavors.

Most evenings, you'll find a mix of guests and locals in the Cobalt Lounge, listening to live music which, in keeping with Spanish traditions, may include the unmistakable sounds of flamenco guitars or classic jazz. Guests come for the music, but also for the hand-crafted cocktails.

Casa Monica is also home to the Grand Bohemian Gallery, an in-house art gallery that showcases local and international artists' work, including paintings, sculptures, ceramics and jewelry.

There's certainly plenty to explore within the walls of Casa Monica, from its décor to food and art. Once you step outside and into America's oldest city, your inner explorer will take over with the city's famed historic attractions and museums. After a day of walking and sightseeing, it's great to return to the modern luxury of Casa Monica.

I'll put St. Augustine up against any other U.S. city in terms of charm. Sure, as America's oldest city, it's bustling with historical ambiance and attractions, but it also has a certain je ne sais quoi that adds a level of quaintness I don't find in other cities. This ranges from the historic district lined with cobblestone streets to quaint cafes and offbeat artisan shops.

St. Augustine, located just 30 minutes south of Jacksonville, was established in 1565 by Spanish explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and the Spanish influence is still prevalent throughout the city. The many historic structures – Fort Matanzas, Castillo de San Marcos, the Lightner Museum and even the Fountain of Youth – make you feel as though you're in another era.

The city's only luxury hotel is an attraction unto itself. Situated in the heart of the downtown district and just steps from the Matanzas Bay, is the historic Casa Monica Hotel.

Built in 1888, the hotel opened with

only three guests and struggled through its early years. Rough times forced the hotel to close in 1932, and it then served as the county courthouse for three decades. In 1997, The Kessler Collection acquired the property and, following a \$10 million restoration, Casa Monica Hotel debuted once again as the luxurious destination it is today.

The moment you step into this Mediterranean revival-style building, you'll know you're someplace special. The lobby transports you to an ancient era with Moroccan frescos, exquisite tapestries and luxurious chandeliers that feel more like a palace than a hotel. But don't let that fool you – the hotel is blessed with the best of all modern day amenities. Each of the 138 guestrooms has its own unique style, with furnishings and décor fit for a king and queen. If you're feeling especially royal, suites are the way to go. The Ponce de Leon Suite is a two-story tower suite with a striking, wrought iron four-poster bed and panoramic views of the

historic district and St. Augustine's picturesque bay. The Flagler Suite is a luxurious three-story tower suite, with two bedrooms and a living room offering views of the magnificent Lightner Museum. Its third floor bedroom features colorful glasswork windows from the hotel's original construction in 1888.

The Casa Monica's restaurant, 95 Cordova, has been a favorite among locals for years, for its haute cuisine served in an eclectic dining room filled with lavish antiques and

