

THE CITY YOU'RE MISSING

Jacksonville

In this diverse corner of Florida, you'll find urban bustle, small-town charm, and outdoor adventure.

BY MILES HOWARD



Downtown Jacksonville

A monster steel-gray Toyota Tacoma is catching up to me fast. It's a broiling Sunday morning, and I'm driving along the interstate just outside of Jacksonville. I had been admiring the tall slash pine trees that flank the highway just before the truck roared up from behind. I quickly move over to let it pass. And that's when I notice the flags flapping in the breeze.

The truck is festooned with miniature teal banners bearing the unmistakable insignia of the Jacksonville Jaguars, the city's NFL team. And as the truck passes, the windows roll down and a grinning middle-aged man with wraparound shades and festively spiked hair leans out and offers me a brief brotherly fist pump before shouting

"Duval!" at the top of his lungs. It's a battle cry. It's game day, and fans are preparing to cheer on their beloved Jags. (Jacksonville is located in Duval County, so this exclamation is also a point of orientation for visitors.) There's something disarmingly sweet about the way the guy in the truck greeted me, and the presumption that I, too, must be heading to the game.

He's right. My first stop on a three-day trip to Jacksonville is to see the Jaguars play on their home field. I already knew that football was something people enjoyed here. But as more cars and trucks

The home of
the Jaguars



adorned with Jaguars flags pass me, horns honking ecstatically, I realize what an understatement that is. I feel like I'm in *Star Wars*, joining a fleet of Rebel X-wing fighters as they prepare to blast into light speed and head for the Death Star. Except that instead of whizzing by stars and planets, we're cruising through palm trees, along the curves of the St. Johns River, and finally, over a bridge toward the high-rises of downtown Jacksonville.

I'm about to learn that Jacksonville isn't just a city. It's a galaxy of its own, and it didn't happen by accident.

Before Hollywood

On a bone-dry day in 1901, an inferno consumed Jacksonville. The city, which served as an outpost for shipping hogs and cattle during the Civil War but had since become known as a growing resort haven for the well-heeled, was in the middle of a drought. In less than 24 hours, the fire incinerated hundreds of wooden houses, destroying more than 140 city blocks and leaving thousands homeless. It was the end of the world.

So the people of Jacksonville built themselves a new one. Architects from New York and Chicago came to help design the new city. Suburbs grew. Modern buildings with electric elevators sprang up downtown. During the city's rapid reincarnation, a new industry took root—moviemaking. Before Hollywood was Hollywood, directors needed a warm climate to shoot pictures. That's

how Jacksonville became “The Winter Film Capital of the World.” It was world-building at its finest, and when the film industry eventually headed west to Southern California, the city of Jacksonville reinvented itself once again. Offering affordable real estate, a unique coastal environment, and a friendly small-town vibe, Jacksonville courted new residents and businesses whose arrival in the city would catalyze the birth of the worlds that make up today's Jacksonville. So I kick off my journey with a foray into the most well-known of these: the world of football.

Go Jags

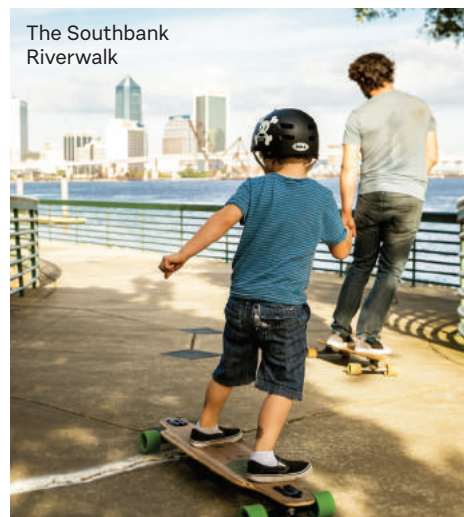
Professional football is a young religion in Jacksonville. Since the city won its NFL franchise in 1993, the Jaguars have transformed Jacksonville into a house of raucous worship on Sundays.

As I drive across the bridge into downtown, I see TIAA Bank Field, a gargantuan white mountain on the riverbank, dwarfing the surrounding buildings. Helicopters orbit the stadium. I drop my car at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront,

slather on some sunscreen, and wander through downtown toward the stadium, which is an easy 15-minute walk from the core of the city. Before long, I've entered a steady procession of Jaguars fans. We're passing by parking lots filled with multigenerational tailgaters laughing and crushing brews. (Tailgating is its own sport here. During the annual Florida–Georgia showdown, tailgaters step up their game and throw a huge outdoor soiree known as “The World’s Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party.”) Fans are decked out in jaguar-print tops, jerseys, and those polo shirts that the NFL hawks, and everyone is really friendly to each other.

This is a revelation to me. I'm from Boston, where sports fans are known to throw entire pizzas at each other. (Seriously.) But in Jacksonville—or “Jax,” as it's called by locals—you can arrive in town as a stranger to Jaguars culture and be adopted by the fans. That's what happens to me. At a crosswalk, an elderly fellow introduces himself as Ken and gives me a recap of the Jaguars' history. As Ken goes on, eyebrows bouncing, an SUV actually slows down to let us cross. Across the street, two young men are holding open the doors of a bustling craft brewery called Intuition Ale Works, practically ordering us to come inside. I do, of course, savoring the air conditioning and an ice-cold red IPA. But I can't stay long. I have a game to catch.

The stadium is across the street from Intuition. As I enter the belly of the beast with thousands of Jaguars fans, I'm surprised by how welcome I feel here, even as my



The Southbank Riverwalk

fair skin crackles in the Florida sun while I track down my seat.

It's hot, and by the time the first quarter is over, I'm ready for another beer, so I start to head downstairs to the shaded lounge deck. But en route, I catch sight of something. Up on the rim of the stadium, there are glass-walled swimming pools in which fans are cooling off and watching the game. The pools were installed along with cabana lounges and even a dog park, making TIAA Bank Field the only NFL venue where you can bring your swimsuit and your schnauzer. All of which reminds you that in Jacksonville, football is more than a Sunday pastime.

Water break

After the game, I'm feeling energized and ready for more. The day is young, so I take a water taxi ride across the St. Johns River, which cuts right through the center of Jacksonville. When I disembark at the Southbank Riverwalk—a waterside pathway decorated by ethereal blue lighting and sculptures—I notice that this enchanting urban trail is surprisingly serene. The only folks I see are a jogger and a young couple on an observation bench.

Geographically speaking, Jacksonville is the biggest city in the continental U.S., with borders that encompass more than 840 square miles of neighborhoods and wildlife areas. On a map, it makes New York look modest. Yet the growing population, with a median age of 36, is still only about 892,000 strong. This means that you can snag dinner reservations with ease, enjoy a romantic walk serenaded by the



Intuition Ale Works

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICE ROSS (BEER) AND RYAN KETTERMAN (RIVERWALK)

sound of birds and rippling water, or—if you're an entrepreneur—find affordable but expansive spaces for pursuing your ventures. With its low cost of living and business-friendly climate, Jacksonville has long proven an appealing place for big-name employers, from Baptist Health to Amazon, which operates several fulfillment centers in the area. In Jacksonville, smaller companies also have room to grow and thrive, especially as young people continue to move to the city and start their own businesses: A 2018 study by the personal finance website SmartAsset found that Jacksonville was the No. 5 destination in the country for millennials on the move.

One distinctly Jacksonville enterprise is Aardwolf Brewing Company, which I come upon after leaving the Riverwalk and trekking through the industrial north end of the San Marco neighborhood. Still coming down from the adrenaline of the Jaguars game, I order a taster and am struck by the San Marco Sour. The beer's



From a kayak, you can see Jax at its best.

GET OUTSIDE

↑ **On the Water** / Rent a kayak from Adventure Kayak Florida and explore Jacksonville from one of its many waterways. The city is also covered in waterfront fishing spots. Try casting a line from the historic Huguenot Memorial Park.

TPC Sawgrass / Northern Florida is home to some of the best golf in the world. If you're willing to spend some serious money on a tee time, go for the iconic Players Championship course at TPC Sawgrass. (For a more approachable option, try the Bent Creek Golf Course.)

Jacksonville-Baldwin Rail Trail / Bike or jog on this paved 14-plus-mile trail, surrounded by woodlands and wildlife.

smokiness complements its tartier champagne notes in an unexpected way. I order one more without hesitation and, just like that, slip into another one of Jacksonville's worlds, the world of creative craftsmanship.

Art walk

No place offers a better glimpse of Jacksonville's appreciation for creativity than Riverside. Once a sprawl of plantation land, this historic neighborhood is now replete with million-dollar waterfront houses and swanky apartment blocks. Fueled by a cafe au lait from Bold Bean Coffee Roasters, I roam the streets and admire the columned facades. Riverside is also home to the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, which contains more than 5,000 objects spanning from 2100 B.C. through the 21st century. Plunked on the riverbank, the grounds include more than 2 acres of gardens and arborways, pairing native trees and flowers with fountains and marble statues.

I share these spaces with families with toddlers and a brawny dude in a WWE shirt. All of them study the art in contemplative silence. In the museum's Italian Garden, I wander around a reflecting pool with teenagers who are Snapchatting the scenery. Art seems to be a shared language in Jacksonville.

I head over to the Five Points district and duck into the colorful 5 Points Vintage to hunt for souvenirs. The owner, Cindy Barfield, greets me at the counter and explains how the store's inventory has transitioned from antiques to kitschier retro swag from more recent decades.

"It's millennials," Barfield explains with a smile. "Our younger residents shape the inventory. Pyrex is very in right now, and turn-of-the-century mixing bowls are out of vogue. The kids also seem to like the industrial steam-punk look."

As I contemplate buying a pair of leather chaps, my messenger bag nudges a shelf and a small china poodle shatters on the ground. I wince and head straight to the register. But when I try to pay for the damage, Barfield refuses my money. "This little guy will go right on the wall," she says, taking the pieces and nodding her head toward the entrance. I step outside and see that the entire front of the store is a mosaic of broken antique pieces. There are shards of Christmas ornaments and action figures. The work of art has been years in the making, and Barfield says it'll only get bigger.

Down the street, I find another site of constant creativity: Black Sheep, an award-winning restaurant specializing in globally influenced (and locally sourced) comfort food. Inside, the owner, a gentle giant named Jonathan Insetta, is conferring with the kitchen crew over menu changes. Insetta is something of a culinary wizard in town. He also founded the buzzy French bistro Restaurant Orsay and the newer Southern chow emporium Bellwether. In person, Insetta is gregarious, self-deprecating, and kind enough to sit down for coffee and share his story. "When I was growing up here in the '80s, we had

Murals adorn the Jacksonville Public Library.



illegal chickens in our backyard, and my mom grew lots of vegetables,” Insetta tells me. “Back then, ‘farm-to-table’ wasn’t even a thing, and none of my friends were doing anything like this. I didn’t embrace it at the time—it just meant more chores for me to do—but it really influenced my food philosophy.”

Black Sheep’s chef and Insetta’s former high school classmate, Waylon Rivers, joins us. “Sports was our gateway into the culinary world,” Rivers says. “I played baseball and football, Jon played basketball, and in the kitchen, you’ve got a similar team mentality where you’re working toward a common goal that’s bigger than you.”

Insetta has been nodding vigorously. “That basically describes this moment in the Jacksonville food scene,” he adds. “People are now starting to recognize this city as a food town. And for us, that’s huge.”

It’s Black Sheep’s off day, so I decide to have lunch at Bellwether, which is back downtown. The cilantro and scallion-garnished chile pepper boiled peanuts are amazing, savory, and infernally spicy, but juicy enough to dissolve in your mouth. The main course remixes shrimp and grits by swapping out the grits for johnnycakes, dressed in a garlic cream and topped with bread-and-butter jalapeños, house bacon, hot sauce, and roasted corn.

Another excellent place to witness more of Jacksonville’s creative side is the public library, which I visit after lunch. The stairways are decorated with enormous murals depicting a thriving community of readers. I take the free



Black Sheep Restaurant

Jax monorail on a scenic trip back over the river to San Marco to visit another untraditional art venue: Baptist MD Anderson Cancer Center. The new 330,000-square-foot treatment center contains more than 700 works of art.

“One of the things we strive for here is curating a patient environment that facilitates healing,” oncology administrator LeeAnn Mengel tells me as I admire some stained-glass butterflies near an elevator. “There’s been so much research done on the effect of placing artwork in treatment centers. It can add color and soften the light in a room.”

By now, I can’t help but ponder what feeds this local proclivity for the arts. Plenty of cities lack the color, craftsmanship, and quirks of Jacksonville. What makes this place so expressive? I contemplate this while ambling over to Treaty Oak Park, which contains one of the oldest live oak trees in Jacksonville. It reminds me of an octopus, with thick branches so long and tentacle-esque that they touch the ground. Walking beneath the mammoth tree, watching my step as some tiny orange lizards scurry across the sidewalk, I wonder what it is that fuels Jacksonville’s creativity, without realizing that the likely answer is staring me in the face.

That evening I’m sitting by the edge of the rooftop lounge at River & Post, a chic seafood restaurant back in Riverside, and I’m finishing my glass of Graffigna malbec when several birds soar overhead. They’re

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICE ROSS (BLACK SHEEP) AND RYAN KETTERMAN (MURAL)

flying east along the St. Johns, beyond downtown, toward the sunset. And I know what awaits out there. It's the wildest and most ancient of Jacksonville's unique worlds—the great outdoors.

Ready for the country

Jacksonville has the largest urban park network in America. We're talking 80,000 acres of vivid green forests, mangroves, riverways, and, most famously, beaches. You don't have to go far to step into any of these environments. I've barely driven 20 minutes from downtown when I stumble upon Castaway Island Preserve, where I stroll along a boardwalk past an estuary that is literally buzzing with life. I push on to Big Talbot Island State Park.

A hike through the verdant forests delivers me to a secluded beach covered with twisted trees. Birds sing overhead. Talk to locals and you'll hear tales of kayak fishing off the coast, cycling along the beaches, paddleboarding on the rivers, and more. But the outdoor activity on my mind today is surfing. The waves are intense, creating "tubes" that crash and spray water everywhere. As I drive south along the coastline, passing bungalows, I can spot daredevils surfing the break on their boards without a care in the world. It looks scary, but also kind of fun.

I end up in nearby Atlantic Beach. After checking into the Hotel Palms, a former motel refashioned as a gorgeous boutique inn, I borrow a complimentary beach cruiser to pedal down to the water. As the sky darkens and the lights of Atlantic Beach come on, the world transitions from golden to deep blue. I venture into town and score a last-minute table at Restaurant Doro, where I enjoy crispy short ribs in an intimate space.

When I step outside after dark, I spot surfers lugging their boards to the beach. I watch them disappear into the moonlight, listening to the gentle roar of the waves.

Well, that was easy

The sun is rising as I drive through the thick, chirping woods of Kathryn Abbey Hanna Park at the north end of Atlantic Beach. I get out of my car, move through the trees, and emerge at a long stretch of beach where Kristen Huth, a surfing instructor with Jacksonville Surf and Paddle, is waiting for me with two colorful boards. She hands me one, and the water is warm as we walk into the ocean. I'm really doing this.

"You should have seen how choppy it was last week," Huth tells me before an oncoming wave cuts the memory short. We both take a deep breath and are submerged as the wave passes over us. After popping back up, we continue into chest-deep water, where Huth helps me point my board toward the beach.

I try to mount the thing and slide right back into the sea, a process I repeat at least 15 times before managing to plant both knees on the board and stay balanced. "OK, here we go," Huth says as another wave surges behind us.



Florida Theatre

THERE GO THE NEIGHBORHOODS

↑ Downtown / Visit the beautiful Florida Theatre, take in some culture at the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville, or try one of more than 90 restaurants in the city's core.

Northside / Offering easy access to Jacksonville's ample great outdoors, the Northside is also home to the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens and the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, which covers thousands of acres of nature along with historic sites of interest.

Springfield / This historic neighborhood features some of Jacksonville's most remarkable architecture and is enjoying an influx of new business, including the Strings Sports Brewery.

"Try to keep centered." I barely hear her as the wave picks up my board and hurls it toward the beach. I get up on both feet and enjoy a millisecond of surfing before flying straight into the drink. The wave crashes, and I resurface.

Time seems to stop as I tread water. What am I doing? How did I get here? What's happening to me? In the past 72 hours, I've transformed into a Jaguars fan, a sour beer drinker, and a really bad surfer. I've become a bit player in an ongoing, decades-old story about a city that built worlds within a world—because that's what Jax does. You enter this city a tourist and leave a different person. Joining the characters here and becoming part of their shared narrative is easy.

You should try it sometime.

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