

SAIL AWAY TO ROMANCE IN ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Lugging my suitcase upstairs, I thought, “This better be worth it.” As soon as I opened the door to the “Celebration Suite,” I knew it was. My husband and I had checked into the Casablanca Inn on the waterfront in historic St. Augustine, Fla., not because it was our wedding anniversary or one of our birthdays, but simply for a relaxing getaway. It turned out that the suite in which we’d be staying offered plenty cause for celebration on its own account.

For starters, a chilled bottle of sparkling wine and assorted treats from Claude’s Chocolate sat waiting for us on a small table between two inviting armchairs that faced the fireplace. But since the weather was warm, we carried our flutes onto our private outdoor veranda. It overlooked the spot on Avenida Menendez where horse-drawn carriages line up for customers and the Matanzas Bay beyond. We climbed onto the wide hammock to savor the panoramic view, sipping bubbly and gently swinging in the soft ocean-scented breeze.

I pulled myself away to answer a ringing telephone. It was friendly Michelle from the front desk, who’d offered to confirm our dinner reservation while handing me the room keys upon check-in. “You’re all set,” she said. “Dinner for two at seven o’clock.” I started filling the Jacuzzi tub. Dean wandered in, clicked on the flatscreen TV and began unpacking his tote bag into the antique armoire.

St. Augustine is the nation’s oldest city, founded by Spanish *conquistadores* in the 16th century. The historic section, in which Casablanca Inn is conveniently located, is easy to navigate by foot. So we left our car parked and walked the few blocks to dinner.

Collage—Artful Global Dining is one of the old city’s newest restaurants. We snagged a table near a window in the cozy bistro’s main dining room. The terra-cotta colored walls were adorned with contemporary vineyard prints. Latin music played at a volume that didn’t inhibit our conversation, which focused primarily on the eclectic menu. Surprised to learn that I’d never had escargot, Dean ordered it as an appetizer. I worried about eating snails, but one bite erased my concern: The earthy flavor of the dense meat was elegantly complimented by a cognac cream sauce. My crab-stuffed shrimp entrée was delicious and rivaled by Dean’s veal scaloppini topped with shrimp, artichoke and a sherry *buerre blanc* sauce. Owners Cindy Stangby and Mike Hyatt created the Bougainvillea Dessert to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the crimson bougainvillea tree outside; it’s a yummy combination of sautéed strawberries with vanilla ice cream, cabernet vanilla sauce and a leaf-shaped phyllo cup.

We wandered back to the Casablanca Inn and stopped at its Tini Martini bar to select our complimentary cocktail—a glass of house wine or beer that’s provided to each overnight guest. The creative blue Atlantic Martini is garnished with a Swedish fish for oceanic whimsy.

The next morning, we decided to explore the 144-block historic district on foot (although tour options via carriage, trolley and train abound). Museums, gift boutiques, B&Bs, restaurants and pubs, galleries, antique stores, entertainment venues and even some kitschy attractions line the streets where age is revered: You can visit the Oldest House (circa 1720), the nation’s Oldest Wooden School House (circa 1763), Oldest Store (1840) and Old Jail (1891). Among the shops, my favorite discovery was Old Florida Spice Traders, stocked with bulk

Casablanca Inn on the Bay in St. Augustine, Florida

IF YOU GO

■ CASABLANCA INN ON THE BAY

24 Avenida Menendez
St. Augustine, FL 32084
800-826-2626
www.casablancainn.com

■ CLAUDE’S CHOCOLATE

904-808-8395
www.claudeschocolate.com

■ COLLAGE—ARTFUL GLOBAL DINING

904-829-0055
www.collageaug.com

■ KINGFISH GRILL CASUAL WATERSIDE DINING

904-824-2111
www.kingfishgrill.com

■ OLD FLORIDA SPICE TRADERS

904-826-3770
www.oldspicetraders.com

■ SCHOONER FREEDOM OF ST. AUGUSTINE

904-810-1010
www.schoonerfreedom.com

■ ST. AUGUSTINE FLORIDA VISITORS INFORMATION CENTER

www.ci-st-augustine.fl.us

spices, teas, herbs, salts and peppers that can be purchased in large quantities or as small as a half-ounce. And any chocoholic like me will adore Claude’s Chocolate, where savory treats created by French chef Claude Franques are available for sale to eat on the spot or hoard for later. Among the 100-plus confections are chocolate-covered almonds and pecans, plus bonbons filled with ganache, liqueur, caramel and more.

For lunch, we drove a short distance outside of St. Augustine’s historic district to the Kingfish Grill at Camanche Cove Marina, since it promised a scenic view and award-winning seafood fare. The space boasts bright décor and a breathtaking view of boats. Friendly

staff members hustled to serve a mix of both tourists and locals. The Kingfish Grill Chowder, an award-winning New England-style clam chowder, proved to be a tasty starter.

Both the spicy crab sushi roll and grilled grouper sandwich, which Dean and I shared, were scrumptious and satisfying.

At 5 p.m., we headed to the marina to board the Schooner Freedom, a replica of a 19th-century blockade-runner. The relaxing two-hour cruise offered views of the city, other boats and marine life. After considering which of the Mexican restaurants we’d passed that day might be best for dinner, I focused on the romantic view. While sipping on cold bottles of beer, we drifted past dolphins at play and watched the sun grow red as it neared the horizon. **SP**



The Schooner Freedom is a replica of a 19th century blockade-runner.



PHOTOS BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK