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Visiting Jacksonville

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Introduction

Welcome to Jacksonville, Florida! Sprawling across Northeast Florida where the St. Johns River meets the Atlantic Ocean, Jacksonville is a vibrant metropolis known for its extensive park system, beautiful beaches, rich history, and thriving arts scene. As the largest city by area in the contiguous United States, "Jax," as locals call it, offers a diverse array of experiences for visitors. From exploring miles of coastline and waterways to discovering unique cultural attractions and enjoying delicious Southern cuisine, this guide will help you navigate and make the most of your visit to the "River City."

Jacksonville's charm lies in its blend of urban sophistication and natural beauty, offering something for every traveler. In this guide, we'll delve into the specifics that make Jacksonville a unique destination, from its pristine beaches like Jacksonville Beach, Neptune Beach, and Atlantic Beach to its renowned cultural institutions such as the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Whether you're interested in history, art, or outdoor adventures, Jacksonville has it all.

One of the city's strengths is its rich and storied history, deeply intertwined with the history of Florida and the United States. This history is on display at numerous sites throughout the city, such as the historic Fort Caroline and the Kingsley Plantation. Our guide will not only direct you to these historical landmarks but will also offer insights into their significance, providing a deeper understanding of Jacksonville's past.

Any visit to Jacksonville would be incomplete without indulging in its burgeoning food scene. Known for its fresh seafood, particularly the famous Mayport shrimp, and its Southern culinary prowess, the city offers a wide range of dining experiences. Our guide will take you through the best dining neighborhoods and introduce you to local favorites and hidden gems alike.

As you plan your trip, it's important to note that Jacksonville is more than its attractions; it's also about the warmth and friendliness of its people, the unique neighborhoods, and the vibrant community life. Encompassing everything from festivals and events to sports and recreation, this guide will help you experience Jacksonville like a local.

Whether you're here for a short stay or an extended visit, Jacksonville invites you to discover its unique character and abundant attractions. We hope this guide serves as a valuable resource, making your exploration of Jacksonville an unforgettable experience. Enjoy your journey through this remarkable city!

CHAPTER ONE: Getting There

Jacksonville's position in Northeast Florida makes it a relatively straightforward destination to reach, whether you're flying in from across the country, driving down the coast, or opting for the rhythmic journey of a train or bus. As the largest city by land area in the contiguous United States, its sprawl is matched by its accessibility, sitting conveniently at the junction of major transportation arteries. No matter your preferred mode of travel, arriving in Jacksonville is the first step towards exploring the diverse experiences the "River City" has to offer, from its sun-drenched beaches to its dynamic downtown core.

For the vast majority of visitors arriving from afar, the journey culminates at Jacksonville International Airport, universally known by its identifier, JAX. Located approximately thirteen miles north of the downtown district, the airport serves as the primary aerial gateway not only for Jacksonville but for the wider Northeast Florida region and even parts of Southeast Georgia. Its accessibility is a key asset, meaning you won't face an arduous trek after landing just to reach the city proper. The drive from the airport to downtown typically takes around 20-30 minutes, depending, of course, on the traffic whims of the moment.

Navigating JAX itself is refreshingly uncomplicated compared to some sprawling mega-hubs. The airport operates with a single, well-organized passenger terminal. Once you clear security, you'll find yourself directed towards one of two concourses: Concourse A or Concourse C. Each concourse houses ten gates, keeping walking distances manageable. This streamlined layout contributes to a less stressful arrival experience, allowing you to transition from air travel to ground exploration more smoothly. The airport's design incorporates local flair, often featuring rotating art exhibits showcasing regional talent, adding a pleasant cultural touch right upon arrival.

A good selection of major US airlines operates regular flights into JAX, connecting Jacksonville directly with key cities across the nation. You'll find carriers like American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines, Southwest Airlines, JetBlue, and others offering numerous daily flights. While the focus is primarily domestic, some limited international service, particularly to Caribbean destinations, might be available depending on the season and airline schedules. It's always wise to check flight availability well in advance, especially if traveling during peak seasons or around major holidays or events like the Florida-Georgia football game.

Once your flight touches down and you've deplaned, you'll follow the signs towards the central terminal area and baggage claim. The baggage carousels are located on the lower level, easily accessible via escalators or elevators. This lower level is also

the central hub for ground transportation, conveniently placing everything you need to continue your journey within easy reach. Free Wi-Fi is typically available throughout the terminal, allowing you to check messages, confirm hotel details, or summon a ride-sharing service as soon as you land.

The airport is well-equipped with traveler amenities. Should you need a quick bite after your flight, you'll find a variety of dining options ranging from fast-food staples to sit-down restaurants and cafes, both before and after security. Similarly, retail outlets offer opportunities to grab forgotten travel essentials, souvenirs, or reading material. ATMs and currency exchange services are also available for financial needs. The airport prides itself on maintaining a clean and efficient environment, often earning high marks from travelers for its ease of use and friendly atmosphere.

Finding your onward transportation from JAX is straightforward. The lower level, near baggage claim, is where you'll find counters for major car rental agencies, the taxi and limousine dispatch areas, designated pick-up zones for ride-sharing services like Uber and Lyft, and stops for hotel shuttles. Signage is generally clear, directing you to the appropriate area for your chosen mode of transport. If you've pre-booked a rental car, you'll typically collect your vehicle from a nearby parking garage connected to the terminal.

For those opting for public transportation directly from the airport, the Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA) offers a viable and economical option. The Route CT3 bus, often referred to as the airport shuttle, provides service between JAX and the downtown Rosa Parks Transit Station. The fare is typically very modest, around two dollars, making it a budget-friendly choice. Be sure to check the JTA schedule in advance, as service frequency might vary, especially on weekends or holidays. The transit station downtown serves as a hub for connecting to other JTA bus routes throughout the city.

Accessibility is a priority at JAX. The airport provides wheelchair assistance, accessible restrooms, TTY phones, and designated parking spaces. Travelers requiring special assistance should ideally notify their airline in advance, but assistance can also be requested upon arrival at the airline check-in counters or information desks. The layout of the terminal, with its elevators and ramps, is designed to accommodate passengers with mobility challenges.

For many visitors, particularly those exploring beyond the immediate downtown area or planning trips to the beaches, arriving by car offers the greatest flexibility. Jacksonville sits strategically at the confluence of two major interstate highways. Interstate 95, the main north-south artery along the Eastern Seaboard, runs directly through the heart of the city, making it a simple drive for those coming from Georgia, the Carolinas, and points north, or from South Florida cities like Miami and Orlando.

Intersecting with I-95 near the city center is Interstate 10, a major east-west transcontinental highway. This makes Jacksonville a natural gateway for travelers arriving overland from the west, connecting cities like Tallahassee, New Orleans, Houston, and beyond all the way to California. The convergence of these two critical interstates underscores Jacksonville's historical and modern role as a transportation crossroads in the Southeast. Driving into Jacksonville via either I-95 or I-10 provides a direct path towards the city's core areas.

Encircling much of Jacksonville is the I-295 beltway, officially known as the Jacksonville Beltway. This loop highway is invaluable for drivers approaching the city. Depending on your final destination, using I-295 can help you bypass potential downtown congestion or provide more direct access to suburban neighborhoods, the Southside business district, or the beach communities to the east. Signage for I-295 is clear as you approach the city limits on both I-95 and I-10. Familiarizing yourself with its path on a map beforehand can save time upon arrival.

Beyond the interstates, several major U.S. highways also converge in Jacksonville, offering alternative scenic or direct routes depending on your origin. U.S. Highway 1 runs parallel to I-95 for much of its length, offering a route through smaller towns. U.S. Highway 17 enters from the north and south, closely following the path of the St. Johns River in places. U.S. Highway 90 mirrors I-10 to the west, while U.S. Highway 301 provides another north-south corridor further inland. These routes often intersect with I-95 and I-295, providing multiple entry points into the Jacksonville area.

As you drive closer to Jacksonville, especially on the interstates, you'll notice an increase in traffic volume, particularly during peak commuting hours (typically weekday mornings and late afternoons). While Jacksonville's traffic isn't generally considered as severe as in some larger Sun Belt cities, slowdowns near major interchanges like the I-95/I-10 junction or where I-295 meets the main arteries are common. Planning your arrival time outside these peak periods can lead to a smoother entry into the city.

One specific roadway to be aware of when approaching certain areas is State Road 202, better known as J. Turner Butler Boulevard or simply "JTB." This major east-west expressway connects I-95 in the Southside area directly towards Jacksonville Beach and Ponte Vedra Beach. Parts of JTB operate as a toll road, utilizing Florida's SunPass system or Toll-By-Plate billing. If your destination is the beaches or certain parts of the Southside, and you're arriving via I-95, you'll likely encounter this route. Cash is generally not accepted at the toll plazas, so ensure your rental car is equipped with a transponder or be prepared for the Toll-By-Plate charge.

Drivers arriving in Jacksonville will find fuel stations and convenience stores plentiful near highway exits. Rest areas are available along I-95 and I-10 further out from the

city, providing facilities before you enter the denser metropolitan area. Signage within Jacksonville is generally good, but having a reliable GPS navigation system or smartphone app is highly recommended, especially given the city's sprawling layout and numerous bridges crossing the St. Johns River and Intracoastal Waterway.

For those who prefer the classic romance and relaxed pace of rail travel, Amtrak offers service directly into Jacksonville. The city's Amtrak station (station code: JAX) is located at 3570 Clifford Lane, which is situated several miles northwest of the downtown core, in an area that's more industrial than tourist-centric. Keep this location in mind when planning your onward journey from the station. It's not typically within walking distance of major hotels or attractions.

Jacksonville is a key stop on Amtrak's Silver Service route, which includes the Silver Meteor and Silver Star trains. These routes connect New York City with Miami, traveling down the East Coast and providing daily service through Jacksonville. This makes train travel a viable option for visitors coming from major cities like Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, Orlando, and Miami. Check Amtrak's schedules for specific timings and potential connections.

The experience of arriving at the Jacksonville Amtrak station is somewhat basic compared to grand terminals in larger cities. The station building itself is functional, offering a waiting area, ticketing services, and restrooms. Amenities are limited, so don't expect extensive dining or shopping options right at the station. Upon disembarking, your immediate priority will likely be securing transportation to your final destination within Jacksonville.

Taxis and ride-sharing services are the most common ways to get from the Amtrak station to your hotel or other points in the city. While some local JTA bus routes may serve the vicinity, navigating them with luggage might be cumbersome, making a direct taxi or Uber/Lyft ride a more convenient choice for most travelers arriving by train. Ensure your phone is charged to arrange a ride-share, or look for designated taxi stands outside the station.

Traveling by train offers a different perspective on the journey. It allows you to relax, watch the scenery unfold, avoid airport hassles, and potentially enjoy more legroom than on a plane. The journey down the coast into Florida can be particularly scenic in parts. However, be aware that train travel often takes significantly longer than flying, and schedules can sometimes be subject to delays. Booking your Amtrak tickets well in advance is recommended, especially for sleeper accommodations or during peak travel periods.

Budget-conscious travelers often turn to intercity bus services, and Jacksonville is well-connected within this network. Greyhound Lines is the primary carrier serving the city, operating routes that link Jacksonville to hundreds of destinations across North

America. Whether you're coming from nearby Florida cities, neighboring states like Georgia or Alabama, or undertaking a longer cross-country journey, bus travel provides an economical way to reach Jacksonville.

The main Greyhound bus station in Jacksonville is conveniently located in the downtown area, near the Jacksonville Regional Transportation Center at LaVilla (JRTC), which also houses the JTA's hub. This central location is a significant advantage compared to the Amtrak station, as it places you closer to downtown hotels and provides immediate access to the city's public bus network (JTA) for onward travel. The address is typically 1111 West Forsyth Street, but always confirm the current location when booking.

Arriving at the bus station, you can expect the standard amenities found in most major terminals: a waiting area, ticketing counters, restrooms, and perhaps some vending machines or a small snack counter. Like the train station, it's primarily a functional transit point. Once you've collected your luggage, you can easily step outside to find connecting JTA buses, hail a taxi, or arrange for a ride-sharing service pickup directly from the downtown location.

Bus travel is undeniably one of the most affordable ways to travel long distances, but it also generally takes the longest time. Journeys often involve multiple stops and transfers. However, for shorter regional trips, such as coming from Orlando, Atlanta, or Savannah, the bus can be a practical and cost-effective alternative to driving or flying, especially if you don't need a car once you arrive in Jacksonville.

While most tourists arrive by air or land, Jacksonville also serves as a departure point for ocean cruises, meaning some visitors might technically 'arrive' in the area specifically for a cruise vacation. The JAXPORT Cruise Terminal is located north of the main city areas, near the Dames Point Bridge off Heckscher Drive. Currently, Carnival Cruise Line frequently utilizes this port for sailings primarily to the Bahamas.

Arrival at the cruise terminal is geared towards embarkation rather than general city tourism. Passengers typically arrive via taxi, ride-sharing services, pre-arranged shuttles, or drive and use the terminal's long-term parking facilities. If you are flying into JAX specifically to catch a cruise, factor in the travel time (approximately 30-45 minutes) and cost of transportation from the airport to the JAXPORT terminal. Shuttles specifically servicing the cruise terminal are often available but may require pre-booking. This arrival method is distinct, focused entirely on the cruise rather than exploring Jacksonville itself, though some cruisers may add a pre- or post-cruise stay in the city.

Finally, for those arriving via private plane or charter flights, Jacksonville offers alternative airfields besides JAX. Jacksonville Executive at Craig Airport (CRG) is located closer to the Arlington and Southside areas, east of downtown, and is a

popular choice for general aviation. Herlong Recreational Airport (HEG) is situated further west. These airports cater to smaller aircraft and offer different services and access points compared to the main international airport, suitable primarily for those with their own aircraft or utilizing specific charter services.

Regardless of how you choose to travel, reaching Jacksonville marks the beginning of your adventure in this multifaceted Florida city. Whether stepping off a plane at JAX, pulling off I-95, arriving via the rhythmic sway of an Amtrak train, or stepping down from a bus downtown, you've successfully navigated the first leg of your journey. The next step is getting around the city itself, exploring its neighborhoods, attractions, and natural landscapes, which we delve into in the following chapter. Welcome to Jacksonville!

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