

My St Augustine Obsession

©2009 Kellie Sharpe

I suppose I am obsessed. I've certainly been called that before.

The summer I was nine, my dad told me we were spending two weeks in "the nation's oldest city." I figured that was cool; yes, I had to combine fun with a little education but heck, I was going to Florida! Two whole weeks in Florida! I could stomach sightseeing and learning as long as I knew there was a beach or a pool in it later. So off we went. The car was loaded with me, my parents and my 6-month-old brother, who was supremely unimpressed with the Nation's Oldest City and howled pretty much the whole time we were there. As adults he has since asked me to go back there with him but I can't shake the memories of his howling, and it'd be just my luck he'd do it again.

We arrived in St Augustine, driving along San Marco Avenue which to this day remains my favorite way to enter the city. I looked through my pop-bottle glasses at the City Gate and at the hulking Castillo de San Marcos on my left, and thought, "Yes! THIS is where I am supposed to be!"

Fascinated, I continued to soak up my first impressions of what was to become the dearest place in the world to me. The line of buildings along the bayfront, the Bridge of Lions, the Plaza... I was home and I knew it.

The scene changed constantly as we crossed the bridge - boats heading in and out of Matanzas Bay, my first glimpse of Anastasia Island, the lighthouse tower... oh, THIS was MY place in the world! I couldn't wait to explore it - to see it up close, touch it, smell it, hear it - even taste it.

But first we had to find a place to stay. We found a cute little motel with a pool out on St Augustine Beach, and since it was late in the day my dad decided we'd sightsee tomorrow. First, he wanted to take me out on the air mattress and teach me to ride the waves. I wanted to go back to town - I was foaming at the mouth to see everything but Dad had the car keys and I was only nine. You kinda have to do what your parents make you do at that age.

We unpacked the car and my dad and I headed to the beach. I hadn't spent much time in Florida, and I was excited to be there and to get to play in the ocean. We waded out into the water, and my dad helped me get on the air mattress. Riding the waves was wonderful fun... feeling the dip in the water before the swell pushed me into the air and then dropped me back again, with a little "flip" in my stomach. I rode the waves for about five minutes before a huge wave broke right over top of me and washed my pop-bottle glasses right off my nose.

Great. Now, here I was, in the one place on earth I wanted to be, the place I had found where I knew I belonged, and I couldn't even see it! We went out sightseeing the next day and I didn't see many sights! I could see the blurs of my parents pointing things out to each other and I could see the blurs they were pointing to, and that was about it. But I could smell it. And I could hear it and feel it. I could touch

things... the Castillo walls, the doors of the Oldest House, the pillars of the City Gate, the air... and I had no doubt that I was home.

Our two weeks ended, and we headed back to Georgia. Back to routine, to school, to everyday things but I dreamed often of St Augustine. I have always been an avid reader of anything I could get my hands on, and one day while digging through my grandmother's bookshelf for something new to read, I came across her copy of "Maria," by Eugenia Price. I became interested in it almost immediately, for it was set in St Augustine! Fascinated, I devoured the novel in a day, and while reading Miss Price's afterword, I realized one of the places I had visited in St Augustine, The Oldest House, was Maria's house! I had been to Maria's house- I had walked through her rooms and sat in her garden! Wow!

I returned to St Augustine several more times on vacation with my parents, and then several more times with friends. But I longed to visit my city by myself, to wander through it, taking my time, exploring it and discovering all its secrets. So, in 1991, I packed up my little silver Mazda RX-7 and headed south, delightfully alone, eagerly anticipating the treasures I would find. I started my visit at The Oldest House, of course, and while I was there soaking up Maria's essences in her house, one of the house guides remarked that there was a historical research library out back and anyone who wanted to could go in there and read, and look things up, and see the history of the Oldest City for themselves.

I wasted not one second getting to this treasure trove. I opened the doors to the library and was immediately surrounded by piles of incredible information and the most helpful and knowledgeable people - people as obsessed as I was about this beautiful city and its secrets. The library has since been moved to its new larger home, the Kirby-Smith House on Aviles Street, and it remains my favorite spot to visit in St Augustine.

I started talking to people. I wanted to talk to everyone who lived in my city. I wanted to know everything. And I learned something interesting: if you live in St Augustine, it's okay to say you are "from" St Augustine. I noticed that pattern as I began to get to know people. So, my question, "are you from St Augustine?" was always followed with "how long you been here?" Answers would range from a week to years. That always cracked me up.

I have made St Augustine my part-time home. I hold a tour guide's license issued by the city, and plan trips for anyone who asks for my help. I have taken several groups of visitors to the city for guided vacations. I guess I fit in pretty well, for I am frequently approached by visitors asking for directions or information about the city. Once when I was there, a couple asked me to recommend a good place for breakfast, so I did. They thanked me and as they turned to leave, the husband asked me if I was from St Augustine.

I couldn't resist. "Sure am!" I replied.

I never did find my glasses. I think I learned to see the old city better without them.