



America's first settlement

Situated in the Florida panhandle, Pensacola has a rich – if tumultuous – history that will lure you off its lovely beaches.

I'm standing on an empty beach. The sugar-white sand tumbles down to the glistening emerald-green waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Behind me are rippling sand dunes and there is not a building in sight. This is the Gulf Islands National Seashore, and just up the beach is the entrance to the protected harbour of Pensacola Bay. This same empty beach is what Spanish Conquistador Tristan de Luna would have sailed past in August of 1559 as he led his armada of 11 ships through the narrow headlands to establish the first European settlement in North America.

The colony, however, was doomed. Less than a month after setting anchor, a hurricane tore through the settlement and eight of the ships ended up at the bottom of the harbour. This is where de Luna made a crucial mistake — all their food and supplies were on those ships.

"It would have been hell," Brenda, a volunteer tour guide at the Historic Pensacola Village told me. "As well as the hurricane, there was also diseases, famine and attacks from Native Americans." The colony only lasted three years – and the Spaniards didn't return for another 173 years.

The Historic Pensacola Village is a collection of 28 historic buildings dating back to 1810, and is one of the 20 stops on America's 1st Settlement Trail, a three-mile marked trail through downtown Pensacola and the Pensacola Historic District.

Clockwise from top left: Cooking demonstration at the Historic Pensacola Village; South Palafox Street marina, Downtown Pensacola; Pensacola Beach; Fort Pickens.

My first port of call on the trail is the Pensacola Museum of History, which does a very good job of unravelling the city's deep, rich and somewhat complicated history. In the foyer are five flags mounted on the wall. Pensacola is known as the City of Five Flags because, after the colony was abandoned, the city was tossed back and forth between not one but five different countries.

At the Historic Pensacola Village, Brenda tried to explain it to me. "You ready?" she said, taking a deep breath. "Pensacola was Spanish-then-nobody-then-Spanish-then-French-then-Spanish-then-French-then-Spanish-then-British-then-Spanish-then-American-then-Confederate-then... finally, American."

The influence of all five nations is evident in the city's architecture, culture and food. In one of the oldest buildings in the historical village, there are daily cooking demonstrations, where dishes are created using 18th-century cookbooks and vegetables grown in their own garden, including onions, cucumbers, tomatoes and sweet potatoes. "I make things like bubble and squeak for British," says Anne the cook, as she adds herbs into an iron pot over an open fire. "For our French heritage, I make a dish called *maque choux*, which is a French-Cajun-style corn chowder. Today, I'm making a Spanish salt-cod stew."

The architecture of the city is just as multinational. I walk down East Intendencia Street, which is lined with fastidiously restored French-influenced Creole houses and post-colonial shotgun-frame vernacular houses. Some are homes, graced with rocking chairs on front porches, while in others, businesses

have set up shop, including the quaint Quina South House built in 1814, which is now a salon offering permanent makeup, waxing and lash extensions.

The British weren't in Pensacola very long, but their influence is the city itself – the streets are laid out in a very orderly grid system. And of course, there's the ubiquitous British pub selling warm pints and fish and chips.

I end my historical expedition at the pre-Civil War Fort Pickens in the Gulf Islands National Seashore. The imposing brick garrison, which is perched dramatically overlooking the headlands, remained under Union control throughout the entire Civil War. I stroll up the beach from Fort Pickens and soon have it all to myself. Only a few miles away is Pensacola's main beach, home to beach umbrellas, boardwalks, bikinis and Bushwackers (the beach town's very own cocktail). Pensacola is the perfect seaside getaway, but the city's rich and vibrant history is worth taking a day or two off from sunbaking to explore.

GETTING THERE Pensacola International Airport is connected to gateway cities, including New Orleans, Orlando, Chicago and Atlanta.

GETTING AROUND Hiring a car gives you the freedom to beach hop and move easily between attractions.

BEST TIME TO GO July and August are hot and steamy, so spring and autumn are probably the best times to visit. It will still be hot, but without the crowds and oppressive humidity.

FURTHER INFORMATION
visitpensacola.com
historicpensacola.org