

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of a blue-painted wooden door. The paint is heavily distressed, with large areas of peeling and cracking, revealing the underlying wood. The door has a traditional panel design with a central rectangular inset. On the right side, a portion of a metal handle is visible, showing signs of rust and wear. The overall texture is rough and aged.

Apalachicola

A Whole Different Kind of Florida

Instead of glitzy hotels and high-rise condos, this waterfront town in northwest Florida has historic homes, a storefront revival, art-filled galleries and a welcoming, yet rebellious, spirit.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY LESLIE LONG

Wonderful textures and color abound in Apalachicola.



I'll admit I'm biased. From the moment I set foot in this town, I was smitten, and I swear it has nothing to do with the fact that the first street I walked down was called Leslie Street. I have a fondness for places on the water, towns with character—and if they're out of the way and rough around the edges, all the better. Apalachicola met all my criteria.

About as far from a typical Floridian tourist town as it could be, Apalachicola (or Apalach, as the residents refer to it) was once the largest port on the Gulf of Mexico. Established in 1831, it has a gracious Southern charm and a passionate townfolk who are all too happy to tell you why they live here (residents mind their own business) or felt drawn to relocate here (there was just *something* about it).

The town boasts more than 900 historic homes and buildings in its National Historic Register District. Stroll along the wide residential streets beneath sprawling trees covered with Spanish moss and you'll see rundown shacks, immaculate craftsman cottages and grand renovated homes originally built by the town's lumber and shipping magnates. Its diverse charm led it to be named as one of America's top distinctive destinations by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Additionally, 90 percent of Florida's oysters and 10 percent of the nation's oyster supply hail from Apalachicola's waters.

EVEN THE HOTEL WAS A HISTORIC LANDMARK

My home base was The Gibson Inn, the town's first hotel built in 1907. With its native heart pine and black cypress construction, the Inn was once the town's crown jewel and the area's ultimate luxury hotel—famous for being the only hotel between Pensacola and Jacksonville heated entirely by steam.



Gibson Inn,



Coombs House Inn,



The old-world elegance of
the Coombs House Inn.

The Gibson's distinctive style was known as Florida "Cracker" Architecture, consisting of a wood frame structure used widely in the 19th and early 20th centuries, along with a metal roof, raised floors, center hallways, high ceilings and large wrap-around porches. In honor of the area's steamboat past, a widow's walk and cupola were built atop the roof.

After checking in, I walked up to my room via a few wonky staircases going in several different directions. My large room overlooked the main street and to the right was a water view. When standing in just the right spot, I could see the sunrise over the water from my bathroom window.

In 1983, the Gibson Inn's current owners began a two-million-dollar restoration project that many say launched the town's revival. Staying in this friendly place puts you the center of the town's action, especially on Friday nights when the bar fills up with a lively group of regulars who spill out onto the porch.

COOMBS HOUSE INN WELCOMES SWIMSUIT MODELS AND MORE

Whereas the Gibson is akin to an eccentric uncle, the Coombs House Inn is more like an elegant aunt.

While I was in town, the crew from *Sports Illustrated* (including the swimsuit models) was holed up at the Coombs, trying to keep their presence on the down low. But word did get out and the fruits of their labor can be seen in the magazine's 2012 *Swimsuit Issue*. The Coombs House Inn bills itself as "a romantic bed and breakfast" and is housed in several picture-perfect Victorian mansions painted a bright citrus yellow. Inside, you'll find fine antiques, upholstered chairs, glowing fireplaces and an old world elegance.

Like The Gibson Inn, Coombs House has a storied past. Built in 1905 by a lumber baron named James N.

Coombs, the main house was practically destroyed by a devastating fire, which led to almost 30 years of vacancy. The present owner, Lynn Wilson, and her husband bought the house, turning it into the gracious establishment it's become. Famous for copious breakfasts, gorgeous gardens, pretty porches and romantic rooms, Coombs House has risen again.

HISTORIC STOREFRONTS ATTRACT SHOP OWNERS OF ALL STRIPES

While many come here for the beach houses across the causeway on beautiful St. George Island, the town of Apalachicola has other charms to discover and every stroll I took uncovered something new.

Each building here seems to have a story to tell and many of them are up and running again thanks to adventurous shopkeepers who have committed themselves to the town's reinvigorated spirit. For a small town, there are a whole lot of stores breathing new life into its old buildings.

FROM HANDMADE CHOCOLATES AND TUPELO HONEY TO KNITTING AND BOOKS

Apalachicola Chocolate Company sells fresh fruit granitas and homemade chocolates displayed behind vintage glass cases and filled with luscious treats such as fudge, caramel turtles and a chocolate concoction made with the locally produced Tupelo honey.

A beautifully renovated former cotton warehouse and ship chandlery is home to the beautiful Grady Market where you'll find an impressive array of classic and not-so-classic clothes and accessories along the banks of the Apalachicola River. Riverfront apartment suites occupy part of the complex, and more businesses are planned for the near future. A charming bookstore called Downtown



Apalachicola Center for History, Culture and Art.



Outside the Bowery Art Gallery.



Old liquor store.

Books & Purl resides in an older home on Commerce Street and sells the unique combo of books and knitting supplies under one roof. There are housewares shops, an old soda fountain, a beautiful garden store and more within the few blocks of this very walkable downtown.

ART THRIVES IN THIS TOWN OF ARTFUL ARCHITECTURE

Whether it's antiques, photography, sculpture or paintings, you can find it in the galleries of Apalachicola.

As a visitor from New York, I was intrigued by the Bowery Art Gallery, which couldn't be further from its city namesake. Set on a charming back street next to the bucolic backyard of The Garden Shop, I found a high quality of art. Owner Leslie Wallace Coon sculpts spectacular resin dogs. She and two co-owners, Ann Seaton and Paula Harmon, show and curate a variety of fine work. A selection of jewelry combining metals with local stones and sea glass was especially beautiful and unique. "Apalach seems to bring out the creativity in those who move here," fabric artist and gallery exhibitor Elaine Kozlowsky told me when she saw me admiring them. "Those necklaces are made by a former lawyer."

The Artemis Gallery along Commerce Street specializes in folk art and Florida landscapes. Along Market Street, Richard Bickel Photography is the gallery and studio of a fine photographer who has settled in town, publishing several books on the area along with others on more far flung locales such as Morocco.

My favorite buildings were the ones without pedigrees.

Apalachicola's more noteworthy buildings are often juxtaposed with shabbier structures basking in the bright Florida sun. The bleached paint colors, peeling signs and vestiges of



One of the many creative items at the Bowery Art Gallery.



Oh the treats at the Apalachicola Chocolate Company.

another era gave these crumbling beauties a different kind of appeal. Perhaps someone will come along to rehabilitate them and give them new purpose. Or maybe they'll just remain there, reminding everyone of the passing of time and the town's illustrious history.

Just as the area's diverse residents feel able to simply be themselves, the buildings of Apalachicola, whether grand or far less so, all seem to have a place.

And finally, a building that reminded me of Edward Hopper.

There is a restored brick building along the river, where art is shown and town events take place. It's called the Apalachicola Center for History, Culture and Arts, and in the twilight it looks like one of the buildings made famous by Edward Hopper's paintings.

On my last night in town, I attended an opening at the Center and ran into a few of the people I'd

There are so many interesting structures about town.



met while walking through town. Happy just to be here, I strolled along the riverside park. The sun was setting and a beautiful rim light glowed around the periphery of the building. Inside, the light was warm and yellow. The night was breezy and a few people stood outside talking or walking their dogs. History, art, beauty, contentment. I had seen all Apalachicola had to offer, and at that very moment, I felt it all, too.

IF YOU GO

AREA INFORMATION

Franklin County

Tourist Development Council

866-914-2068

www.saltyflorida.com

ART GALLERIES

Bowery Art Gallery

149 Commerce Street

850-653-2425

www.boweryartgallery.com

Artemis Gallery

127 Commerce Street

850-653-2030

Richard Bickel Photography

81 Market Street

850-653-2828

www.richardbickelphotography.com

Apalachicola Center for History, Culture and Arts

86 Water Street

850-653-3930

historicapalachicola.com

SHOPS

Apalachicola

Chocolate Company

15 Avenue E

850-370-6937

Grady Market

76 Water Street

850-653-4099

www.jegrady.com/market.html

Downtown Books & Purl

67 Commerce Street

850-653-1290

downtownbooks@fairpoint.net

The Garden Shop

147 Commerce Street

850-653-1777

www.gardensinc.net

HISTORIC HOTELS

Gibson Inn

51 Avenue C

850-653-2191

gibsoninn.com

Coombs House Inn

80 Sixth Street

850-653-9199

888-244-8320

coombshouseinn.com 

Leslie Long is a New York-based travel writer and photographer. Although she loves where she lives, nothing thrills her more than heading out of town—whether it's a weekend at the beach or halfway around the world. Her articles have appeared in The New York Post, Time Out Kids New York, Westchester Magazine and Travelmuse.com.