ADVERTISEMENT



Discover Your New Home

TRAVEL

Old Florida is alive and well in sunny Stuart, where the past won’t be forgotten

By NANCY MORELAND

CHICAGO TRIBUNE |

OCT 29, 2019 | STUART, FLA.





The Stuart Heritage Museum is in a 1901 building that operated as Stuart Feed Store until the late 1980s, when the city bought it. The museum is open seven days a week with free admission. (Getty Images)

It's no secret that the suddenly single are vulnerable to rebound romances. Even the newly divorced Ralph Evinrude, a captain of industry, found himself susceptible. Who could blame him? The object of his desire was singer and film star Frances Langford.

In the 1950s, both were guests at the **Clifton Guest and Fishing Lodge** in Stuart, Florida. The self-proclaimed "Sailfish Capital of the World" sits on the Atlantic, about a two-hour drive south of Orlando and two hours north of Miami. The coastal setting was ripe for a tropical tryst: coconut palms swaying in balmy breezes, moonlight reflecting off the St. Lucie River, sensuous flowers blooming at every turn. This tryst, however, turned into a 31-year marriage between two luminaries whose philanthropy benefits the city to this day.

ADVERTISEMENT

Downtown Stuart is full of stories like that.

You can contemplate all of this while staying in the **Evinrude** or **Langford suite** of that same fishing lodge. It's one of 22 restored dwellings transformed into boutique accommodations by Steven Vitale, a local real estate attorney with a penchant for historic preservation.





When the turn-of-the-century Clifton Guest and Fishing Lodge was slated for demolition, a local preservationist bought the property and barged it down the St. Lucie River to its current spot on Seminole Street. (Steven Vitale)

"I purchased my first property in 2007, right when the market began to go down," Vitale says. "I had to make the building pay for itself, so I converted it from apartments back into its original use as a hotel."

[Most read] 5 observations from rewatching the Bears' loss to the Eagles, including repeated self-destruction on first-and-10 and Tarik Cohen's funk »

While that first project, now known as the **Old Colorado Inn**, was driven by necessity, Vitale's vision soon became a passion. When the turn-of-the-century Clifton Guest and Fishing Lodge was slated for demolition, Vitale bought and barged it down the St. Lucie River to its current spot on Seminole Street.

And so, like Vitale's other projects, the Clifton has a happy ending. All of the properties balance modern comfort with old Florida character. Guests tread gleaming Dade County heart pine floors and sleep under beadboard ceilings. They chat on porches graced with gingerbread trim. Depending on the property, observant visitors may spot an antique door bell, telephone shelf or mail slot. Nightly rates at the Inn in December start at $119; guest house rates start at $229.

The Clifton sits next door to a literary landmark known as the **Lyons House**. An 1890 Florida vernacular cottage, it once housed author and conservationist Ernest Lyons. The former Stuart News editor penned **"My Florida"** and **"The Last Cracker Barrel"** while living here. The house's roots run deep into Stuart's pioneer past. It served as the town's first school and church, and witnessed its first wedding and first birth.

Around the corner, the Old Colorado Inn has ties to a character as colorful as its bright yellow facade. It was built as a hotel by John Coventry, whose son Frank fueled the local gossip mill. A Prohibition-era rum runner, Frank purportedly drove the getaway car for Florida's notorious **Ashley gang**.

"He was later shot in a pool hall over a love interest," Vitale says. "They held his funeral at the hotel."

[Most read] 'A miracle': Days after she was shot while trick-or-treating, 7-year-old girl is sitting up and watching 'Finding Dory' »

Even Stuart's most recognizable landmark, the 1904 **Owl House**, is available for stays, with a three-night minimum requirement. Its sea captain builder designed the four-pointed gable roof to be hurricane resistant. The resulting roofline, forever frozen in a quizzical frown, stares out at the river as it has for more than a century. Inside, the beamed, angular ceilings and expansive windows feel more like Frank Lloyd Wright than the Victorian and farmhouse styles that dominated the Sunshine State in the early 1900s.





The Owl House's roofline, forever frozen in a quizzical frown, stares out at the river as it has for more than a century. (Nancy Moreland/for the Chicago Tribune)

Vitale's efforts to save local history have not gone unnoticed. He received Martin County's Historic Preservationist of the Year Award for 2019.

Although Vitale's venture started at an inauspicious time, he had the golden rule of real estate in his favor. All of his properties are located on scenic side streets near the St. Lucie River in downtown Stuart, a success story in its own right.





Boutiques line the pedestrian-friendly streets in downtown Stuart. (Martin County Tourism)

In the late 1980s, local citizens, with help from Andrés Duany, the influential architect of **Seaside** renown, reinvigorated the town. Duany’s New Urbanist plan connected Stuart’s historic downtown with its scenic waterfront. The citizenry followed through on his ideas and today, the compact main street hums with activity. Laughter and conversation emanate from sidewalk cafes. Independently owned boutiques entice shoppers. The restored 1926 **Lyric Theatre** fills with audiences eager to see celebrated performers. People stroll along the Riverwalk past a pier, marina and parks, within view of the elegant Roosevelt Bridge.





The restored 1926 Lyric Theatre fills with audiences eager to see celebrated performers. (Martin County Tourism)

At the same time, Stuart evokes an era of languid afternoons on the lanai: mai tai in hand, ceiling fan circling slowly overhead. Even in our overstimulated age, it’s easy to maintain that carefree state. Just stroll around the neighborhood. You quickly realize that this town carefully cultivates its people-friendly pace and scale.





Guests can kick back and relax on the porch of the Blue House, one of the accommodations at the Old Colorado Inn. (Steven Vitale)

Along Flagler Avenue, brightly colored canvas awnings shade shoppers from the Florida sun. Benches invite weary husbands. A fountain, strategically placed in a traffic-calming roundabout, provides background music for diners in outdoor cafes. A crosswalk painted swimming pool blue alerts drivers and guides pedestrians. Balconies brim with fuchsia bougainvillea. Murals accent buildings, even those that face alleys. Further down Flagler Avenue, a former 1901 mercantile, reimagined as the **Stuart Heritage Museum**, invites a deeper exploration into local history. Year-round on Sundays, you can peruse artisanal food at the **Stuart Green Market**, then picnic with your purchases at a free

Rockin' Riverwalk concert, from 1-4 p.m.

ADVERTISEMENT

Stuart is the seat of Martin County, a mecca for water recreation, with about 22 miles of coastline. Beaches are dotted with sea turtle nests and unusual rock formations. Those at **Blowing Rocks Preserve** and **Bathtub Beach** are especially notable.





Bathtub Beach in Stuart, Florida, lures locals and tourists to its soft sand and clear water. The coral reef off shore is good for snorkeling and scuba diving, too. (Getty Images)

The subtropical climate makes fall and winter ideal for the beach, as well as **downtown events** like Christmas on Main Street, Nov. 29, the Stuart Stroll, a community-wide street party on Dec. 5, and the Christmas Parade Dec. 6.

ADVERTISEMENT

Tourist season peaks around Easter, but spring breakers lean more toward families than Gen Z. If you can take the heat but not the crowds, book a summertime retreat at the

Clifton Guest and Fishing Lodge, Lyons House or Blue House; all share a pool.

Any time of year, you can always catch a breeze by the beach or river. In doing so, you follow the footsteps of accomplished Floridians. Whether led by love, literature or landmarks in need of rescue, all found a haven in this sunny city by the river.

[Most read] Chicago’s condos are turning into rentals. Here’s what’s driving the deconversion trend, and what it means for condo owners. »

Nancy Moreland is a freelance writer.

Customer wants more than a voucher after American Airlines cancels flight. Travel Troubleshooter investigates.

When Robert Hughes' aunt dies, he books a flight to the funeral in Omaha. But when American Airlines cancels his flight, it issues a voucher.

Chicago Tribune