

Florida House Inn

TOURISM

The Florida House Inn is the state's oldest continually run bed and breakfast. With its then upcoming 150th anniversary, its owners wanted to create some buzz leading to increased bookings and more repeat visits. Before the mint hit the pillow, AXIA launched a public relations campaign that reached and resonated with reporters who cover travel and tourism. AXIA public relations professionals reviewed editorial calendars, and introduced the innkeepers to our media contacts as subject-matter experts. AXIA's impact was soon felt, with the inn earning a full-color, front-page story in the Sunday business section of *The Florida Times-Union*. Additional coverage included *Florida Trend*, *Jacksonville Business Journal*, *Nassau Sun* and *News-Leader*.



Some businesses on the First Coast say there's a benefit to being oldest

But is antiquity enough of a marketing hook to reel in visitors? Not all tourism experts think so.

By ALISON TRINIDAD
The Times-Union

Florida's First Coast — from Nassau to Flagler counties — is immersed in many things old.

The Florida House Inn in Fernandina Beach, which claims it is the state's oldest surviving hotel, celebrates its 150th anniversary this year. The Palace Saloon, also in Fernandina, says it's the state's oldest tavern. Kingsley Plantation has the state's oldest standing plantation house, built in 1817. And the country's so-called oldest house is in St. Augustine, which, by the way, calls itself the nation's oldest city.

Time will tell whether being old is enough of a hook to get people to pay a visit.

"It [history] wasn't what grabbed me, but it was a big plus," said Brian Holcomb from Marietta, Ga., who regularly vacations at the Florida House.

Tourism is a cash cow waiting to be milked, especially in Florida, the land of Mickey Mouse. Those in the trade know to use the tools at hand. And, for the First Coast, history is a given. This weekend, 150,000 people are expected to drop \$13.8 million at the 44th annual Isle of Eight Flags Shrimp Festival on Amelia Island, which celebrates the region's historic ties to the shrimping industry.

Area businesses don't care much whether it's the shrimp or the history that brings tourists in, but they might fare better if it's

the history.

History buffs have deep pockets

Research shows that travelers interested in history and culture are big spenders. Travelers who include historic sites and cultural activities on their trips, on average, spend more and stay longer than other tourists, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. Not including the cost of transportation, so-called heritage and cultural tourists spend \$623 per trip, while other U.S. travelers spend \$457.

That's why it might make sense to sell an attraction as the "oldest," or at the very least, "historic."

As long as it genuinely is.

"Authenticity is extremely important when talking about heritage tourism," said Gleran Hastings, executive director of the St. Johns County visitors bureau, which includes St. Augustine and Ponte Vedra Beach.

It doesn't help that there is no governing body that verifies claims to be the "oldest" of anything; the National Register of Historic Places, administered by the National Park Service, certifies only that a place is worthy of preservation, not that it is the oldest.

When you've got T-shirt stands and 99-cent, made-in-China souvenirs hawking the "Nation's Oldest City," you walk a fine line between "historic" and "tourist trap," Hastings said.

"There is probably a point where some

OLDEST continues on G-8

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