

Florida Travel AUGUST 21, 2015

Florida discoveries: Princess Place full of history & beauty



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Funky Florida will always find ways to surprise you.

Take this park for example. It preserves a grand hunting lodge from 1888. Its most famous residents were an exiled Russian prince and his princess. And it's home to Florida's first in-ground swimming pool.

And yet, Princess Place, as the park is known, could be famous only for its splendid natural beauty — a spring-fed creek and pond, 80-foot-tall live oak trees, a view across a broad stretch of Pellicer Creek.

Princess Place is a 1,500-acre Flagler County Park, located midway between St. Augustine and Flagler Beach along Florida's less developed northeast coast. Princess Place is even more off-the-beaten-path because you don't get there via the road most tourists take, a very scenic stretch of A1A. Instead you travel on Old Kings Road, west of the Intracoastal Waterway. And when they say Old King's Road, they mean it literally — it was built by the British in 1767.

The entry to Princess Place from Old Kings Road takes you through a thick forest. The lodge is situated on a wide stretch of water, with rocking chairs on the porch enticing you to sit down and enjoy the view and the breeze.

Princess Place is the oldest homestead in Flagler County. It was founded in 1888 by a wealthy 24-year-old from New England, Henry Cutting. In 1888, he built a large hunting lodge in the Adirondack Camp style. You might think that northern design would look out of place in Florida, but the rustic hunting lodge uses local materials, including the area's wonderful coquina rock. (Coquina is also used in St. Augustine's fort.) The pillars supporting the lodge are unfinished tree trunks and the interior is finished with cypress wood.

It's worth arranging your schedule to tour the lodge (which is unfurnished) on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m. The tours, like admission to the park, are free.

But what about the princess? The same year the lodge was built, Henry Cutting married Angela Mills, 19. They entertained prominent people from St. Augustine and they had two children. Her story, however, is not a happily-ever-after tale. Her husband Henry died four years later. The widow married two more times. Both of these husbands died, as did both her sons.

It was the third husband, who she married in 1923 at age 54, that made her a princess. He was the Russian Prince Boris Scherbatoff, exiled after the Bolshevik revolution. From then on, the site was known as the Princess Estate or the Princess Place.

The “royal couple” lived and entertained here for two and a half decades. The prince died in 1949. The princess sold the place in 1954 and died in St. Augustine two years later at 87.

Fortunately, the two subsequent owners of Princess Place preserved the lodge and the property. Flagler County bought it in 1993.

Today, you can tour the lodge on weekends and admire its spring-fed swimming pool with a sign marking it as Florida’s first in-ground pool. The complex is on the National Registry of Historic Places, along with its rather elegant stable, which is being restored to show off its innovative design – glass windows, a raised wooden floor and a gabled roof.

When visiting, make time to walk some of the beautiful trails. The longest, the Hominy Branch, is 2.5 miles under a canopy of oaks. Others run along the banks of Pellicier Creek or through the saltwater marsh. One has good views of the bay and estuaries; another goes to a spring-fed pond and bird rookery. There are 7.2 miles of equestrian trails that can also be hiked. (The 0.7-mile Blue Trail is good for wheelchairs and strollers.)

If you bring your own gear, there are two other excellent recreation opportunities:

- **Camping:** There are seven family campsites, one equestrian campsite and a group campsite. All are primitive tents-only campgrounds. The fee for non-county residents is \$20 for family sites. Reservations are made online: https://www.usedirect.com/Flagler_Web/.
- **Kayaking or canoeing:** The park has a kayak launch area and the rivers and marshes are perfect for exploring by boat. (You can rent kayaks in Palm City, but it’s a long paddle to Princess Place from there.)

For a weekend getaway, combine Princess Place with two recreational sites that are very close:

- Fort Matanzas, a small Spanish fort you visit by a free ferry. It's a national monument administered by the National Park Service. www.nps.gov/foma. The nearby ocean beach is spectacular and at low tide there are many sandbars and tide pools along the Matanzas River.
- Washington Oaks Gardens State Park, which has historic gardens on one side of A1A and an unusual conquina-rock beach along the Atlantic. www.floridastateparks.org/park/Washington-Oaks.

Princess Place: Tours of the lodge available Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m. The tours, like admission to the park, are free.

www.flaglercounty.org/facilities.aspx?page=detail&RID=18

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