

Bed & Breakfast Inns

Riverview Hotel

The Pink of Perfection

New Smyrna Beach
By Cindy Lowe

Postcard-pretty, this historical hotel, with its gingerbread and wrap-around balconies, is something to write home about. Rising from the banks of the Intracoastal Waterway in New Smyrna Beach, the Riverview has been visited by tourists since the early part of this century.

From Victorian times, beach-goers have frolicked seaside on the sandy shore which is only just over four blocks away from the inn.

In 1894, the packed sand was celebrated as "so hard that a (horse and) buggy makes no tracks on it." Fellows on roller skates and bicycles raced along the beach, no doubt hoping to impress demure females clad in modest bathing suits which were long-sleeved, full-skirts dresses with bloomers peeking out at knee length.

Today, bathers may dip in the Atlantic Ocean, or splash in the pool surrounded by the tropical flora of seagrapes, bright bouganvillas and hibiscus.

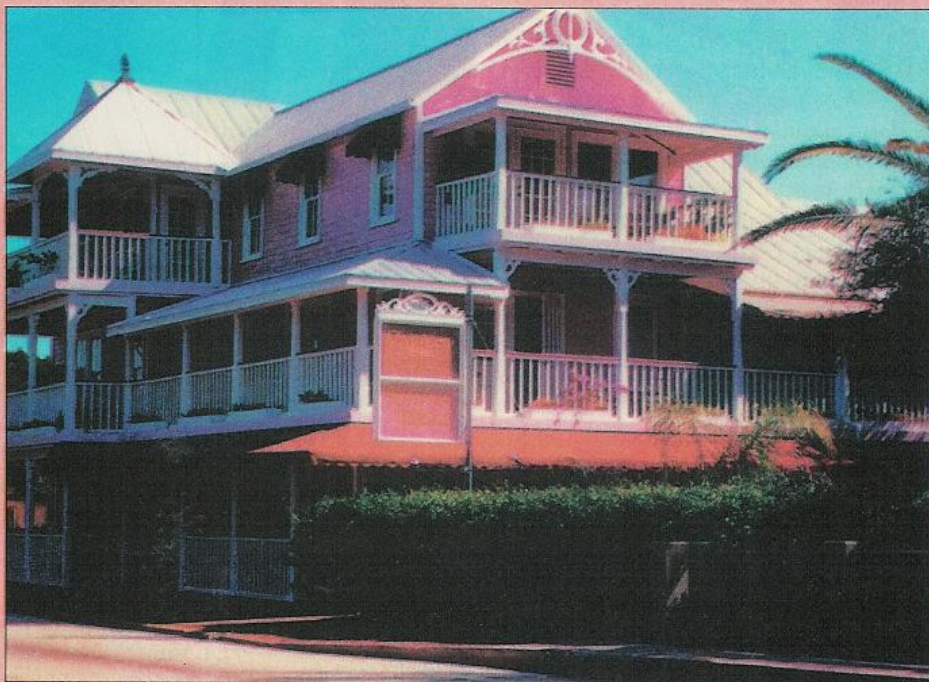
Flagler Avenue Historic Area, of which the hotel is a part, is a collection of shops, small restaurants and clubs featuring live entertainment. According to hotelier Christa Kelsey, Riverside Charlie's, next door, is the only fine dining establishment on the Intracoastal Waterway in New Smyrna.

Leaving the Keys, where she and her husband Jim owned a resort in Marathon for 10 years, they escaped to a small responsibility when they bought the Riverview six years ago.

They added the gift shop, which is open 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. This, Christa said, is her joy. She happily stocks her shelves with prize purchases collected on buying trips from around Florida, Atlanta and New York. "It's really nice to buy something you like and to be able to display it and have people say, 'Where did you get this? I love it!'" The Riverview is Florida's exclusive carrier of delicate cameo glass.

Staying at the inn gives one a sense of mystery, as well as history: The top room overlooking the river is rumored to have always been reserved for the infamous gangster Al Capone, who had his hideous heyday as crime syndicate boss in 1920s and '30s Chicago.

But, don't worry: Though return guests are many, Capone's ghost is not among them Christa said people visiting for corporate business on a regular basis will call and say, "I'll be in on Tuesday.



Courtesy Riverview Hotel

Have my room ready!"

Other guests have enlivened the inn: Singer Neil Young stayed here two years ago, and child actor Spanky McFarland brought his congeniality to the Riverview about three years ago.

Built by the bridge tender as a two-story hunting and fishing lodge in 1885, the structure was jacked up in 1910 to add a lobby and dining room underneath it.

The hotel was improved in 1936 with the addition of the west wing. Steam heat and individual baths were also installed. At that time, the inn was open only in the winter. After World War II, it served as housing for Coast Guardsmen, and later, as a youth hostel during the 1970s.

Neglect nearly brought the old gal to her knees. Her sad, unpainted exterior gave her the nickname "The Gray Ghost." The hotel was nearly condemned when fire code violations forced its closing in 1980.

She was revived in 1984 with a half-million-dollar facelift and the addition of the pool and restaurant.

With most of the renovation work already done, the Kelseys bought her and gave her a new pink dress and gingerbread.

Truly, the old gray ghost ain't what she used to be: She is now in the pink—an elegant grande dame.

Rates range from \$70 to \$150 for the executive suite with champagne. All rooms have private baths, cable TV, safes, bathrobes and telephones, and they include a continental breakfast brought to the room. A choice is given of cereals, muffins, juices, coffee, fruit bowl and more.

Enjoy eating outside on a balcony in the freshness of morning. Resident sparrows will keep you entertained as they beg for crumbs.

Complimentary bikes are available for riding on the hard beach sand or exploring this seaside community. Art and antiques may also be found around the small town. Golf courses, tennis courts and parks are nearby. Charter fishing can be arranged. Or, just relax and scout the river's waters for playing dolphins and manatees.

For reservations and information, call 1-800-945-7416 or (904) 428-5858, FAX (904) 423-8927. The Riverview Hotel, located at 103 Flagler Avenue, in New Smyrna, is a three-diamond inn and is approved by AAA. Please make other arrangements for pets.