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Come on, make me want to stay in Tallahassee

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When my wife and I have a few free hours, there's plenty to do here in Tallahassee, from shopping and museums to nature walks and evening concerts.

When we have a whole day, a jaunt to St. George Island is often the choice.

But when we have a few days, for my money, you can't beat St. Augustine.

St. Augustine offers what Tallahassee merely promises at this point an 18-hour downtown.

Sure, a lot of it is fake, with ghost tours and tacky T-shirt and curio shops. But in one five-by-eight-block area you can walk around at 8 a.m. or 10 p.m., any day of the week, and find good food, art galleries, fellow strollers, college students and a feeling of safety even in the dark alleys.

You can get a cup of espresso or a Diet Coke. You can enjoy greasy pizza on a hard bench or gourmet fare on a white tablecloth.

There's Mass at the cathedral or the early service at a Presbyterian church that looks like some over-decorated building from Red Square.

Just a few blocks from million-dollar homes in the Old Town district is Lincolnville, a historically black area where freed slaves could find a home and where Martin Luther King Jr. brought his message in the 1960s.

And not too many miles away is Jacksonville, with an awesome new library and other accouterments of a big city.

Thinking ahead

When you're a young man of 20, every young woman is a potential date; when you're in your 50s, every town is a potential retirement spot.

The thinking was, "If we like coming here so much, wouldn't it be great to *live* here?" So our long walks this past weekend took on a new purpose, as we peered into yards and picked up real-estate fliers.

But we're not an easy couple to please.

My wife wants something close to a beach.

I want something that won't be 10 feet under water when the hurricane hits.

My wife wants a neighbor who doesn't have a Little Debbie truck parked in the front yard.

I want something I can afford.

It occurred to us that, if we could work a deal, maybe we could just live in our motel room.

Talk about downsizing.

To digress a bit, I am talking about a motel room, not a bed and breakfast.

Every time I mention what a great time I had in St. Augustine, somebody says, "Oh, did you stay at a bed and breakfast?"

No. We tried that once, eons ago in New Orleans. It was OK.

But my theory is, if I want to eat with annoying people and sleep in an antique four-poster bed, I'll stay at home.

This area has its own share of B&B's, from Quincy to Monticello to little St. Marks. Tallahassee has at least two the Inn at Park Avenue (in a spectacular Victorian home) and the Little English Guest House on Timberlane Road (featuring Sadie the dog and those concrete lions on the front lawn).

But that's not my cup of tea.

Just like Ruby

Anyway, as we checked out the real estate for the retirement years, retiring to a motel room was sounding better by the minute. Heck, if it was good enough for Ruby Diamond, the Tallahassee grande dame who lived at the Floridan Hotel for 50 years, it should be good enough for us. You've got a bathroom, a bed, a desk, a TV and maid service.

Really, what more do you need in retirement?

Well, I'll tell you. You need friends and activities. You need to see the neighbor's kids growing up, and you need a spiritual life.

I'm not sure a retirement consisting of walks on the beach would be fulfilling, no matter how blissful and relaxing it is on a three-day weekend.

That's where Tallahassee keeps its hold on us for now.

If we can get this 18-hour downtown going (heck, I'd settle for 12), what a joy this city would be. Think downtown St. Augustine, but without the silly ghost tours.

Sure the beach is farther away, but that's not a deal-breaker.

Maybe, when it comes to my retirement, St. Augustine could be a great place to visit, and Tallahassee, with just a few improvements, could be an even better place to live.