

# Where guests and ghosts mingle

These hotels aren't for those with reservations about spooky crime stories

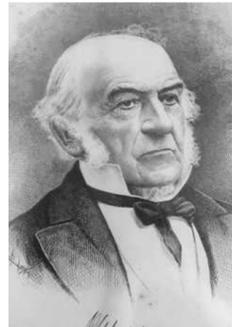
BY LIZ LANGLEY



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MIRRORPIX/GETTY IMAGES



LIZ LANGLEY

## The Island Hotel & Restaurant, Cedar Key, Fla.

I have many happy memories of Cedar Key, a tranquil town on Florida's north Gulf Coast, so ghosts provide even more incentive to visit the Island Hotel & Restaurant there. Built in 1859, the Colonial-style hotel, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, is an ideal place to unplug from the world.

While giving a tour of the 10-room lodging, Andy Bair, who owns the hotel with his wife, Stanley, opens Room 29 and says in a deep, almost Sam Elliott voice, "Some people call this a portal to the other side."

Someone seems to have left the portal open, too, because this place has several spirits, including a Confederate soldier and a little boy who reportedly drowned in the cistern in the basement. (Ghost stories being difficult to document, there are differing versions of many of the tales in this report.) During Prohibition, rumor has it, a prostitute was murdered in the hotel. Now, gentlemen who stay in that room may get a "peck on the cheek," Bair says, from a very friendly ghost.

One for "Forensic Files," though, is an apparition that Stanley's daughter, Shields, saw in the family's private apartment. It was "a head with some fuzzy beard" which "floated through the room and the wall and was gone," Bair says.

When Shields was shown a portrait of former owner Simon Feinberg, who converted the property from general store to hotel in the early 19th century, she identified him as the owner of the floating head. Feinberg died in suspicious circumstances, expiring of food poisoning in Room 33 after dinner with his property manager, whom he had confronted about an illegal still on the property.

And that "portal" room? That belonged to Bessie Gibbs, a cheerful soul who owned the inn from the 1940s through the 1970s. The whole hotel has a very relaxed, beachy, comfortable feel to it, but Bessie's coral-colored quarters feel eerily magnetic, as if inviting me to stay. Forever. And ever.

373 Second St., Cedar Key, Fla.  
352-543-5111  
[islandhotel-cedarkey.com](http://islandhotel-cedarkey.com)  
Rooms from \$90

## The Myrtles Plantation, St. Francisville, La.

Of the many ghost stories at the notoriously haunted Myrtles Plantation, opened in 1796, one that seems ripe for a cold case investigation is the death of William Winter.

William was married to Sarah, the owner's daughter. In 1871, a stranger on horseback arrived at the Myrtles calling for a lawyer, says tour director Hester Eby by phone. William came outside, and the stranger shot him.

"That [shotgun] blast blew him back into the gentlemen's parlor," Eby says. William tried to reach his wife, made it to the 17th step of the staircase, "and died in her arms."

Sarah and William are two of the numerous spirits said to haunt the grounds of the plantation, which offers daytime and nighttime tours. Guests have reported hearing a woman, possibly Sarah, crying, or seeing a door-knob turning and finding it warm to the touch, among other occurrences. Often, they smell Sarah's perfume, then hear William's footsteps.

The sprawling plantation property, with cypresses, live oaks and draping Spanish moss, was built in 1796 by Gen. David Bradford and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. There are 12 rooms on the property: six in the spare-no-expenses antebellum mansion and six detached cottages, which sleep up to either four or six people. Assuming people sleep.

Some take off in the middle of the night with just their car keys and return in daylight for their things, Eby says. Others enjoy their rest, and still others can't wait to talk about a "spired" night. "They're so excited when it happens to them," Eby says.

7747 Hwy. 61,  
St. Francisville, La.  
225-635-6277  
[myrtlesplantation.com](http://myrtlesplantation.com)  
Rates from \$175

## The Read House Historic Inn & Suites, Chattanooga, Tenn.

Many men do not sleep well in Room 311 at the elegant Read House hotel, especially those who are smokers. Annalisa Netherly, the ghost of 311, doesn't like it.

"We think that's because of the husband," says Wesley Sang, di-

rector of marketing for Read House's owner, Avocet Hospitality, in a telephone interview. Annalisa's husband found her in 311 with another man, the story goes, and "ended up decapitating her in the bathtub."

Men are said to sometimes check out of 311 in the middle of the night because of weird activity. When the property manager, a man, stayed here, recalls Sang, "the phone would not stop ringing, and no one was on the other line."

When the rooms were gutted this year for the start of a \$27 million renovation, the door to 311 wouldn't open. "We ended up using a saw and cut the door in half," Sang says.

Built in 1926, the 242-room hotel consists of two buildings, the Read House and the Manor House. The first phase of renovations, which restored the Read House to the sumptuous Gatsbyesque style of the period, is complete. The Manor House, which includes Room 311, will be completed in December. While other rooms will have sleek, deco design and modern perks such as WiFi and flat-screen TVs, Room 311 will have no TV or electronics and will be booked by special request and by phone only.

Historic tidbit: Al Capone was kept in Room 311 en route to his Chicago trial. We're betting Annalisa didn't like his cigar habit.



AMANDA DEVILLE



STEVEN SENNE/ASSOCIATED PRESS



LIZ LANGLEY



READ HOUSE

## CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

**LEFT:** An 1890 photo of Lizzie Borden, who was found not guilty of murdering her father and stepmother in what is now the Lizzie Borden Bed & Breakfast Museum in Fall River, Mass. Architect Francis Rattenbury, who designed the Fairmont Empress in Victoria, B.C., with his wife, Alma, and his son, John. Simon Feinberg, a former owner of the Island Hotel on Cedar Key, Fla., died in suspicious circumstances there. The Myrtles Plantation in St. Francisville, La., where William Winter is said to have been shot by a stranger on horseback. Bessie Gibbs's coral-colored room in the Island Hotel has been called a portal to another dimension. The door of Room 311 in the Read House, purportedly the home of a decapitated woman's spirit, had to be sawed open after it wouldn't budge during renovations. A portrait of Andrew Borden, Lizzie Borden's father, hangs in the room where he was killed in 1892.

"Maybe that's why they chose that room for him," Sang says.

107 W. Martin Luther King Blvd.,  
Chattanooga, Tenn.  
407-536-2735  
[theadhousehotel.com](http://theadhousehotel.com)  
Rooms start at \$219

## The Fairmont Empress, Victoria, B.C.

Ghost walks are a great, adrenaline-spiced way to learn the history of a city. It was during such a tour in Victoria, B.C., a few years ago that I heard that the Fairmont Empress hotel is said to be haunted by Francis Rattenbury, its architect. Rattenbury also designed the stately Parliament Buildings, and together they dominate the inner harbor of Victoria, accessible by ferry from cities including Vancouver, Seattle and Portland, Ore. (Bring your passport!)

The Empress is a 464-room icon cited by Parks Canada as important in the development of a uniquely Canadian chateau style. The interior is sheer opulence, both modern and old-world, which is probably why tea at the Empress has been a tradition since the hotel opened in 1908.

In a recent telephone chat, John Adams, historian and founder of Discover the Past tours, related how Rattenbury became quite an egoist by the 1920s, took up with a young beauty named Alma Pakenham and divorced his wife, Florrie, who died of cancer shortly afterward.

"People blamed Rattenbury," Adams says, and the couple fled to England, where Alma eventually began an affair with her handsome 17-year-old chauffeur, George Stoner, who eventually bludgeoned Rattenbury to death. Stoner was convicted and given a death sentence that was later commuted to life; Alma was acquitted but took her own life before hearing George had been spared.

Rattenbury's spirit is said to have returned to the Empress, where guests have seen a man in period dress on the staircase to the lower lobby. Adams thinks Rattenbury is hoping to hear the people's praise once again for this masterpiece, recognized as a Historic Site of Canada in 1981.

So when at the Empress, do the Canadian thing: Be nice.

## The Fairmont Empress

721 Government St.,  
Victoria, B.C.  
250-384-8111  
[fairmont.com/empress-victoria](http://fairmont.com/empress-victoria)

## Ghostly Walks

250-384-6698  
[discoverthepast.com/ghostly-walks](http://discoverthepast.com/ghostly-walks)  
Tours about \$12 for adults, \$10 for students and seniors

## Lizzie Borden Bed & Breakfast Museum, Fall River, Mass.

The murder of Andrew and Abby Borden with a hatchet in 1892 is up there with the Black Dahlia killing as one of America's most enduring true-crime mysteries. Lizzie, Andrew's daughter and Abby's stepdaughter, was tried but found not guilty, and the crime remains unsolved.

The Greek Revival home where the killings occurred, located in Fall River's Corky Row Historic District, offers guests the opportunity to stay the night in one of six rooms, including the one where Abby was found murdered.

Abby and Andrew are said to haunt the site. Lee-ann Wilber, who has owned the house for 14 years, tells me over the phone that she has heard "what sounds like whispering, people talking in other rooms," and footsteps on the front and back stairs and overhead, when no one else is there.

When I talk to tour guide Sue Vickery, who has heard a woman speak right into her ear when no one was around, she has some advice for haunt hunters. "They were people," she says, and while curiosity is normal, "you should be respectful to them. You're more likely to get a response if you're respectful."

As for the flickering lights and unexplained shadows, "you get used to it after a while," says Wilber. "It's like having a roommate you never see."

230 Second St.,  
Fall River, Mass.  
508-675-7333  
[lizzie-borden.com](http://lizzie-borden.com)  
Rooms from \$225

[travel@washpost.com](mailto:travel@washpost.com)

Langley is a writer based in Orlando. Find her on Twitter: @LizLangley.