

M E E T T H E R E A L

# Saint Nick

Amelia Island's annual Victorian-themed holiday celebration, Dickens on Centre, returns with a Saint Nick who can make anyone a believer.

If you spend some time talking with Allan Foss, you'll start to wonder if he really is St. Nick. It's not only the rosy cheeks, real white beard and grand presence, but also his delightful stories and jolly demeanor.

There's also the fact that, all year long, when people ask him if he's the real St. Nick, he'll say with a wink: "I think you know."

This year, Foss returns as St. Nick for the seventh-annual *Dickens on Centre on Amelia Island*. When he's not patiently listening to the details of every child's wish list and taking photos with them on his knee, Foss wanders the streets of the festival, pausing for selfies, telling stories about the North Pole and showing anyone who asks photos of Mrs. Claus and his reindeer on his phone. He prides himself on winning over the youngest kids, who are sometimes afraid of old St. Nick.

"I've never had a kid who stays afraid of me," Foss says. "If I have the time, I'll win them over. The high-five—you start with something easy like that, and the end result is to get them on my lap to take a picture."

You can find lots of holiday magic at Dickens on Centre from Dec. 9-12, a seasonal tradition that has become a major draw for Amelia Island each year. Inspired by *Charles Dickens' novel A Christmas Carol*, the festival takes over downtown Fernandina Beach, turning the already quaint main street into an English village, and includes a series of themed events. Expect impromptu carolers, costumed

characters, seasonal art and wares, and a riverfront city draped in holiday lights.

As part of this year's festival, a 10-day culinary showcase unfolds from Dec. 3-12, during which local restaurants will feature Dickens-themed prix fixe dinners and menus inspired by Victorian-era foods. The festival's Dickens Illuminated Procession returns Dec. 9, encouraging attendees to bring anything that glows or twinkles as they take a stroll through the city and stay for the fireworks afterward. Then, on Dec. 11, an adult party, Dickens After Dark, features a historical ghost tour, entertainment, food and drink.

As it does every year, Dickens on Centre includes lots of events for the kids, including storytelling, games, a Parade of Paws and a holiday craft area in Tiny Tim's Kid Zone, which includes a spot to write letters to St. Nick.

Those letters may not need to go far, considering Foss will be nearby. Now 74 years old, Foss grew up in Attleboro, Massachusetts, and moved to Florida in 1985. After serving for four years in Vietnam, he's been a "jack of all trades," including working as a longshore fisherman and owning an assisted living facility. Foss was working for UPS years ago when he got injured, and while he was out, he grew a beard that had people telling him he looked like St. Nick. He already had an outfit from the time he wore it for his family, and so he started breaking it out for appearances around the Jacksonville area.

Nowadays, he does it in large part for the expressions he sees on the kids' faces as they approach him. When he's wandering around Dickens on Centre, he'll see children from a distance, their eyes widening as they get close.

Sometimes they'll ask him if St. Nick is real or about the kids at school who've told them it's a lie. He tells them: "Santa Claus is real in the hearts and minds of a lot of people. Some people say there's no real Santa Claus, but I say, 'Well, if you believe in Santa Claus, he's real, no matter what people say to you.'"

In between appearances at Dickens on Centre, Foss says he'll be in a restaurant or store and notice a child pointing to him. Foss will gift them a holiday book that he signs on the spot.

"I don't wear a suit a lot of times, but I'm basically Santa Claus all the time," he says. "All year long I have people tell me, 'You should be Santa Claus,' and I tell them, 'I am Santa Claus.'" Book your stay to enjoy the festival and meet the real St. Nick. [ameliaisland.com/holiday](http://ameliaisland.com/holiday)

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— SANTA FOSS



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