

# Alachua County Visitor Assessment

December 2014

Gainesville

Alachua

Archer

Hawthorne

High Springs

Melrose

Micanopy

Newberry

Waldo



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Tourism provides economic development opportunities and to be successful, residents, business owners and stakeholders must provide hassle-free experiences and services that meet visitors' needs and exceed their expectations.

*With so many destinations for to choose from, why should someone choose a community in Alachua County to visit and what will their experience be like once they arrive?*

This county-wide project focused on answering this question by taking a candid look at where each community is today and what will make the community stronger. It also establishes a foundation for on-going conversations about whether tourism makes sense for each community in terms of economic development and in terms of quality of life for residents.

Communities who successfully continue to attract visitors work hard to with a strong identity and strong sense of place backed by solid product and effective marketing. When you deliver on the promise you make to your visitors, they are eager to return and will share their positive experience with their friends, family and a variety of online sources.

It's important to note that emphasizing tourism isn't for every community. Having a strong sense of place and being a great place to live comes first. If residents are choosing to spend their free time elsewhere, the community probably won't appeal to visitors either.

This assessment, funded by *Alachua County* and *Visit Gainesville*, is a look at nine communities in Alachua County through the eyes of a visitor. It is intended as a tool for identifying strengths upon which to build, challenges to mitigate, and opportunities to consider. Containing both a marketing assessment and an on-site assessment, it is a snapshot in time, a baseline against which to gauge progress

After our assessment we had two basic findings:

### **1. The area was not what we expected**

To varying degrees we all anticipated the area would be like the commercial strip along Archer Road. We didn't expect to find great restaurants tucked in those strip malls. We didn't expect towns that claimed to be historic and charming that lived up to their promise.

Everyone from the hotel staffs, to people at the gas station made us feel welcome and did their best to provide us with a great experience

### **2. Most towns lack a clearly-defined identity**

Micanopy has a strong sense of who it is. Not a brand or tagline-type of identity, but they know who they are as a community and have a vision for who they want to be moving forward.

The other communities know who they were in the past and they recognize that things have changed. They're just not sure what the future looks like.

Ultimately, each community needs to work together to define who they are and develop a plan for where they're going in terms of economic development and quality of life and whether focusing on tourism should be a part of their future.



## PROJECT OUTLINE

### **September 2014**

A team of six completed the marketing assessment to determine if the county, and its individual communities, show up as an option when people plan a Florida vacation.

The assessment started with planning a trip to Florida in general, then focused on the Alachua County area and, ultimately, 3–5 team members looked at each individual community to determine whether they would visit and what they would do if they did visit.

Getting past the first step, where visitors gather information, is challenging for all destinations.

When visitors are making decisions about where to spend their time and money, they consciously and subconsciously access an array of resources over an indeterminate period of time.

For this assessment, the team was free to use any resources they would normally use when planning a trip, including:

- Recommendations from friends and family
- Books
- Movies and TV shows
- Magazine and newspaper articles
- Guidebooks and brochures
- Print advertising
- TV and radio advertising
- On-line advertising
- Social media including Facebook and Twitter
- Websites
- Blogs
- YouTube and Flickr
- Billboards
- Highway signs
- Previous travel experiences

### **October 4–13, 2014 and November 8–12, 2014**

Another team of six, including a member who is deaf, conducted the on-site assessment of Alachua County. The purpose of this phase was to experience the community the same way a first-time visitor might. No one knew who we were (even the *Visit Gainesville* staff)

Questions addressed were:

- Can visitors find each community?
- What's the first impression?
- Where can visitors get information?
- What do the communities offer?
- Where are the public restrooms?
- Can visitors find their way around?

Members visited every community multiple times to understand what visitors experience. These visits took place on a variety of days and at different times of the day. We took pictures, explored, visited attractions, made purchases, ate in restaurants and talked to business owners, residents and other visitors.

### **November 13 and 14, 2014**

Public meetings were held in Gainesville, Alachua, Micanopy and Newberry to review the assessment findings and begin the conversation about each community's future as a tourism destination.

The observations in this report are a supplement to the presentations and provide a compilation of the team's experiences along with recommendations for the future.

### **October 2015**

A return trip will be made to evaluate each community's progress. We will provide an actionable summary of our findings and will also meet with stakeholders in each community to answer questions, provide feedback and discuss additional action steps.



## STEP 1: PLAN A TRIP TO FLORIDA

You've already been to the Orlando area, where else would you like to visit?

Is there any place that you've read about or heard about that sounds interesting? This can be towns, historic sites, activities, restaurants, lodging, retail, natural areas, anything.

## Marketing Assessment Team

### **TYLER**

Single, 20s  
Travels with girlfriend/friends  
Flying from California  
Likes outdoor recreation, history, quirky places,  
breweries, sports  
Budget-conscious

### **BETSY**

Married, 30s  
Travels with family, 3 children under 8  
Flying from Montana  
Likes family-friendly, outdoor recreation,  
shopping, history  
Budget-conscious

### **CHARLES**

Single, early retiree  
Travels solo, with extended family/friends  
Driving from Midwest  
Likes historic sites, unusual places, golf, state parks  
Budget-conscious

### **DENISE**

Married, 50s  
Travels with spouse  
Driving from Fort Myers area  
Likes geocaching, local foods, historic sites,  
music, natural sciences  
Value over price

### **ROCK**

Single, 60s, self-employed  
Travels solo or with friends  
Flying/driving from Texas  
Likes food, history, visual arts, relaxation  
Value over price

### **CAROL**

Married, retiree  
Travels with spouse/extended family  
Driving from Midwest  
Likes history, quaint shops, music, arts, sports  
Value over price



## Search Terms Used

Visit Florida  
Things to do Florida  
Things to do North Florida  
Things to do Florida Panhandle  
Best beaches Florida  
Must see sporting events Florida  
Vintage Florida  
Best teams to see live Florida  
Best nightlife Florida  
Offbeat Florida  
Florida museums  
Florida small museums  
Florida flea markets  
Mid-Century Florida  
Historic architecture Florida  
Family-friendly Florida  
Historic gardens Florida  
Florida heritage  
Hand-crafted in Florida  
Florida folk art  
Florida citrus history  
Florida estates  
Best places to visit in Florida  
Free things to do in Florida  
Florida best festivals  
Golf courses in Florida  
Rafting/kayaking Florida  
Outdoor recreation Florida  
Adventures in Florida  
Local foods Florida

## Books Consulted

AAA Florida Guidebook  
Lonely Planet Florida & the South's Best Trips – Adam Skolnick  
Fodor's Florida 2014  
Weird Florida: Your Travel Guide to Florida's Local Legends and Best Kept Secrets – Charlie Carlson & Mark Moran  
Florida Authentica – Ron Wiggins



## Websites Visited

[Smartertravel.com](http://Smartertravel.com)

[Travelchannel.com](http://Travelchannel.com)

[www.floridatravellife.com/gallery/free-things-do-florida](http://www.floridatravellife.com/gallery/free-things-do-florida)

[lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com)

[topeventsusa.com](http://topeventsusa.com)

[pineislandchamber.org](http://pineislandchamber.org)

[vrbo.com](http://vrbo.com)

[tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g34345-Activities-Key\\_West\\_Florida\\_Keys\\_Florida.html](http://tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g34345-Activities-Key_West_Florida_Keys_Florida.html)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida)

[floridatravellife.com/weekendgetaways](http://floridatravellife.com/weekendgetaways)

[visitflorida.com](http://visitflorida.com)

[guides.milespartnership.com/VISITFLORIDA/2014](http://guides.milespartnership.com/VISITFLORIDA/2014)

[huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/13/best-botanical-gardens-us-world\\_n\\_1879112.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/13/best-botanical-gardens-us-world_n_1879112.html)

[ahs.org/gardening-programs/rap](http://ahs.org/gardening-programs/rap)

[ecotourism.org/news/florida](http://ecotourism.org/news/florida)

[floridasee.org](http://floridasee.org)

[traveltops.usatoday.com/ecotourism-florida-104228.html](http://traveltops.usatoday.com/ecotourism-florida-104228.html)

[floridastateparks.org/default.cfm](http://floridastateparks.org/default.cfm)

[floridascenichighways.com](http://floridascenichighways.com)

[visitflorida.com](http://visitflorida.com)

[tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com)

[unknownflorida.blogspot.com/p/bucket-list-north-florida.html](http://unknownflorida.blogspot.com/p/bucket-list-north-florida.html)

[lonelyplanet.com/usa/florida](http://lonelyplanet.com/usa/florida)

[travelchannel.com/interests/beaches/articles/top-beaches-in-florida](http://travelchannel.com/interests/beaches/articles/top-beaches-in-florida)



## What places and/or activities in Florida (excluding Orlando) look interesting?

### TYLER

- Key West
- Miami nightlife
- Shell Island
- St. Andrew's State Park
- Beaches—Siesta Key, South, Atlantic
- Florida or Florida State football games
- Pelican Island NWR
- Florida Holocaust Museum
- Apalachicola Seafood Festival
- Tallahassee
- Gainesville

*"There was nothing about Florida that particularly stuck out for me besides the beaches, nice weather, college sports and world-class nightlife in the Miami area. I decided I'd rent a car and drive from north Florida, stopping in Gainesville or Tallahassee for a football game. Then I'd head down the west coast and stop at a couple of beaches before ending up in Miami for more beaches and the nightlife. I would end up in Key West to relax."*

~Tyler

*"Sarasota looks like a lot of fun for the kids. Who doesn't love the circus?... I really want to go to St. Augustine, the history attracts me ... Taking the kids to collect shells on Sanibel Island sounds like a great way to spend a day."*

*I liked the places that had beachfront hotels with more character and history. Being away from the super busy places with a ton of clubs and nightlife appeals to me"*

~Betsy

### BETSY

- Sanibel Island
- Little Havana—Viernes Culturales
- Fort Matanzas
- Clewistown Sugar Festival
- Tubing the Rainbow River
- Sarasota
- St. Augustine
- Orange Blossom Festival—Brooksville
- Caladesi Island
- Old Town—Kissimmee
- Key West

### CHARLES

- Pine Island
- Key West
- Everglades National Park
- Oldest House Museum
- Houseboat Heaven/Suwannee River
- Key West
- Hemingway House
- Little White House
- St. Petersburg

*"While watching the television show 'Beachfront Bargain Hunt,' I became interested in visiting Pine Island. The art and culture seem intriguing and I'd like to fish and go boating. I've also always wanted to drive through the Keys on US 1 to Key West."*

~Charles



## What places and/or activities in Florida (excluding Orlando) look interesting?

### DENISE

- Crystal River State Park
- Homosassa Springs State Park
- Dudley Farm State Park
- Charles Hosmer More Museum
- Flagler Beach
- Ten Thousand Islands

*"I don't enjoy large urban areas much when I'm on vacation so I tended to stay away from larger cities during my assessment. I'm happy to spend a day there but don't enjoy staying there for my entire vacation."*

~Denise

*"I've always wanted to see Ybor City, the historic city where Cubans settled and cigars were made. I'm interested in historic buildings, neighborhoods, and architecture. I looked into touring some of the large estates and some gardens and several look interesting. I didn't find much so asking around may be the best resource for that ... I didn't find as many oddities as I expected."*

~Rock

### ROCK

- Ybor City
- Flea Markets
- Bowling Ball House
- Ticmucuan National Park
- Flagler Beach
- Key West
- Fairchild Botanical Garden
- Mexico Beach
- Venice
- Tampa

### CAROL

- Naples
- Fort Lauderdale
- Palm Beach
- Pelican Island National Refuge
- Cape Canaveral
- Daytona Beach
- St. Augustine
- Jacksonville
- Key West

*"We typically select a route and stop at the first visitor information center to select brochures of sites to visit. We'd take I-75 down the west coast and I-95 up the east coast, stopping in selected communities along the way."*

~Carol

After all of their research, did Alachua County show up on anyone's list of places to visit?

Barely—they did identify Dudley Farm State Park and Gainesville for UF football, but that was it.

This led to the next step where the team was asked to focus on the Alachua County area. Their first challenge was to actually find Alachua County since none of them had ever heard of it. Everyone commented that they used online maps more in this phase because they first needed to orient themselves geographically

within the state. They also used maps once they found information about a community to see where it was a relationship to other places.

The feedback indicated below reflects their initial research. Subsequent community-specific sections summarize what happened when they looked only at an individual community.

On the next page is a list of what interested them when they were looking at the county as a whole.

## **STEP 2: WOULD YOU GO TO THE ALACHUA COUNTY AREA?**

**If No, why not?**

**If Yes,**

**Where would you go?**

**What would you do?**

**How long would you stay?**

### **Tyler—Yes, overnight**

Gainesville

### **Betsy—Yes, 1 to 2 days**

Gainesville

Micanopy

High Springs

Newberry

### **Charles—No**

### **Denise—Yes, day trip**

Gainesville

Newberry

### **Rock—Yes, 4 to 5 days**

Gainesville

Micanopy

High Springs

Alachua

### **Carol—Yes, overnight**

Gainesville



## What places and/or activities in the Alachua County area look interesting?

- Harn Museum of Art
- Tubing/Canoeing
- San Felasco Hammock Preserve
- Hippodrome Theater
- Eating locally sourced food
- Eating regional specialties
- Shopping for artisan-crafted items
- Shopping for vintage jewelry
- Matheson Museum
- M.K. Rawlings State Park
- Haile Homestead
- Garden tours
- Thomas Center
- Flaco's Cuban Bakery
- Explore area's Latin heritage
- Antique shops
- O.Brisky Books
- 3-D Fluorescent Art Museum
- Old Florida Cafe
- Great Outdoors Restaurant
- Florida Gators game
- Sweetwater Branch Inn
- Bo Diddley's Concert Stage
- Blue Gill
- Herlong Mansion
- Emiliano's Cafe
- Holiday Inn Campus Center
- Butterfly Rainforest
- Museum of Natural History
- Learning to dive



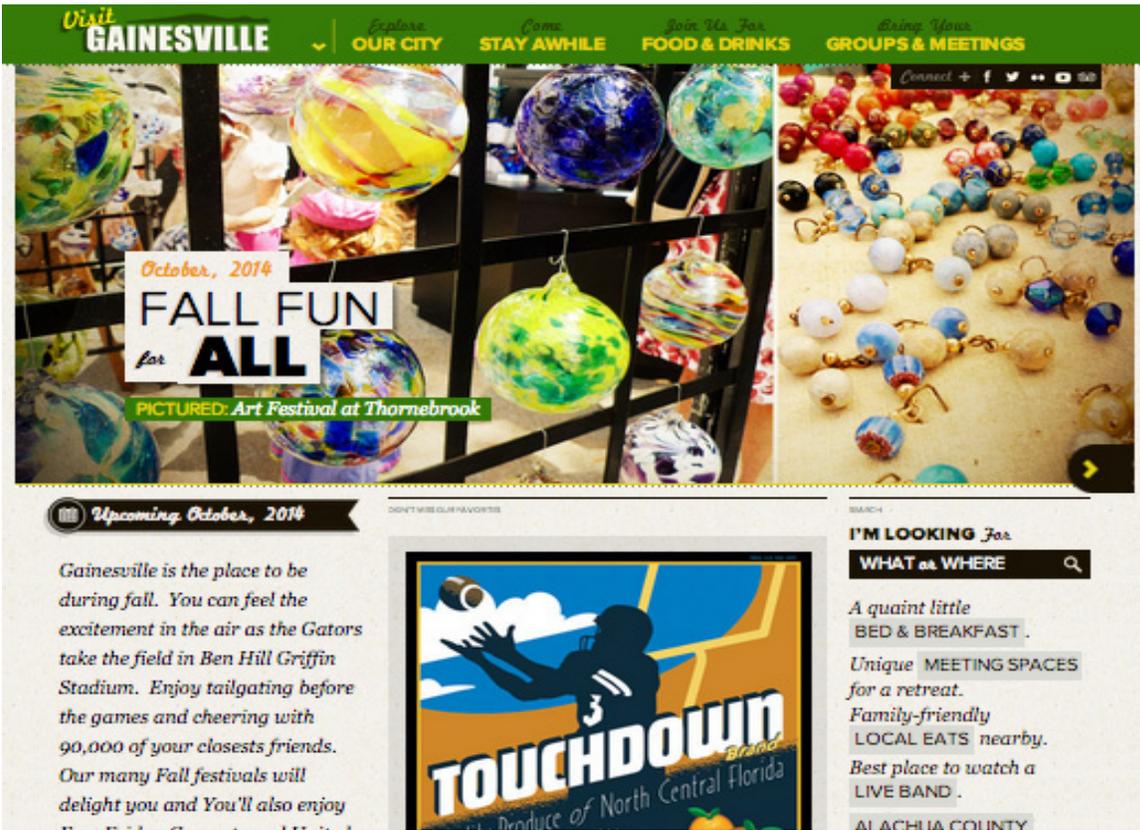
After visitors have identified a destination or a region and are searching online for what there is to see and/or do, they usually search for something like “things to do Alachua County FL.” That’s exactly what happened with our team. All of them found the *Visit Gainesville* website and started there with the decision making process.

This is the homepage for the Alachua County Visitors and Convention Bureau (VCB). The VCB uses *Visit Gainesville* as their consumer identity; however, the Bureau markets the entire County as a visitor destination.

Everyone felt the *Visit Gainesville* site was well designed, easy to navigate and provided a broad range of information for Gainesville, but most didn’t find the links for local communities.

As the communities add more content to this section, think about improving the visibility for smaller communities via a button elsewhere on the page, maybe at the top of the sidebar.

## www.VisitGainesville.com



Printed visitor guides are still used by many people, however, they're often picked up spur-of-the-moment instead of being requested ahead of time. In a test of response times for requested materials, the team found that the telephone request was delivered in less than a week while four different requests via the website took about a month to be received.

*Update:* The visitor center staff has reviewed their procedures and made adjustments to facilitate a more timely response.

**Visit GAINESVILLE** | Explore OUR CITY | Come STAY AWHILE | Join Us For FOOD & DRINKS | Bring Your GROUPS & MEETINGS

Connect + f t + i y

## VISITOR GUIDE REQUEST

Thank you for your interest in Gainesville, Florida. To get a copy of our VisitGainesville Visitor Guide, please fill out the form below, hit send and you will receive your guide in a couple of weeks.

*Can't wait for the mailman?* **VIEW IT ONLINE NOW**

**Sign Up FOR OUR E-NEWSLETTER**

SEARCH: I'M LOOKING for WHAT and WHERE

FIRST NAME \*  
LAST NAME \*  
ADDRESS \*  
CITY \*  
COUNTRY \*  
United States  
STATE/PROVINCE/REGION \*  
ZIP/POSTAL CODE \*  
EMAIL ADDRESS \*  
PHONE

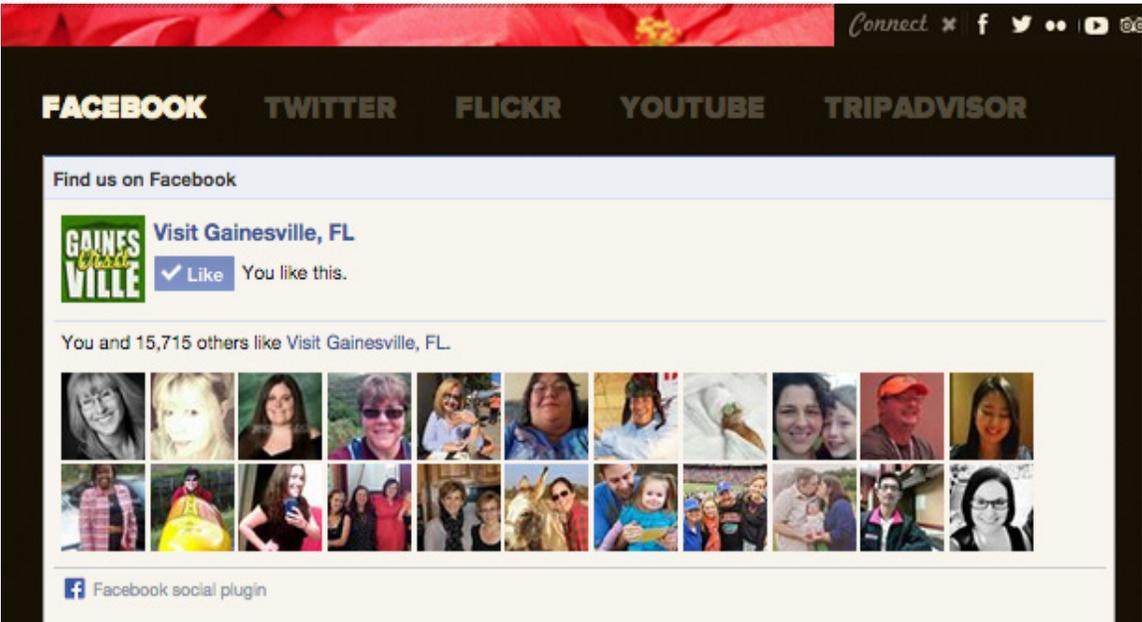
I WOULD ALSO LIKE TO RECEIVE NEWS AND OFFERS EMAILS  
 I WOULD ALSO LIKE TO RECEIVE MEETING AND EVENT PLANNING EMAILS

**SEND**

The digital marketing presence of *Visit Gainesville* is well-executed and diverse with a strong presence on the most popular platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Flickr, YouTube and Instagram.

**Two suggestions:**

- 1. Consider updating the “Connect” tab on VisitGainesville.com (shown below) to include additional platforms you’re using like Instagram and Pinterest to drive more engagement with your strong visual content.
- 2. Help with TripAdvisor forum questions that others aren’t responding to.



www.facebook.com/visitgainesvilleflorida

**Visit Gainesville, FL**  
Tourist Information

15,583 likes  
1,383 visits

Katherine Hoppe, Theresa Ertle Overby and 8 other friends like this or have been here.

**Visit Gainesville, FL**  
11 hours ago

While you're in town for THE FEST this weekend, make sure to enjoy some hometown brew from Swamp Head Brewery!

https://www.flickr.com/photos/visitgainesville/

**Visit Gainesville**  
15 Albums August 2014 Member Since

- Gainesville Food & Drink (19 photos)
- Thomas Center (4 photos)
- Where to Stay (27 photos)
- Nearby Towns (75 photos)
- University of Florida (27 photos)
- Bed & Breakfasts (27 photos)
- Art, Culture, and History... (45 photos)
- Paynes Prairie (31 photos)
- Kanapaha Botanical Gardens (8 photos)
- Football (19 photos)
- Gainesville Raceway (37 photos)
- Gainesville Sports (36 photos)

## twitter.com/Gainesville

The screenshot shows the Twitter profile for Visit Gainesville (@Gainesville). The header features a banner image of a boat on a river and the 'GAINESVILLE VisitVILLE' logo. Below the banner, statistics are listed: TWEETS 3,487, FOLLOWING 1,061, FOLLOWERS 3,242, FAVORITES 254, and LISTS 2. A 'Follow' button is visible. The bio reads: 'Where Nature and Culture Meet', the Official page for info on what to do, where to go, and what to see in Gainesville, Florida! Location: Gainesville, Florida; Website: visitgainesville.com; Joined: November 2009. There are 427 photos and videos. The main content area shows two tweets. The first tweet, dated Nov 29, promotes #SmallBusinessSaturday with a link to social.collinsonmedia.com/5jo and an image of a boutique interior. The second tweet, dated Nov 28, asks 'Need a little pick-me-up while out shopping?' with a link to social.collinsonmedia.com/0a4 and an image of cookies. On the right, there is a sign-up form for updates and a 'Worldwide Trends' section listing various hashtags.

## instagram.com/visitgainesville

The screenshot shows the Instagram profile for Visit Gainesville. The profile picture is the 'GAINESVILLE VisitVILLE' logo. The bio reads: 'visitgainesville - Visit Gainesville Official destination marketing organization for Gainesville, FL, Where Nature and Culture Meet. Our tags are #gainesville and #GNVFL http://www.VisitGainesville.com'. Statistics show 383 posts, 742 followers, and 344 following. The post grid includes a variety of images: a boat on a river, a balcony with wicker furniture overlooking a pool, a large yellow flower, a red drink, a plate of fries, a neon 'V' sign, a man in a suit with the text 'YOU WILL BE', a 'SMALL BUSINESS SATURDAY' sign, a 'BEST FISHING RECOMMENDATIONS' list, and a hot dog.

<http://www.pinterest.com/gainesvillefl/>

The screenshot shows the Pinterest profile for 'Visit Gainesville'. At the top, there is a profile picture of a green tree logo, the name 'Visit Gainesville', and a 'Follow' button. Below the name, it says '© Gainesville, Florida' and 'www.visitgainesville.com'. A bio reads: 'Where Nature and Culture Meet', the Official page for info on what to do, where to go, and what to see in Gainesville, Florida!'. Statistics are listed: 21 Boards, 1,684 Pins, 136 Likes, 1,432 Followers, and 414 Following.

The main content is a grid of 24 boards, each with a cover image, a title, a pin count, and a 'Follow' button:

- Things to Do in Gainesville (61 Pins)
- Gainesville Food & Drink (479 Pins)
- Gainesville Gifts & Shopping (102 Pins)
- Gainesville Holidays (9 Pins)
- Gainesville Events (77 Pins)
- Gainesville Farmers Markets (37 Pins)
- Gator Gameday (244 Pins)
- Gainesville, Florida (57 Pins)
- Downtown Gainesville (45 Pins)
- Get Outside in Gainesville (53 Pins)
- Go Gators! (101 Pins)
- Nearby Towns (41 Pins)
- Stay in Gainesville (28 Pins)
- Get Married in Gainesville (167 Pins)
- Gainesville Bed & Breakfasts
- Gainesville Art
- Meet in Gainesville
- Gainesville Entertainment
- Gainesville Nightlife
- Pin Your Way to Gainesville
- Blog/Stories About Gainesville...