

The Charleston Experience

In the closing pages of *Gone With the Wind*, Rhett tells Scarlett that he's going back home to Charleston, where he can find "the calm dignity life can have when it's lived by gentle folks, the genial grace of days that are gone. When I lived those days, I didn't realize the slow charm of them." In spite of all the changes and upheavals over the years, Rhett's endorsement of Charleston still holds true.

If the Old South lives throughout South Carolina's Low Country, it positively thrives in Charleston. All our romantic notions of antebellum days—stately homes, courtly manners, gracious hospitality, and above all, gentle dignity—are facts of everyday life in this old city, in spite of a few scoundrels here and there, including an impressive roster of pirates, patriots, and presidents.

Located on the peninsula between the Cooper and Ashley rivers in southeastern South Carolina, Charleston is the oldest and second-largest city in the state. Notwithstanding a history dotted with earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, and Yankee bombardments, Charleston remains one of the best-preserved cities in America's Old South. It boasts 73 pre-Revolutionary War buildings, 136 from the late 18th century, and more than 600 built before the 1840s. With its cobblestone streets and horse-drawn carriages, Charleston is a place of visual images and sensory pleasures. Charleston's Old City Market is bustling with craftspeople jammed under the covered breezeways. Sweetgrass basket weavers hum spirituals; horse-drawn carriages clop down the street; and thousands of tourists eat, drink, and shop their way along. Jasmine and wisteria scent the air; the aroma of she-crab soup (a local favorite) wafts from sidewalk cafes; and antebellum architecture graces the historic cityscape. "No wonder they are so full of themselves," said an envious visitor from Columbia, which may be the state capital but doesn't have Charleston style.

In its annual reader survey, *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine names Charleston the number-five city to visit in America. Visitors are drawn here from all over the world. Each spring the city hosts the

Spoleto Festival U.S.A., one of the most prestigious performing-arts events in the country, even the world.

Does this city have a modern side? Yes, but it's well hidden. Chic shops abound, as do a few supermodern hotels, but Charleston has no skyscrapers. You don't come to Charleston for anything cutting edge, though. You come to glimpse an earlier, almost-forgotten era.

Many local families still own and live in the homes that their planter ancestors built. Charlestonians manage to maintain a way of life that in many respects has little to do with wealth. The simplest encounter with Charleston natives seems to be invested with a social air, as though the visitor were a valued guest. Yet there are those who detect a certain snobbishness in Charleston—and truth be told, you'd have to stay here a hundred years to be considered an insider.

A minimum 3-day stay is required if you are to discover Charleston by day and night. Try to include a trip over the Cooper River Bridge to the string of islands that have rebounded from the massive destruction of Hurricane Hugo.

1 Frommer's Favorite Charleston Experiences

- **Playing Scarlett & Rhett at Boone Hall:** Over in Mount Pleasant, you can pretend that you're one of the romantic figures in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* by paying a visit to this 738-acre estate, a cotton plantation settled by Maj. John Boone in 1681. Its gorgeous Avenue of Oaks was used for background shots in *Gone With the Wind* and the miniseries *North and South*. See chapter 8.
- **Going Back to Colonial Days:** At Charles Towne Landing, you get the best insight into how colonists lived 300 years ago when they established the first English settlement in South Carolina. Even the animals the settlers encountered, from bears to bison, roam about. Enjoy 80 acres of gardens by walking along the marsh or biking past lagoons that reflect blossoming camellias and azaleas. See chapter 8.
- **Taking in the View from the Battery:** The Battery, as locals call White Point Gardens, offers the best perspective of the historic district. The gardens lie at the end of the peninsula, opening onto Cooper River and the harbor, where Fort Sumter sits. For the best walk, head along the sea wall on East Battery Street and Murray Boulevard. Later you can relax in the landscaped park, beneath wonderful live oaks. See chapter 8.

- **Tasting She-Crab Soup:** She-crab soup is to the local Charlestonian what clam chowder is to a New Englander. This rich delicacy has many permutations, but in most kitchens it is fashioned from butter, milk, heavy cream, sherry, salt, cayenne pepper, and, of course, crabmeat picked free of shells and cartilage. The secret ingredient: crab roe. See chapter 7.
- **Shopping Along King Street:** In 1854, painter Charles Fraser wrote of King Street and its “dazzling display of goods emulating a Turkish bazaar.” The street’s decline began with the Civil War and continued through subsequent natural disasters and 20th-century suburban sprawl. Today, King Street has bounced back. While it may never have the dazzle of a Turkish bazaar, it now ranks as one of the most attractive shopping promenades in the South. See chapter 9.
- **Exploring Fort Sumter:** Few events have had such a far-reaching impact on American history as the first shot of the Civil War fired here on April 12, 1861. Remembering what happened on that awful day and how it would rend the fabric of the nation gives great import to a tour of this fortress, its gun emplacements and artifacts on shining display. You can almost hear the bombardment as Yankee ships fired on the fort, whose Confederate troops valiantly resisted until the final day of surrender 4 years after that fateful shot. See chapter 8.
- **A Night in a B&B:** Few cities in the South recapture that antebellum feeling as much as a stay in a restored bed-and-breakfast lodging in Charleston. The Old English theme prevails, with stucco-finished walls, muslin curtains, draped rice beds, exposed beams, an occasional tapestry, and crystal chandeliers. Listen for the clank of an iron gate in front of a columned house as the scent of jasmine fills the air. See chapter 6.
- **Strolling Through the City as a Garden:** The entire district of Charleston seems to be one lush garden—not just the public plantings, such as the oleanders that line the Battery, but the nooks and crannies of private courtyards, where even the smallest patch of earth is likely to be filled with lush plantings. Wherever you stroll you can peer through wrought-iron gates into private edens planted with everything from wisteria to Confederate jasmine, tea olives to ginger lilies. Pink-blossomed crape myrtles line the streets, and camellias and magnolias sweeten the air.

- **A Horse and Carriage:** Nothing in Charleston quite captures the languid life of the Low Country more than a horse-drawn-carriage ride through the semitropical landscape. Most times of the year, the streets of Charleston are heavenly scented, perhaps from the blossoms of tea olives, jasmine, or wisteria. As the horse pulls you along, you'll feel you're back in the antebellum South as you slowly clip-clop past sun-dappled verandas and open-air markets selling fruits, vegetables, and straw baskets. See "Organized Tours," in chapter 8.

2 Best Hotel Bets

See chapter 6, "Where to Stay," for complete reviews of all these accommodations.

- **Best Classical Hotel:** The city's premier hostelry, **Charleston Place Hotel**, 205 Meeting St. (☎ 800/611-5545 or 843/722-4900; www.charlestonplacehotel.com), rises like a postmodern French château in the historic district. Visiting dignitaries and celebs like Mel Gibson bunk here. Acres of Italian marble, plush bedrooms, and a deluxe restaurant await you. See p. 45.
- **Best and Most Prestigious Inn:** One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence built the **John Rutledge House Inn**, 116 Broad St. (☎ 866/720-2609 or 843/723-7999; www.charminginns.com), which has been restored to its former Federalist grandeur. All the modern comforts have been added to the gracious, antiques-filled bedrooms. See p. 46.
- **Best and Grandest B&B:** Hailed by many as one of the top B&Bs in the South, the **Philip Porcher House**, 19 Archdale St. (☎ 843/722-1801), is an impressively restored 1770 Georgian house at the core of the historic district. Once the home of a French Huguenot planter, the property was converted into this plush hotel in 1997. Period antiques and evocative art and objects from yesterday are graciously used in this nostalgic, inviting setting. See p. 46.
- **Best Small Luxury Hotel:** For those who like their inns on the small scale but as luxurious as any first-class competitor, there's the **Planters Inn**, 112 N. Market St. (☎ 800/845-7082 or 843/722-2345; www.plantersinn.com). This beautiful little hotel next to the Old City Market was opulently renovated in 1994, transforming it into an enclave of colonial charm, filled with 18th-century antiques and good reproductions. One of Charleston's best restaurants and bars is on-site. See p. 48.

- **Best Survivor of the Gilded Age:** A landmark Charleston hotel, **Wentworth Mansion**, 149 Wentworth St. (☎ 888/466-1886 or 843/853-1886; www.wentworthmansion.com), is an 1886 Second Empire building filled with the kind of luxurious architectural details that America's robber barons used to decorate their lavish estates: hand-carved marble fireplaces, Tiffany stained-glass windows, and elaborate wood and plasterwork. Built by a rich cotton merchant, the mansion has been successfully converted into one of South Carolina's grandest hotel addresses. See p. 50.
- **Best Boutique Hotel:** The **French Quarter Inn at Market Square**, 166 Church St. (☎ 866/812-1900 or 843/722-1900; www.fqicharleston.com), has a facade that evokes an 18th-century town house in Paris. Although it's modernized, the hotel blends in beautifully with the surrounding neighborhood, as if it's always been there. You stay in dignified, luxurious comfort here, enjoying nostalgic reminders of the architecture of yesterday, such as high ceilings, monumental staircases, and wrought-iron fixtures. See p. 55.
- **Best Harbor View:** No inn in Charleston is more aptly named than **HarbourView Inn**, 2 Vendue Range (☎ 888/853-8439 or 843/853-8439; www.harbourviewcharleston.com), a four-story inn in the heart of Charleston, across from Waterfront Park. From the hotel windows you can look out at one of the best city seascapes in South Carolina, a historic setting where the first round in the Civil War was fired. The traditions of the Old South are heeded here, and the sea-grass rugs and rattan chairs are of the sort Charleston sea captains used to bring back from their voyages. See p. 56.
- **Best Conversion from Existing Buildings:** No one will mistake **Maison Du Pré**, 317 E. Bay St. (☎ 800/844-4667 or 843/723-8691; www.maisondupre.com), for a dull roadside Days Inn. Five historic structures—three of them here since 1803, with two moved into position from their original perches—have been combined by the Mulholland family into a harmonious compound of free-standing 19th-century houses. This is one of Charleston's best examples of recycling existing buildings. The result is a hotel of charm and grace arranged around two landscaped courtyards. See p. 57.
- **Best Historic Hotel:** Constructed in grandeur and steeped in the history of Charleston, the **Mills House Hotel**, 115 Meeting

St. (☎ 800/874-9600 or 843/577-2400; www.millshouse.com), is a deluxe address. Its guest roster has ranged from Robert E. Lee to Elizabeth Taylor. Many of the original furnishings remain from 1853, when it was built for the then-astronomical price of \$200,000. Although much altered over the years, it still has antebellum charm. See p. 59.

- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel:** Constructed as a private house—probably for slaves—**The Elliott House Inn**, 78 Queen St. (☎ 800/729-1855 or 843/723-1855; www.elliotthouseinn.com), has been converted into one of Charleston's most charming inns. Even though none of the hotels in the historic district are particularly cheap, this one offers good value in its comfortable, carefully maintained bedrooms. Rooms are arranged off tiers of balconies opening onto a verdant courtyard, and each comes with a four-poster bed. See p. 62.
- **Best for Value:** If you want antebellum charm, but at an affordable price, check into **The Rutledge Victorian Guest House**, 114 Rutledge Ave. (☎ 888/722-7553 or 843/722-7551; www.charlestonvictorian.com), an Italianate building from the 19th century that is one of the city's better inns. In keeping with its name, its rooms are furnished with Victorian antiques along with an intriguing assortment of beds ranging from Italian “rope beds” to the famous rice beds of South Carolina. To go really economical, ask for one of the units without a private bathroom, the most reasonably priced in the historic district. See p. 63.
- **Best Modern Hotel:** For the best of contemporary luxury living, head to **The Inn at Middleton Place**, 4290 Ashley River Rd. (☎ 800/543-4774 or 843/556-0500; www.theinnatmiddletonplace.com), a newly created and striking modern luxury hotel now receiving guests on the grounds of the historic 18th-century Middleton Plantation, one of the area's major sightseeing attractions. It was the creation of Charles Duell, one of the descendants of Middleton's original owners, who deliberately wanted to escape “ersatz colonial.” See p. 66.

3 Best Dining Bets

See chapter 7, “Where to Dine,” for complete reviews of all these restaurants.

- **Best French Restaurant:** With top-notch cuisine, formal service, and an upmarket clientele, **Robert's of Charleston**, 182 E.

Bay St. (☎ 843/577-7565), stands up there with some of the most outstanding restaurants of Paris. The seasonally adjusted menu is the showcase for the culinary talents of chef and owner Robert Dickson, who has brought a new dimension to French-inspired cooking in Charleston. See p. 70.

- **Best Low Country Cuisine:** Hip and stylish, **Anson**, 12 Anson St. (☎ 843/577-0551), is filled with Low Country charm. The way it handles the recipes and foodstuffs of coastal South Carolina is reason enough to visit. Time-tested recipes are often given imaginative modern twists, as exemplified by the lobster, corn, and black-bean quesadillas or the cashew-crusted grouper in champagne sauce. See p. 72.
- **Best Historic Restaurant:** Of course, George Washington no longer dines at **McCrary's**, 2 Unity Alley (☎ 843/577-0025), on his visits to Charleston, but this citadel of upmarket American/French cuisine is still going strong. *Esquire* magazine recently heralded it as one of the best restaurants in America, even though it's set in a historic tavern of exposed beams and wide-plank floors. Even the most basic dish is magical here—take potato soup, for example. Here it's creamy and enlivened with chive oil, truffles, and leek foam. See p. 74.
- **Best for Sunday Brunch:** In the historic Mills House Hotel, taking Sunday brunch at the **Barbados Room Restaurant**, 115 Meeting St. (☎ 843/577-2400), is a Charleston tradition. In an antebellum setting, you can enjoy some of the best Low Country brunch specialties in the city. Shrimp and grits are traditional, but who can resist Chef Gibson's jumbo crab cakes? See p. 75.
- **Best for Seafood:** Most restaurants in Charleston serve seafood dishes, more or less, but for authentic Low Country fish dishes we always head for **Hank's**, 10 Hayne St. (☎ 843/723-3474), a converted turn-of-the-20th-century warehouse overlooking Old City Market. The she-crab soup, that invariable Charleston appetizer, is prepared to sheer perfection here. See p. 78.
- **Best for Barbecue:** For Tennessee-style barbecue, the kind Elvis loved, head for the aptly named **Sticky Fingers**, 235 Meeting St. (☎ 843/853-7427), where the barbecue is hickory smoked and the sauce is zesty. Ribs are prepared in the traditional slow-smoking process for extra flavor. The hickory-smoked chicken isn't bad either. See p. 84.

- **The Best Restaurant in South Carolina:** In the town of Summerville, outside Charleston, some of the most discerning palates in the South have ruled that the elegant **Dining Room at Woodlands**, 125 Parsons Rd. (☎ 800/774-9999), is the finest in the state. Readers of *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine, in fact, have rated it one of the top restaurants in North America for several years in a row. Low Country cuisine is prepared here to near perfection. See p. 89.
- **Best for Romantic Dining:** In the carriage house of Wentworth Mansion, **Circa 1886 Restaurant**, 149 Wentworth St. (☎ 843/853-7828), is the city's most elegant setting for a romantic dinner for two. That it also serves some of the city's best Low Country and French cuisine comes as an added bonus. To get you in the right romantic mood, take in the water views from the restaurant's cupola. See p. 69.
- **Best Chef in Charleston:** Hitting town from the Wild Boar in Nashville, Chef Bob Waggoner wowed local foodies when he took charge at the **Charleston Grill** in the Charleston Place Hotel, 224 King St. (☎ 843/577-4522). His French cuisine, with Low Country influences, draws raves, and his is the only restaurant in Charleston that boasts the much-coveted Mobil Four-Star rating. See p. 72.
- **Best for Steak:** Since the '90s, **High Cotton**, 199 E. Bay St. (☎ 843/724-3815), has won a clientele devoted to its steaks. Using the finest cut of meats, the results are tender, juicy, and succulent steaks. To go the full Southern route, ask for a steak with bourbon sauce. See p. 74.
- **Best for Oysters:** Long known for its oysters, **A. W. Shucks**, 70 State St. (☎ 843/723-1151), settles the demands of city dwellers who really know their bivalves. Oysters, perhaps the best in the South, are prepared here in various delightful ways, including, of course, chilled and served on the half shell after they are carefully shucked. See p. 74.
- **Best for Kids:** A short walk from the Old City Market, **Bocci's**, 158 Church St. (☎ 843/720-2121), has one of the best family dining rooms in Charleston, known for its good-value Italian cuisine. Kids love to dig into the full-flavored pastas. There's a special menu for children. See p. 76.