

The Best of Charleston

The rich history of Charleston has led to countless Gothic romances, the last major one being *Scarlett*, the faintly praised sequel to *Gone With the Wind*. Although a relatively small state—40th in size among the 50 states—South Carolina has had an enormous impact on the nation, none more significant than the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor that launched the Civil War.

Charlestonians manage to maintain a way of life that in many respects has little to do with wealth. Many local families still live in homes built by their planter ancestors. The simplest encounter with 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 snobishness 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.

To fortify yourself before you go, here's some background on one of America's most colorful, historic, and romantic port cities.

1 Frommer's Favorite Charleston Experiences

- **Playing Scarlett & Rhett at Boone Hall:** Pretend you're one of the romantic figures in *Gone With the Wind* by paying a visit to this 738-acre Mount Pleasant 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 6.
- **Going Back to Colonial Days:** At Charles Towne Landing, gain 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 6.

- **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 6.
- **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, crabmeat, and the secret ingredient: crab roe. See chapter 5.
- **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 and ranks as one of the most attractive shopping promenades in the South. See chapter 7.
- **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. When you tour 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 6.
- **Spending the Night in a B&B:** Few places in the South allow you to recapture that antebellum feeling as much as a stay in a restored B&B in Charleston. The Old English theme prevails, with muslin curtains, draped rice beds, exposed beams, 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 4.
- **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 also the nooks and crannies of private courtyards, 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.
- **Hiring a Horse & Carriage:** Nothing captures the languid life of the Low Country more than a horse-drawn-carriage ride

through the semitropical landscape. Most times of year, the streets of Charleston are heavenly scented from the blossoms of tea olives, jasmine, or wisteria. You'll feel like 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 6.

2 Best Hotel Bets

See chapter 4, "Where to Stay," for complete reviews of all these accommodations.

- **Best Classical Hotel:** Visiting dignitaries and celebs like Mel Gibson bunk at the **Charleston Place Hotel**, 205 Meeting St. (☎ 800/611-5545 or 843/722-4900; www.charlestonplacehotel.com), which rises like a postmodern French château in the historic district. Acres of Italian marble, plush bedrooms, and a deluxe restaurant await you. See p. 49.
- **Best & 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 of the modern comforts have been added to the gracious, antiques-filled bedrooms. See p. 50.
- **Best B&B:** One of the most outstanding bed-and-breakfasts in the Southeast, **Palmer Home View**, 5 East Battery (☎ 888/723-1574 or 843/853-1574; www.palmerhomebb.com), was constructed in 1848 by John Ravenel, who designed the fore-runner of the submarine. Since 1977, it's been rated one of the most beautifully decorated B&Bs in the area, its bedrooms opening onto views of Charleston Harbor. See p. 60.
- **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. One of Charleston's best restaurants and bars is on-site. See p. 52.
- **Best Survivor of the Gilded Age:** The landmark **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 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. 52.

- **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 has been modernized, the hotel blends in beautifully with the surrounding neighborhood. You'll stay in dignified comfort, 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), set in the heart of Charleston, across from Waterfront Park. From its 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 sea-grass rugs and rattan chairs are of the sort Charleston sea captains used to bring back from their voyages. See p. 56.
- **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), has welcomed everyone 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 Modern Hotel:** For the best of contemporary 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, striking 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. 65.

3 Best Dining Bets

See chapter 5, “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 seasonal 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 this place handles the foodstuffs of coastal South Carolina is reason enough to visit. Time-tested recipes are given imaginative twists, as exemplified by the lobster, corn, and black-bean quesadillas or the cashew-crusted grouper in champagne sauce. See p. 71.
- **Best Historic Restaurant:** Of course, George Washington no longer stops 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. Set in a historic tavern of exposed beams and wide-plank floors, it was recently heralded by *Esquire* as one of the best restaurants in the U.S. Even the most basic dish is magical—take potato soup, for example. Here it’s creamy and enlivened with chive oil, truffles, and leek foam. See p. 73.
- **Best for Sunday Brunch:** Sunday brunch at the historic Mills House Hotel’s **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 the jumbo crab cakes? See p. 74.
- **Best for Seafood:** Most restaurants in Charleston serve seafood, but for authentic Low Country fish dishes, 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 perfection here. See p. 76.
- **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. To go the full Southern route, ask for a steak with bourbon sauce. See p. 72.

- **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. See p. 79.
- **Best Chef in Charleston:** Bob Waggoner wowed local foodies—and drew raves from as far away as Paris—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, earned the restaurant the only Mobil four-star rating in town. See p. 68.
- **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. (☎ 843/875-2600), is the finest in the state. Readers of *Condé Nast Traveler*, 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. 87.
- **Best for Romantic Dining:** In the carriage house of Wentworth Mansion, **Circa 1886 Restaurant**, 149 Wentworth St. (☎ 843/853-7828), is Charleston's most elegant setting for a romantic dinner. That it also serves some of the city's best Low Country and French cuisine comes as an added bonus. To get in the right mood, take in the water views from the restaurant's cupola. See p. 68.
- **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; they even get their own special menu. See p. 75.