

# The top U.S. city to visit: Charleston, S.C.



**The 13 historic houses of Rainbow Row brighten downtown Charleston, South Carolina, near the Battery district. The city is known for its well-preserved buildings, laid-back hospitality and sophisticated restaurants.**

Photo © Benita Le Mahieu | Dreamstime.com



**St. Michael's Church, the oldest church in Charleston, welcomed George Washington in 1791. With more than 400 churches, synagogues and mosques, Charleston is known as the "Holy City."**

Photo © Jonathan Ross Dreamstime.com

While the Rainbow Row houses and the Pink House aren't open to the public, numerous historic houses welcome visitors, such as the Heyward-Washington House.

Thomas Heyward, Jr. was one of the four South Carolina signers of the Declaration of Independence, and George Washington was a guest at the Georgian-style home, built in 1772. Brick walls in the back of the house enclose a manicured garden.

The Victorian-style Calhoun Mansion, built in 1873, includes more than 30 rooms and a large ballroom. If it looks familiar, you might have seen it in such films as *North and South* and *The Notebook*.

More historic houses on plantations outside the city limits are also open for tours. Magnolia Plantation and Gardens is about a 20-minute drive from downtown Charleston. The 500-acre plantation has been in the same family since 1676. Visitors can wander the entire estate or take a nature tram or boat through a former rice paddy to see plentiful wildlife, from alligators to egrets.

Arched bridges lead the way into the gardens, some of which have existed for more than 325 years. A guided tour of the plantation house focuses on the years between 1870 (when the third incarnation of the house was built after being burnt down by Union soldiers in the Civil War) to 1975 (when it was opened to the public).

## Confronting the past

But behind the columned facades of some of Charleston's grander homes lies a darker past. The Port of Charleston was the largest slave port in the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and before the Civil War nearly half of Charleston's residents were enslaved.

Magnolia Plantation, for example, enslaved 235 people at one time, but they aren't more than a footnote during a tour. However, other historic house museums have worked to paint a fuller picture of their pasts.

The Aiken Rhett House in Charleston has changed little in the last 200 years. Both the large yellow corner house flanked by palm trees and its outbuildings, including the original quarters of enslaved people, have been preserved rather than restored, with original floors, paint and fixtures.

An audio tour gives visitors a vivid sense of life 170 years ago, helping contrast the lives of the residents living in the bare-bones outbuildings to those ensconced in the opulence of the main house.

Similarly, the McLeod Plantation Historic Site, a 37-acre site owned by Charleston County Parks, provides new insights into realities of life in pre-Emancipation Proclamation Charleston.

At McLeod, visitors can learn about the enslaved people on the plantation who picked sea island cotton, a strain with long fibers unique to the Lowcountry of southeast South Carolina.

Also unique to the area were the Gullah Geechee people. Descended from West and Central Africans who were forcibly relocated to the coastal South, they retained many of their indigenous traditions and also created the Gullah language, spoken nowhere else in the world. Many of their cabins on the McLeod plantation have been preserved.

McLeod also offers information about the plantation during the Civil War, when the free Black soldiers of the Massachusetts 55<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Infantry freed the enslaved people there.

The Civil War itself started in Charleston with the Battle of Fort Sumter in 1861. The fort, located on a small island in Charleston Harbor, was seized by the Confederates who occupied it for most of the war. Fort Sumter is open to visitors but can only be accessed by tour boat. A visitors' center is located on the shore in Charleston.

## Food and fun in the sun

As much as Charleston is immersed in the past, a thriving food scene helps bring it back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The popular restaurant High Cotton offers Lowcountry food with ingredients from nearby farms. High prices for its primarily seafood and meat menu, including scallops, shrimp and grits, filet mignon and duck, don't deter the hordes of tourists who make reservations weeks ahead for this highly-rated restaurant.

Another standout is Lenoir, which was opened in 2021 by chef Vivian Howard, a North Carolina native and star of the PBS show "A Chef's Life."

Lenoir's menu includes cornmeal-dusted catfish served with Carolina caviar, a salsa-like side made with black-eyed peas, black beans, white shoepeg corn and tomatoes. For dessert try the Atlantic beach pie with a saltine crust, lemon custard and honey whipped cream.

While Charleston's early profusion of azaleas, cherry blossoms and tulips lure tourists from the North still in the grip of freeze warnings in late February and early March, the city is quieter in the fall. The overwhelming heat and humidity of mid-summer has melted away, leaving behind warm days and cool nights. October and November are the city's driest months.

There's still plenty of time to visit Charleston-area beaches before winter. Folly Beach, located on an island just south of Charleston, has a pier stretching more than 1,000 feet into the ocean, a lighthouse and a park complete with a pelican rookery.

Kiawah Island is 21 miles from downtown Charleston, with 10 miles of beaches facing both east and west so you can catch both the sunrise and sunset on the water. *Conde Nast Traveler* named it the best island in the U.S. in 2018.

## If you go

Ninety-minute nonstop flights from all three D.C.-area airports make getting to Charleston relatively easy. Southwest Airlines' one-way fares for direct flights from BWI start at \$71 in late October; American Airlines flights from Reagan National start at \$211 roundtrip; and the lowest United Airlines flight from Dulles is \$193 roundtrip.

Rather take the train? Two trains leave Washington's Union Station daily for the 10½-hour trip. Amtrak tickets start at \$94 each way. If you'd just as soon drive, Charleston is about an eight-hour drive from the DMV.

Hotels in the historic district can be pricey, especially during the busy tourist season in late winter and spring. Many are historic themselves, and are walkable to many of Charleston's attractions — a perk given the small city's heavy traffic and sparse parking options.

Built in 1843 as a private mansion, 20 South Battery has wraparound porches with views of the city's White Point Gardens and the harbor beyond. Battered during the Civil War, the mansion remained standing and has been renovated with period art and furniture. Rooms start at a hefty \$600 a night in October.

A less expensive but still historic hotel is the Francis Marion Hotel, named for a Revolutionary War hero, open since 1924. Rising 12 stories above the historic district, the hotel offers views of Charleston's historic mansions and harbor. Rooms start at \$254 a night, and AAA and AARP discounts are available.

The contemporary waterfront Hilton Garden Inn, about two miles from the historic district, has views of the Ashley Marina. It has free parking and a restaurant. Rates start at \$252 a night. AAA and AARP discounts are available.

Get more information from the Charleston Convention and Visitors Bureau at [charlestoncvb.com](http://charlestoncvb.com).

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By [Barbara Ruben](#)  
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From sprawling live oak trees draped in Spanish moss, to horse-drawn carriages clip-clopping over cobblestoned streets, to historic houses in pastel hues, Charleston, South Carolina, transports visitors to another era.

A thriving culinary scene and proximity to pristine beaches helped inspire *Travel & Leisure* magazine readers to choose it as the top U.S. city to visit for the 10<sup>th</sup> year in a row in July.

Charleston has antebellum mansions and Civil War sites, as well as so many historic church steeples that the city has been dubbed the Holy City.

More than 1,400 historic buildings spanning the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have been preserved in its downtown, situated at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean on a peninsula bordered by the Ashley and Cooper Rivers.

The city was named for Britain's King Charles II, when the first English settlers, along with their slaves, landed on its shore in 1670.

## Old homes worth a visit

What's likely the city's oldest house dates back to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Known as the Pink House, it's made of pink-hued Bermuda stone, soft limestone formed primarily of broken shells and coral, and brick.

Pink is echoed in a series of 13 pastel-colored houses near the waterfront called Rainbow Row. The often-photographed rowhouses were constructed from around 1740 to 1784, many with businesses on the first floor and residences above.