

# ENCHANTED BY CHARLESTON

COURTESY OF CHARLESTON AREA CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

It has a reputation of being among the world's top travel destinations. So what's to love about The Cultural Capital of the South? According to our writer, a lot.

By Stacy Tillilie

*"It is impossible for me to enter Charleston from any side, whether by land or by sea, and not feel that here the land is precious; here is a place worth keeping..."*

—Elizabeth O'Neill Verner, artist, author and Charleston native

AS OUR WATER TAXI TRAVERSES the choppy early-morning waves of Charleston Harbor on our 20-minute voyage from the dock of our hotel at Patriots Point in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, to downtown Charleston, hundreds of years of history are in the air—and, literally, in the water.

To our right, set against the backdrop of the cable-stayed Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge over the Cooper River, the historic WWII-era USS *Yorktown* aircraft carrier and the WWII-era USS *Laffey* destroyer stand sentry over a storied and heroic past. In their shadow sits the USS *Clamagore*, a WWII-era submarine that served our country throughout the decades-long Cold War. From the middle of the harbor, beyond Castle Pinckney, an 1810 fortification known as "America's Forgotten Castle" that's slowly being reclaimed by nature, Fort Sumter National Monument echoes with the epic clash between the North and South, marking the spot where the initial shots of the Civil War were fired on April 12, 1861.

Yesterday, these waters were bow-to-bow with sailboats for the annual Charleston Race Week, which is part competition, part party, as a sunburnt sailor from Baltimore commented

earlier in the hotel elevator. Today, Carnival Cruise Line's *Carnival Fantasy* is anchored at the downtown cruise ship terminal, where it sets sail for year-round cruises to The Bahamas and Eastern Caribbean.

"We'll be landing at Waterfront Park, and [attraction-rich] Market Street is just a two-block walk," says our captain, as he points out dolphins diving in the distance and delivers the weather report—temperatures in the mid-70s with a chance of afternoon thunderstorms, typical here for mid-April.

As my family and I make our way along the dock, I have countless postcard-perfect photographs composed in my mind before I can even reach for my camera. Old brick buildings converted into luxury homes peek behind a row of palmetto trees fringed by marshes. Several people relax in wooden swings lining the pier. A man sells roses woven from sweetgrass. A woman walks her dog in the grassy common. At the entrance to downtown, young children play in a large pineapple-shaped fountain. Nearby, a woman waits with her newborn baby outside a posh inn as her driver loads suitcases into a Towncar. The faint sound of construction hums along





Window boxes dress many downtown buildings.

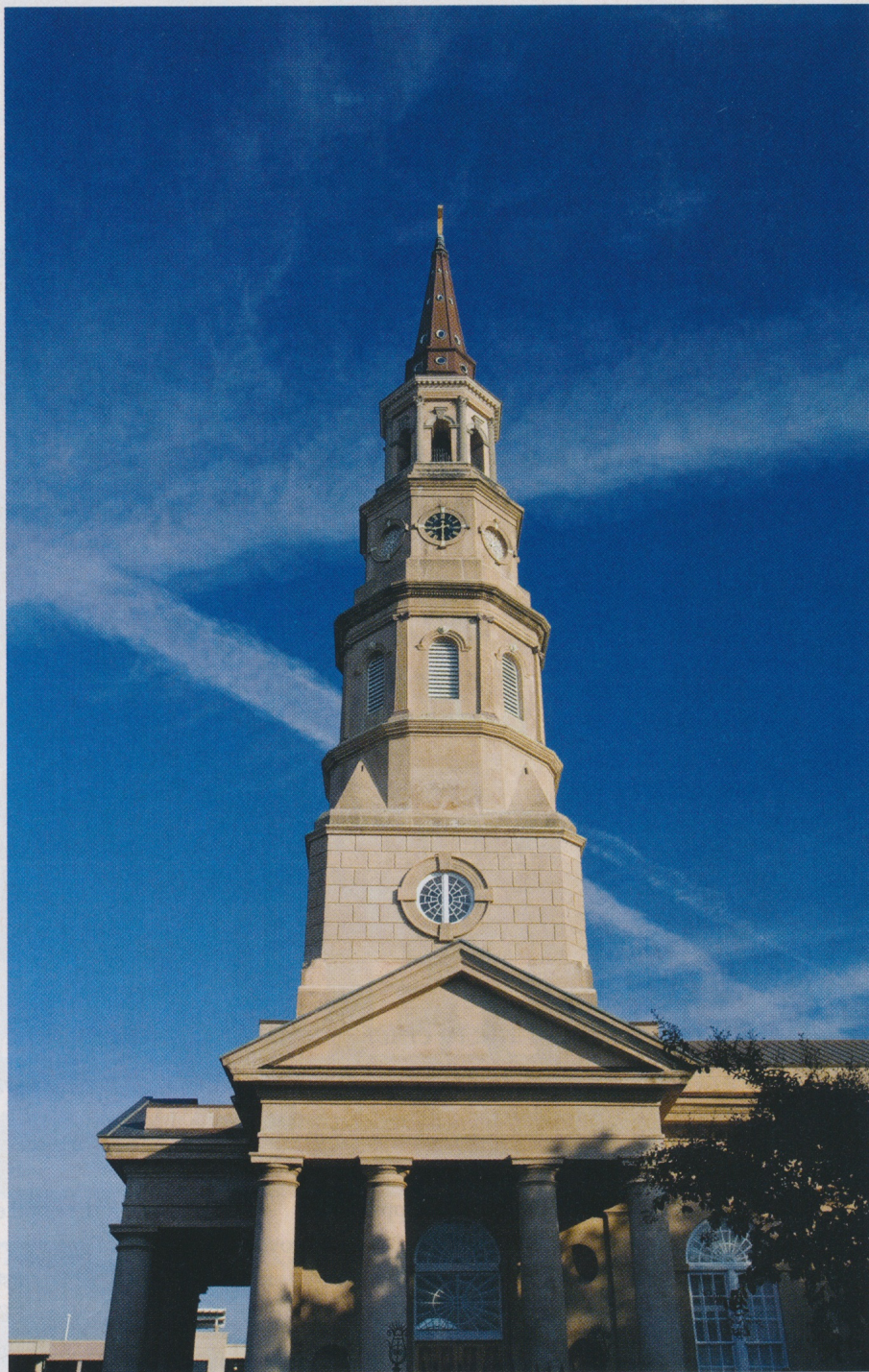
with the steady flow of traffic.

It's a spring Monday morning, and life is sweet, moving at the unhurried pace of a charming Southern drawl.

"I could live here; couldn't you?" comments my husband in the little time that it takes to reach the heart of the historic district. And he's not alone. Of the some 4 million visitors whom Charleston welcomes each year, you can bet that more than a few wish to join the fortunate 330,000 or so residents who call South Carolina's oldest and second-largest city home.

Sitting on the coast about midway between Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head Island and boasting a subtropical climate—February sees average highs in the 60s—Charleston is a sophisticated peninsular city that's often called The Cultural Capital of the South. In fact, last year, it garnered such superlative titles as the Top City in North America in the World's Best Awards (and the seventh-best in the world) by *Travel + Leisure* magazine as well as the Top City in the U.S. (for the third consecutive year) in *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine's Readers' Choice Survey. In recent years, Boeing and other high-tech companies have set up shop in the area, earning it the moniker "Silicon Harbor."

But can The Holy City truly live up to



Built in 1836, St. Philips Church is a National Historic Landmark in The Holy City.

all the hype? In two short days exploring the city, I was about to find out.

## A SWEET SLICE OF CHARLESTONIAN LIFE

Charleston is often referred to as a veritable living museum, and it doesn't take long to see why. Our delve into the past begins with a one-hour horse-drawn carriage ride with Palmetto Carriage Works' local tour guide Bubba. The tour hits the mother-lode of must-see attractions—from mansions and gardens

to churches and parks—throughout 25 or so blocks of Old Charleston.

Among the treasure-trove of historic gems are Rainbow Row, a palette of pastel-colored mid-18th-century homes that compose one of the most-photographed attractions in the city; White Point Garden, a waterfront park on the Charleston Battery that was once used as a Civil War fortification and, a century before that, the city's gallows for pirates, including the infamous "Gentleman Pirate" Stede Bonnet; and





**The highly decorated USS Yorktown is the centerpiece of the Patriots Point Naval & Maritime Museum.**

historic houses such as the Neoclassical 1808 Nathaniel Russell House, which features a free-flying staircase, and Calhoun Mansion, a 24,000-plus-square-foot Victorian home built in 1876 by a wealthy Civil War blockade runner.

Along the way, Bubba relates tales of local lore and interesting tidbits—like, for example, some say that Rainbow Row's homes were painted different colors so that drunken sailors in port could identify which home was theirs late at night. Or, for another example: A home's open front gates signaled that the residents were welcoming visitors; if the gates were closed, the residents were not receiving guests—especially if the female residents, with their heavy layers of dress, were cooling off on the porch and exposing—aghast!—their bare legs.

The afternoon rain arrives as promised, so we grab a casual lunch of crab cake and blackened mahi sandwiches at the Charleston Crab House, and then stop across the street at the famed City Market, which dates back to 1788 when American Revolutionary War hero and state legislator Charles Pinckney ceded land to the city for the sole purpose of a public market to be built and remain

there in perpetuity. Today, the market comprises four blocks of open-air stalls capped by a grand 1841 Greek Revival-style Market Hall building, which now houses the Confederate Museum, small in size but chockfull of fascinating Civil War memorabilia.

Every day, 364 days a year, more than 100 vendors sell everything from artwork, pottery, jewelry and clothing to spices, seashells, dolls and baseball cards. For a special souvenir, check out the beautiful sweetgrass baskets handmade by Gullah artisans who carry on the legacy of this traditional West African art—right on-site.

Purchases in hand, we taxi back over the harbor, sharing a ride with a small group of WWII veterans, to get onboard those colossal, awe-inspiring ships at the Patriots Point Naval & Maritime Museum. The state's top heritage attraction, the museum features more than two dozen aircraft from conflicts dating from WWII to present-day operations and is also home to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society's Medal of Honor Museum, a Vietnam Naval Support Base Camp and a Cold War Memorial.

Exploring the Yorktown, Laffey and Clamagore stem to stern—climbing the decks, sitting in the captain's seats,

## LIVE LIKE A LOCAL

*Want to sample the best of Charleston like the locals do? Three residents point us in the right direction.*

Put your walking shoes on when you come to Charleston, and do a walking tour with [a local guide] so that you can find alleys that do not exist on any map and see a tree with a 200-year-old structure built around it. Stroll the [City] Market. Make sure to stay downtown....

Eat good while you're here; try Lowcountry Bistro or Magnolias for local fare. For good seafood, eat at Hank's Seafood [Restaurant], or if you want something trendy and hip, try Indaco or Stars [Rooftop & Grill Room] on upper King [Street]. Make your dinner reservations a couple weeks in advance to get the times and places you want.

And don't try to rush and do everything; Charleston is a laid-back city, so treat it as such.

—*Jerrica Rudd, concierge at the Indigo Inn*

Pick up a current copy of *Charleston* magazine—the best tips are in this beautiful publication. Walk the bridge from Mount Pleasant to downtown; pedi-cab through South of Broad at night; go to Leaf, and dine for lunch or dinner; shop on King Street; don't miss Mount Pleasant—eat at the Old Village Post House or the Old Village Pharmacy; paddle or kayak at Shem Creek; shop at Towne Center/Gwynn's/Copper Penny; party at [Patriots] Point at the Charleston Harbor Resort [& Marina]; walk the beach at Sullivan[']s Island and stop at restaurants; go to the shops at the IOP [Isle of Palms] beach; pick berries at Boone [Hall] Farms; go explore the Angel Oak; bike ride at Kiawah [Island], and visit The Sanctuary Hotel there; go to the Boardwalk Inn at Wild Dunes [Resort]; and listen to the bands at Awendaw on the Green.

—*Susan Aviles of Aviles Real Estate Brokerage*

See Charleston from the water with a boat tour, visit one of the local plantations and take a guided tour of the city, whether that's by bus, carriage or a walking tour. [When it comes to must-eat cuisine], eat local! Try some of our historical heirloom dishes like shrimp-n-grits or she-crab soup. Charleston has been 'farm to plate' since 1670, so there are plenty of opportunities to dine like royalty here.

Charleston is a great place to visit year-round with each season offering different highlights. In the springtime, the climate is terrific, and the city is awash in blooms from wisteria and jasmine to the azaleas and camellias. For beach lovers, nothing beats a summertime vacation to Charleston. In the fall, the climate is wonderful with sunny days and less humidity plus a packed calendar of events.... Winter visitors, especially those living in much colder environments, enjoy our mild temperatures and visiting when Charleston isn't as busy.

Unless you're visiting for two weeks, don't try to fit everything into your schedule. You're here to relax and have fun; so dial back the stress meter, and embrace our slower pace of life.

—*John LaVerne, tour guide with Bulldog Tours, Inc.*





The Charleston area is home to five beach towns, each with its own distinct vibe.

turning the various knobs and wheels, and viewing the barebones sleeping, dining and medical facilities—I imagine what life was like onboard for the sailors serving our country during war.

The Essex-class USS *Yorktown*, a.k.a. The Fighting Lady, served in the Pacific Offensive beginning in 1943 and ending in 1945 with Japan's defeat. The carrier also earned five battle stars for service off Vietnam and recovered the *Apollo 8* astronauts and capsule. The only surviving Sumner-class destroyer on the continent, the USS *Laffey*, which was commissioned in February 1944, also participated in the offensive against Japan and supported the D-Day landings at Normandy, France. Having survived attacks by 22 Japanese bombers and kamikaze aircraft, the *Laffey* was nicknamed The Ship That Would Not Die by her heroic crew. And serving our country for 30 years in the Cold War, the *Clamagore* is the only preserved GUPPY (Greater Underwater Propulsion Program) III submarine in the U.S.

Today, all three of these vessels are National Historic Landmarks and

serve as testaments to the bravery and sacrifices of our veterans and current servicemen and women.

## TWO DAYS, TOO LITTLE

Day two takes us on a scenic drive down Ashley River Road, punctuated by old live oaks and historic plantations, to arrive at Middleton Place, America's oldest landscaped garden, dating back to 1741. The spring rain has returned just in time for our visit, but we don't want to miss this must-see National Historic Landmark, so we don rain ponchos and carry on.

What was once an overgrown wasteland after the Civil War and the Great Earthquake of 1886, Middleton Place is considered "the most important and most interesting garden in America" today by the Garden Club of America. Spread over 65 artfully landscaped acres—adorned with secret gardens, arched walls of flora, winding paths flanked by fragrant azaleas, butterfly-shaped lakes, massive oaks garnished with Spanish moss and more—Charleston's Middleton Place is like

having Louis XIV's gardens at the Palace of Versailles right in your backyard. In fact, the formal gardens, which were started by Henry Middleton, the second president of the First Continental Congress, were designed using the principles of the landscape architect of Versailles.

During our self-guided tour, we wander past fields with grazing Gulf Coast Sheep, catch a glimpse of two water buffalo behind a post-and-rail fence and visit two Belgian draft horses before reaching the Plantation Stableyards. Here, artisans demonstrate the skilled work that African American slaves living on the plantation performed, including those of a blacksmith, cooper, carpenter, potter, spinner and weaver. Today, the cooper/carpenter is demonstrating the various tools used to make everything from barrels and buckets to handles and utensils.

We also stop at Eliza's House, named after Eliza Leach, the building's last resident. This circa 1870 duplex was once the dwelling of former Middleton slaves and freedmen and now stands as





COURTESY OF THE ARTHUR RAVENEL JR. BRIDGE AUTHORITY

With a main span of 1,546 feet, the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge is the longest single cable-stayed bridge in North America.

a poignant reminder of the somber past of slavery. Here, visitors can embark on a guided tour exploring the lives of African American slaves and freedmen who survived life on the plantation.

Nearby, the tour is about to begin in the House Museum, or what remains of the three-building residence, dating to 1705, after Union troops set it ablaze in 1865. Today, you can see the ruins as well as what life may have looked like for the Middletons in the preserved part of the home, replete with a collection of their furniture, silver, porcelain, paintings, books and documents—much of it spanning from the 1740s to the 1880s.

Wet and muddy, we skip the tour and enjoy a Lowcountry lunch at the on-site restaurant. On the daily luncheon menu: pulled pork with mustard BBQ, fried North Carolina chicken, South Carolina collard greens with ham hock, Hoppin' John, corn pudding, cornbread, she-crab soup, vegetarian potluck and more.

With the relentless rain, we drive back toward downtown and over to Sullivan's Island, a beach town on a barrier island

north of the harbor. Here, casual eateries and beach shops are sprinkled along the main road surrounded by tidy historic homes, many of which served as former military housing; however, you won't find any "transient lodging" here—that is, hotels, motels or bed-and-breakfasts—due to strict zoning laws. With its strategic location, the island served as a fortification against invaders and is home to Fort Moultrie, a pivotal fort during both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War.

Later that evening, we venture back into the historic district for dinner and dessert (the local Ben & Jerry's pays homage to hometown TV personality Stephen Colbert with his own AmeriCone Dream ice cream flavor) and stroll the streets buzzing with tourists and locals alike, many of whom are likely in town to catch the last few days of the annual spring Festival of Houses and Gardens (and many of whom will likely be back in May for the annual 17-day arts extravaganza that is Spoleto Festival USA, the sister of Spoleto, Italy's Festival of Two Worlds).

As the sun appears briefly for an encore before setting over the city that has so easily charmed my family and me, I find myself seeking out local real-estate guides, dreaming about those antebellum mansions—with their welcoming wrap-around porches, manicured gardens tucked behind ornate wrought-iron gates, and walls of shutter-framed windows accented by cheerful flower boxes—set on quaint cobblestoned streets lined with majestic live oaks and hearty palmettos.

Charleston is, indeed, a welcoming, sophisticated city steeped in storied architecture, intriguing history, delicious Lowcountry cuisine, and attractions and events galore—surrounded by unspoiled beaches and complemented by pleasant weather much of the year. There are those places that you enjoy but are content to visit once, and there are others to which you begin planning your return before you've even packed your bags. And then there are those few that beckon you to stay—maybe even for a lifetime.

The question isn't whether I could live here; rather, the question is: who *couldn't* live here? ■