People gravitate to Charleston for a lot of reasons: its buzzing restaurants and bars, eclectic art and culture, its picturesque appeal, proximity to water, its rich history. We’ve condensed them all to compile our list of the top things to do when you’re there. Spanning old, new, buzzing, and surprising, our list boils down to the essentials, no matter if it’s your first visit or your tenth.

1. Nathaniel Russell House

Approaching the Nathaniel Russell House from the street, your first impression is just what Nathaniel intended: your eye is drawn immediately to his initials wrought in iron over the front door. This event display meant the same thing in 1808 (when the house was constructed) as it means at a certain New York City tower today: new money runs wild.
**Charleston Farmers Market**

Every Saturday, from April through December, Marion Square springs to life with little tents lining its northern and western pathways. As the name suggests, this is a real farmer's market, in the know locals head here for the very freshest in produce, from bundles of asparagus, to heirloom tomatoes and turnip roots. And if you're looking to sample Southern Carolina fare, this is the place to be. Stop by the Lowland Farms booth for a taste of pineapple cheese spread, or the strawberry honeyuckle jam made from fruit that Lisa herself picked earlier that week on Lumbree Farm. Dip cubes of bread into cold-smoked local honey or hickory-smoked olive oil at Holy Smoke's stall, as the owner touts the virtues of a pepper, buttermilk salsa that tastes like liquid bacon (yes, there, gown for you). The key: make that last longer than lunchtime, pick up a photograph of the Angel Oak mounted on canvas, or one of Barrow MacDonald's large, labor-intensive sweetgrass baskets.

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**High Wire Distilling**

Charleston has its share of distilleries, but High Wire stands out on multiple counts: (1) it is the last distillery in downtown Charleston since Prohibition; (2) it sources distinctive southern grains, fresh herbs, heirloom roots, and other custom crops for a genuine spirit; (3) everything is small-batch and experimental, yielding many different types and styles of liquor; and (4) husband-and-wife owners Brent Blackwell and Ann Marshall have a background in the baking business as their approach is culinary.
Dayton Hall

When John Drayton began construction in 1730 of his grand country house, little did he know that nearly 300 years later, it would survive intact and be toured as one of the finest examples of Georgian Palladian architecture in America. Visitors drive along a sandy road, past massive live oak trees as old as the house itself. On approach, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the house's sheer scale and presence.

The Charleston Museum

As museums go, there's nothing stuffy or old-school about this one. The terraced modern structure reinvents a refined 18th-century and great retreat from summer's heat. In the two-story lobby hangs a suspended whale who swam into Charleston's harbor in 1803. This museum has been building its collection, with few interruptions, since 1773. Visitors often wander in and swing through it, and amazingly enough, some locals are just discovering it.

Coastal Expeditions

Greater Charleston is both surrounded by and interlaced with saltwater marshes, and kayaking is a great way to appreciate that. You can either rent kayaks (singles or doubles) or standup paddle boards to venture solo (with tips on where to go), or book guided tours of varying lengths. It is quite common to see surfacing dolphins feeding in pairs and groups, with the occasional manatee making an appearance.
ACTIVITY

Preservation Society of Charleston

If you seek an authentic Charleston keepsake, this store has you covered. Think of it as a souvenirs shop with taste and soul. Every item they source is locally made, with the exception of teas that may have been published elsewhere, and pears from a farm two hours north. The independent boutique was founded by and is still run by one of Charleston's prominent preservation groups, thus the name.

ACTIVITY

Angel Oak Tree

The tree is unexpectedly beautiful and formidable. Resurrection ferns coating the oak's branches sit dormant when dry but spring to life after a good rain. The ground yells newly underwater, a honey-colored rose: the ever rising spring exudes the circumference of its branches. Visitors who bring lunch enjoy meals on picnic tables scattered beneath younger oaks (perhaps offspring of the “mother tree”).

ACTIVITY

Sugar Bakeshop

Everyone needs a little treat now and then (or lots of them). Sugar Bakeshop is owned by a pair of architecture-turned-bakers who traded in New York for the potted houses and live oaks lining Cannon Street. Swing open the door, and breathe in hearty aromas of whatever they're baking at the moment (on my visit, it was ginger molasses cookies). Soft tunes of Ravel just lower your tension instantly. This place is definitely one-of-a-kind.
Mrs. Whaley's Garden

Most private gardens in Charleston rarely open to the public, with throngs of visitors buying tickets for bi-annual house and garden festivals and tours. But here's a secret: Emily Whaley's garden at 55 Church Street stays open year-round, on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday afternoons. And it's just the way Mrs. Whaley wanted it. In 1997, the frisky octogenarian known as "Cherokee" to friends and family wrote a book of musings, opinions, gardening thoughts, and memories, all woven together into a conversation novel titled Mrs. Whaley and Her Charleston Garden. The book made the New York Times' bestseller list, and every year on the author's private oasis is still attracting visitors. Slip your $10 through the front door mailslot, then swing open the gate and walk back. You'll feel the breeze rattle through shade plants, boxwood hedges, climbing roses, and acanthus sends up spiky purple blooms. There's always something in bloom, with a deep accretion of garden "rooms" and places to relax.

Schooner Pride

A mellow and relaxing sail on a reproduction 18th century schooner built to resemble the triple-masted tall ships that once lined Charleston's harbor. There is no song and dance or arterial narrative from the crew, although they do answer questions and converse with you about what you've seeing. And no sound but an authentic seafarer's lullaby of waves lapping against the hull, and the steady creaking of ropes and beams.
No reserve boxes, no clinical minimalism, no bourgeois attitude here. This place exudes warmth and inclusiveness. The building itself in a 230-year-old former grain warehouse with berry floors and the color of sash windows, and rough silver sheen.

Comfortable lounges, leather chairs, and a rope swing (yes, you read that right) invite you to settle in and be a part of things.

**Fly in Helicopters**

The beauty and spontaneity of this operation is that no reservations are required. There are other helicopter companies in town, but none that offer such affordable "quirky" trips. The introductory flight over the harbor takes three exhilarating minutes. Prices increase for longer tours which take you around lighthouses, over salt marshes, and along barrier islands, but the harbor tour itself covers Fort Sumter, Castle Pinckney, the Flight Battery, shipyard and Ravenel Bridge, and the Yorktown, all from close range above.

**Self-Guided Walking Tour**

Sure, you could hop on a horse carriage, or into a pedicab, or join an official walking tour, all excellent ways to explore the city. But sometimes you want to explore at will, without the drone of a historical lecture, and the best way to do that is on foot. This is a walking tour that sticks in just under two miles in length, and it is a must do for anyone visiting Charleston. Start at Waterfront Park, whose pier juts out into the harbor, to scope out the original colonial city wall, then make your way to the East Bay, where you might just catch a regatta in progress. Gape over the live oak at White Point Gardens, and walk south to north on Legare (pronounced LEE-gree) for the first stop at Legare, the "Pineapple Gates House" for pecans. End at Goat, Sheep, Cow, where you can have them arrange a picnic spread that you can take to nearby Washington Square, and feast on expertly curated cheese under the shade of a live oak tree.