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OVERSEAS

Do the Charleston: why British buyers are being lured to this old American city

The genteel South Carolina metropolis dances to a different drum from much of the US, and is attracting buyers in search of a leisurely lifestyle, says Hugh Graham



Where the living is easy: downtown Charleston
SEAN PAVONE/GETTY

The Sunday Times, March 24 2019, 12:01am

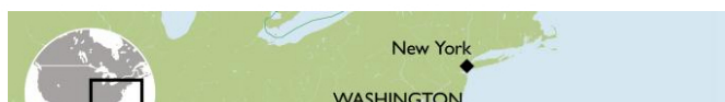
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Britain may have a special relationship with the US, but how many American cities would old-world Anglos feel truly comfortable living in? Boston looks British, but the cold winters put off retirees and holiday-homers. Florida has warm weather, but too many strip malls and not enough culture.





Now there's a new, very old American city on the radar of British buyers, one that combines winter sun with a genteel sensibility. On April 4, British Airways is starting direct flights from London to Charleston, South Carolina, a small city (population 775,000) with enormous charm. Its pastel-coloured period architecture — from Georgian to gothic revival, clapboard to Italianate — is enchanting. The elegant streets are dotted with sash windows and ancient steeples rather than tower blocks and fast-food outlets. Jungly secret gardens, glimpsed through ornate wrought-iron gates, are shaded by live oaks and palmettos, and overlooked by sprawling verandas. “My mother always said there are three great cities in the South,” Anne Barnes, a local historian, tells me on a walking tour one balmy February morning. “Savannah is the shopgirl, New Orleans is the prostitute and Charleston is the lady.”



Streets are lined with pastel-coloured period architecture
ALAMY

Barnes showed Julian Fellowes, the creator of *Downton Abbey*, around in 2017 — “He was wildly curious about everything.” Fellowes was in town to promote Charleston to Charleston, a literary festival that brings over British writers each November (the other Charleston is the Bloomsbury set’s farmhouse in East Sussex). And Prince Charles’s interior designer, Ben Pentreath, visited the city earlier this year and filled his Instagram feed with houses.

CHARLESTON, S.C. — THE CITY OF THE FUTURE IS HERE. THE CITY OF THE PAST IS HERE. THE CITY OF THE PRESENT IS HERE.

Charleston is full of British ties. It was founded in 1670 after Charles II awarded land to eight of his loyal generals. Today it's home to several Anglo-American couples who reckon it's the perfect transatlantic blend. Londoner Suzanne Togna Haythe, 76, and her American husband, David Haythe, 75, live in Knightsbridge for part of the year, but spend most of it in Charleston. Twelve years ago, they bought and restored a 1900 clapboard home with a large veranda — they call them piazzas — in the prestigious SOB (South of Broad) neighbourhood, where three-bedroom houses sell for between \$1m (£758,000) and \$3m.

Togna Haythe has filled it with antiques from local shops and painted the interior several shades of sage green. As we sit on the piazza, red cardinals dart past the palms, camellias and olive trees in her garden. Her husband, a former managing director at Morgan Stanley, does some teaching at the College of Charleston, where he also audits classes. He tells me: "I couldn't stand to be stuck in a gated community in Florida. It's beautiful here and I can walk everywhere."



As his wife walks me to her favourite coffee shop, she points out brick garden walls topped with carved pineapples, flickering gas lanterns, and separate kitchen buildings — the colony built them apart so the house wouldn't burn down in a fire. "Legare Street is one of the nicest streets in Charleston," she says. "Listen to how quiet it is."

As we walk, older, well-heeled passers-by display their Southern manners and cordially wish us good morning. "It's a cosy city," says Togna Haythe, who contributes to the Gibbes Museum of Art and the Library Society. "But there are two sides to it — the old Charleston, which is more conservative, and a lot of new, young people who are coming in. It's changing."

One of the young, cool crowd is Ben Towill, a British restaurateur who owns the Basic Kitchen, a healthy-eating cafe. Towill, 34, was a protégé of Gordon Ramsay and co-owns the Ferry Boat Inn in Falmouth, Cornwall, near where he grew up. He ran restaurants in New York for 10 years, but he and his American wife, Kate, moved to Charleston five years ago.



Kiawah Island has pristine beaches, large villas and a golf club
ALAMY

"There's an entrepreneurial spirit here," he says over coffee in the light, airy, warehousey space, where his surfboard hangs over the door. "People are doing creative things. We had friends who had opened restaurants and cool stores, so we moved down. The city is exploding."

Twenty-eight people a day are moving in, many of them families priced out of bigger cities. The couple also run Basic Projects, a company that renovates old homes, often for first-time buyers in up-and-coming areas north of Broad Street (but not known as NOB), where a fixer-upper can be had for \$500,000. “We get an email a week from someone thinking of relocating here from New York or Chicago or San Francisco,” Towill says. “The lifestyle is much easier.”

He cycles, sails and hits the nearby beaches on Isle of Palms and Kiawah Island, an ecofriendly community of pristine sands, maritime forest, saltwater marshes and strictly regulated architecture. His friend Scott Dawson, another Brit, manages the Kiawah Island Club, a private golf club for property owners — 22 out of 1,700 are British — but the Towills live in the city, where their two-year-old son attends Montessori daycare. “We rent an old home near the marina. I walk my dog on the docks and meet people from all over the world. It’s a port city, so very cosmopolitan.”

Basic Kitchen is a reflection of the city’s burgeoning foodie scene. Towill says many tourists come down for “restaurant weekends”, and his canteen offers a clean-eating take on Southern cuisine. “Instead of chicken wings, we do cauliflower wings. We do collard greens, but stir-fried with miso. Instead of shrimp and grits, we do grits and greens.”

Paul Raffle, 53, is another expat adding British flavour. He moved here from Bristol 12 years ago to take a job as chief operating officer of Arcadia Publishing, a small press that publishes pictorial books about local American history; he initially worked for the parent company in Stroud, but found the living easier in Charleston. He married an American and, in 2007, bought a four-bedroom house for \$900,000 on Daniel Island, a planned community of clapboard houses, golf courses and walking trails. “It’s aesthetically pleasing, it’s not cookie-cutter,” he says. “There’s a tight architectural review board in Charleston.”

Raffle reckons the city’s economic future is bright: multinationals with a local presence include Mercedes-Benz, Volvo, Bosch, Boeing and BP. “Brits just enjoy being here,” says Raffle, who wants to stay. He has a British plumber and says there is a chippy run by Brits (The Codfather).

He accepts that it’s not perfect. “Summers are brutal — I go from air-conditioned home to car to office.” Hurricanes are a worry, too: Raffle has experienced two, but has not suffered any damage. The city is investing in flood protection and working with Dutch engineers to future-proof the streets. Homeowners in vulnerable areas have protective flood panels and sump pumps; some are jacking up their homes 8ft with hydraulic lifts for \$200,000. But many streets are rarely affected: check Federal Emergency Management Agency flood maps and insurance plans before you buy.

The political climate may also be an issue for some purchasers. Charleston voted Democrat in the last election and has a reputation for tolerance and diversity that sets it apart from much of the socially conservative South. But it made headlines in 2015 when a white supremacist from upstate shot dead nine black parishioners at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

“To the eternal credit of Charlestonians, the whole city came together — black, white, Hispanic,” says Stephanie Kirkman, 53, who moved to Charleston from the UK in 2014. “People marched on the bridge holding hands. Anyone who tried to rabble-rouse got sent away with a flea in their ear. There’s been a huge effort to reach across communities. This is a compassionate city.”

Born in the US, Kirkman lived in London from 1987, raising three British children there, but her American husband moved the family Stateside in 2014. The couple sold up in Wandsworth and converted an 1810 warehouse in Charleston’s French Quarter into a home. “It’s hidden down an alley — we wanted to feel like we were living in Mayfair,” says Kirkman, who keeps a Union Jack outside, has kept her

living in Mayfair, says Kirkman, who hangs a Union Jack outside, has kept her membership at London's Hurlingham Club and flies back for Ascot every year.

Her son Milo, 24, is the maitre d' at Tradd's, a hot new bistro. He says his English accent has done wonders for his social life; he gets up at 7am on Saturdays to watch Chelsea matches at My Father's Moustache, a British pub.

His mother is trying to shake her homesickness for Britain: she shipped her horses over and rides twice a week. Last year, she had Plum Sykes to stay when the British author and socialite gave a talk at the art museum. To keep busy, she's joined nine tennis teams, studies at the Alliance Française and volunteers at a soup kitchen.

"When my husband said we were moving to the US, I said there's only one city I will move to," she recalls. "That's Charleston. It was the most palatable option. It has history and culture — I knew I could find a way to live here without it being too much of an American shock."

*BA's direct flights to Charleston start on April 4 (9hr, returns from £483; [ba.com](#)).
Hugh Graham was a guest of the Dewberry hotel ([thedewberrycharleston.com](#))*

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Kiawah Island \$4.495m

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00 1 843 566 4093, hudsonphillipsproperties.com



29 Legare Street \$12.995m

Dating from 1835, this could well be the most charming home in Charleston. It has five bedrooms, two piazzas, an avenue of palms, a pool... and a dog shower.

00 1 843 566 4093, hudsonphillipsproperties.com





47 South Battery \$3.25m

Six-bedroom Henry Cheves House dates from 1886. Its double parlour can hold 60 guests: it has hosted chamber concerts. French doors open onto a pool and a screened-in piazza. 00 1 843 460 3190, handsomeproperties.com



85 Cumberland Street \$465,000

On the first floor of a block built in 1890, this one-bedroom flat in the French Quarter has exposed brick walls, heart-pine floors and a 19th-century fireplace. 00 1 843 566 4093, hudsonphillipsproperties.com



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S McCormick

24 MARCH

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24 MARCH

While air-conditioning may mitigate the worst of the summer heat and humidity in 'The Low Country' I'm surprised there is no mention of a possibly even greater impediment to the enjoyment of outdoor life there; no-see-ums (aka biting midges) - their bites are fierce and you can easily end up with very itchy marks on your skin.

Due to a work commitment there my wife and I owned a property for five years at Dunes West, Mount Pleasant - across the Cooper River from Charleston. Charleston is probably as pleasant a place to live as anywhere else on the eastern seaboard, however property insurance costs and realtor's fees are considerably higher than what one might be used to in the UK.

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Global Voter

3 APRIL | PD

Thanks for the insight. Do you know if Raleigh, NC is better in terms of the insect issue you mention?

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D

Dsl000001

24 MARCH

It is a wonderful town with much going for it, I live within three hours as a Brit ex-pat and enjoy weekends there.

Best if you're a destination source if you live in the UK. Otherwise, a much better option...

but it isn't a destination venue if you live in the UK. There are so many better options closer to home in Europe.

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Joanna Edwards 24 MARCH | *Edited*

If these property examples are representative then I can only conclude Charleston is a place I will never move to.

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4  Recommend

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Charlie Croker 24 MARCH |  Joanna Edwards

I am sure the people of Charleston are greatly relieved, Joanna.

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5  Recommend

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