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Great escape: Charleston, S.C.

Southern belle of a town boasts great food, historic attractions and family friendly fun

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WILD DUNES

The Boardwalk Inn at Wild Dunes resort, located 30 minutes north of Charleston, S.C., provides a fun, family atmosphere.

To get a taste of Southern hospitality, there's no better place to visit than Charleston, S.C.

As a onetime resident and frequent visitor to the "Holy City" — so named for the abundance of church steeples that dot the skyline — there is never a bad time to explore the many treasures hidden in plain sight.

Upcoming events this season include downtown festive tours, holiday craft markets and spirituals concerts on historic plantations. To get potential visitors in the spirit, the [Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau](#) has an online Advent Calendar where you can enter your name for daily giveaways.

My most recent trip began at [Wild Dunes Resort](#) on the Isle of Palms, about a half hour north of the city center. The resort radiates outward from The Village Plaza, where you can enjoy the fitness center, salon and spa, Hudson's Market and The Lettered Olive Restaurant & Lounge.

The Lettered Olive's casual indoor dining room or outdoor patio is the perfect setting to enjoy the gazpacho, coconut prawns, seafood stew, or local blue corn crusted wreckfish served over lemon and black pepper risotto. A slice of key lime or pecan pie is a great way to complete the meal — or enjoy the free ice cream given to all of the younger guests.

If you want a room closer to the beach, try [The Boardwalk Inn](#), a relaxed hotel featuring its own pool and fine dining at The Sea Island Grill Restaurant & Lounge. As is the case with The Lettered Olive, The Sea Island Grill prides itself on a sustainable menu, with starters like Charleston's own She Crab Soup and truffled popcorn scallops, and entrees such as Moonshine Tuna and Breach Inlet Clams to go along with the delicious beef and poultry options on the menu. The Grill should not be overlooked for breakfast as the pancakes and Southern breakfast were the perfect start to the day.

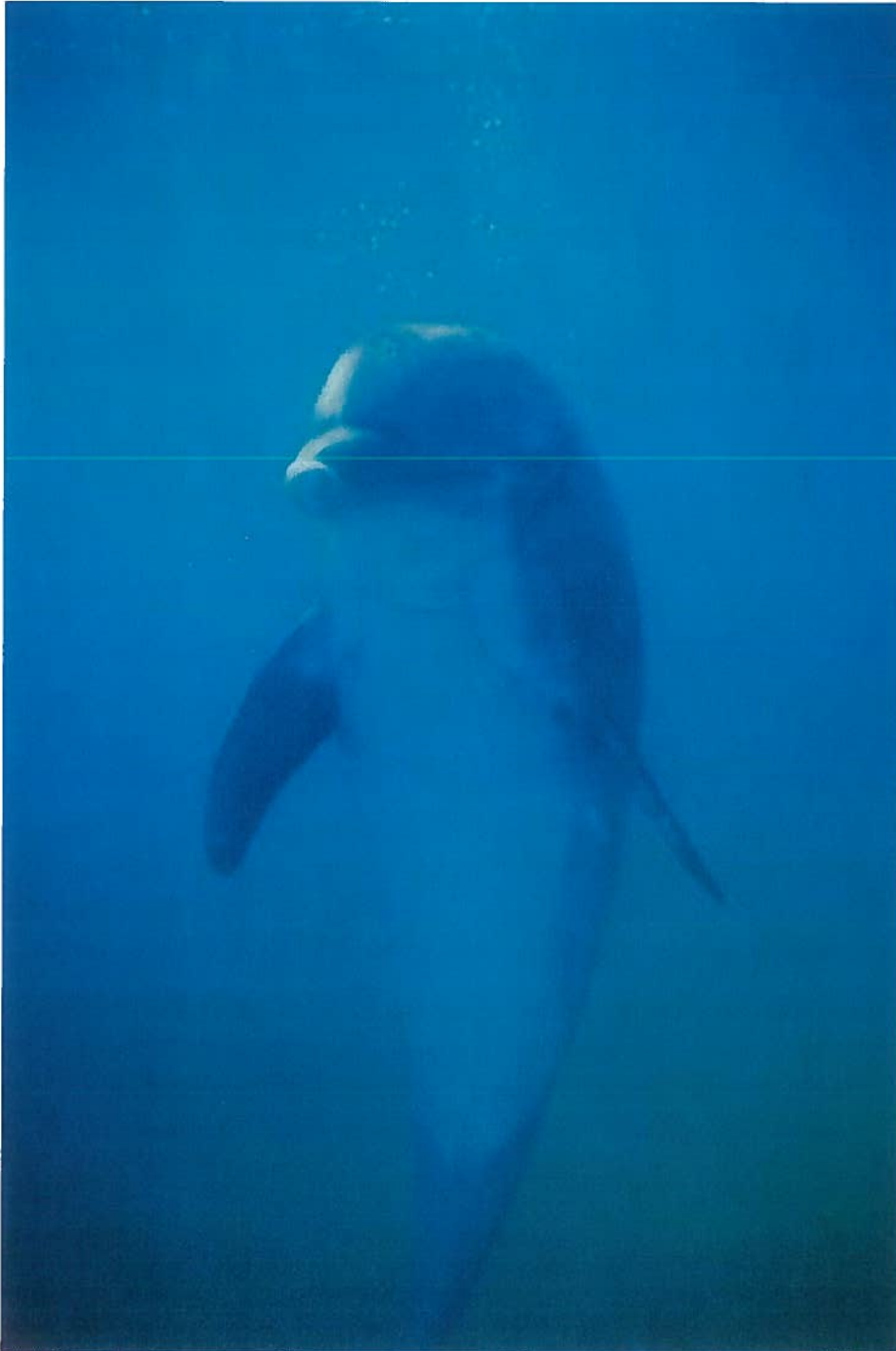
Lastly, a popular choice for extended families and groups of friends is renting one of the three-to seven-bedroom homes or one- to three-bedroom condos located throughout the resort.

Wild Dunes, originally popular as a tennis resort but now better known for its two signature golf courses — the Links Course and the Harbor Course — is designed for convenience, offering beautiful beaches, several pool options, golf and tennis of course, bicycle rentals, and great restaurants all in one location.

It has been voted among the top 10 Best Beach Resorts for Families by Parents magazine.

Wild Dunes' Island Adventures Activities gives families the opportunity to experience kite sails, kayaking, marsh excavations, and other water sports, along with eco-tours run by Shane and Morgan Ziegler of [Barrier Island Eco Tours](#).

The tours range from private charters to beachside cookouts. Our favorite was the Dolphin Discovery Sunset tour, which included a stop at Capers Island, where we explored the old tree "skeletons" found at boneyard beach and searched for beautifully conical whelk shells and shark teeth. Naturally, the highlight of the tour was viewing the dolphins.



Swimming with dolphins is just one activity offered by Barrier Island Eco Tours.

Wild Dunes is only a 15-minute drive from the ever expanding Charleston suburb of Mount Pleasant and another 15 minutes from the charm and cuisine of downtown Charleston.

The two main attractions in Mount Pleasant are [Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum](#) and [Boone Hall Plantation](#). Before we did the "tourist thing" though, we made a most important pit stop at the [Mount Pleasant Visitor Center](#) located under the soaring, twin-spired Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge that connects Mount Pleasant to downtown. At the Visitor Center my kids were able to pick up their [Charleston Explorers Club passports](#) to get our adventure underway.

The Explorers Club is an extremely popular and unique concept that has had much success engaging children of all ages in the variety of fun and educational activities that the Charleston area has to offer. With over 30 participating attractions, it is easy to entertain youngsters with varying interests. The passports are stamped with a logo and five-digit code as they visit each locale. Then the kids input each code into the website as they watch themselves rise through the ranks from Deckhand to Lieutenant and eventually all the way up to Elite Explorer. As further incentive, along the way at each milestone achieved, the Visitor Center will mail small gifts to your home for your child. One benefit of the program is that it does not expire, so your child can continue to advance to the next level on future visits to Charleston.

We chose to divide our Mount Pleasant activities into two days to carve out some time on the Atlantic Ocean beaches of Sullivan's Island, which is the western half of the island connected to Isle of Palms. While there are vacation rental homes on Sullivan's Island, there are no hotels, motels or bed and breakfasts, which gives the island a special charm.

While on Sullivan's Island be sure to get your passport stamped when you visit [Fort Moultrie](#) the lesser known, land-based fort as compared to its island dwelling brethren [Fort Sumter](#), which sits in Charleston Harbor.

As you drive over the bridge from Sullivan's Island into Mount Pleasant it is a straight shot 10 minute drive to Patriots Point and the USS Yorktown. We climbed aboard the US Navy aircraft carrier to pay tribute to our country's brave soldiers and sailors in the Congressional Medal of Honor Museum.

Also docked at Patriots Point are the Navy destroyer the USS Laffey and the submarine USS Clamagore. Patriots Point is one of two departure points, the other being downtown Charleston, for ferries to Fort Sumter, where the first shots of the Civil War were fired.

Our second day commenced with a 15-minute drive north on Highway 17 to Awendaw for a truly memorable visit to the 152-acre facility of [The Center for Birds of Prey](#). One of the least written about attractions in the Charleston area is without doubt a "must see" for anyone who seeks to add to their appreciation of our natural world. The grounds are laid out as a sprawling campus with large aviaries housing over 40 different worldwide species of owls, hawks, kites, eagles, falcons and vultures.

The twice-daily flight demonstrations in the main field will leave you feeling rapturous about raptors as you witness these magnificent predators swooping, sailing and soaring in a natural setting.



Go back in time to wander slave quarters at Boone Hall Plantation in Mount Pleasant.

Heading south back towards Mount Pleasant on Highway 17 we stopped at [Boone Hall Plantation](#) to drive down the avenue of ancient oaks draped in Spanish moss that majestically greet all visitors en route to the plantation house. Along with a guided tour of the house, there is a self-guided tour of the slave cabins. Throughout the day there is an informative history talk that discusses what it was like to be a slave living and working at Boone Hall Plantation as well as a live presentation that explains Gullah Culture in the Lowcountry.

Lastly, the two gardens in front of the Plantation House, which are laid out in the form of two butterfly wings, are not to be missed - not only for the flowers, but for the frogs, dragonflies, and butterflies.

Our travels the next morning took us over both the Cooper and Ashley Rivers in pursuit of passport stamps to [Charles Towne Landing](#). The interactive museum in the Visitors Center provides a nice introduction to the history behind this English settlement from 1670 whose grounds include an Animal Forest with indigenous species like bison, black bear, puma, and elk, along with the Adventure, a replica trading ship, and a live cannon firing on the settlement grounds.

The next stop was downtown Charleston. With stomachs growling or howling depending upon your age, our first priority was lunch, which brought us to Fleet Landing <http://www.fleetlanding.net/> and is downtown's only waterfront restaurant.

The blackened triggerfish sandwich with avocado aioli and pepper jack cheese was delicious as was the mixed greens salad with salmon. Chicken fingers and a fried flounder sandwich got the job done for the kids.

Just a couple of blocks from Fleet Landing as you walk toward the Battery is Waterfront Park complete with park benches, lawns, a long pier with swings, and two large fountains with multiple spouts. From here it is easy access to the many historic homes, churches, museums, and shopping that downtown has to offer.

Our final day in Charleston began with an early visit to the beach and a successful sand dollar hunt. Then we went to the acclaimed [South Carolina Aquarium](#) with its exhibits featuring different marine environments highlighted by a rare albino alligator in the Coastal Plain area. The Touch Tank was a big hit with the little ones, as was feeding the rays.

The [Children's Museum of the Lowcountry](#) is less than a five-minute drive from the aquarium and there is parking in the Charleston Visitor's Center where the kids can get another passport stamp.

The Children's Museum, like the Aquarium, packs a ton of fun into a relatively small space. Kids will be hard to pull away from the Medieval Creativity Castle area or the Art Room. Thankfully the idea of walking the plank by the Pirate Ship and getting wet in the WaterWise! section were enough incentive. There is also an outdoor garden and fire truck for children to enjoy.

Our final destination for the day was the College of Charleston campus, though we took the "long way" there by popping into a bunch of the stores along King St. As we neared the campus we decided to grab a picnic dinner from [Caviar & Bananas](#) on George St. to be enjoyed on the beautiful green space called the Cistem.

C&B is quite reminiscent of our beloved New York mainstay D&D — and with good reason. Proprietor Kris Furniss is a former Dean & DeLuca manager who in his previous career in finance was working on the 73rd floor of the World Trade Center's South Tower on Sept. 11, 2001. Co-proprietor and wife Margaret is a College of Charleston grad from Tennessee who provides the marketing energy and genius behind the gourmet market and café's success.

Whether you are grabbing a quick artisanal coffee or tea with a bakery item to go, sitting down to enjoy a freshly made sandwich or salad, or ordering takeout from the prepared food and sushi menu, it is hard to go wrong at Caviar & Bananas. The most popular item is the "naked" kale salad with almonds, cranberries, blueberries, aged gouda, grape tomatoes, and lemon vinaigrette. The caprese sandwich on Ciabatta and the Applewood Smoked Chicken Panini with manchego, sundried tomatoes and Meyer lemon crema were two of the many delectable choices. And yes they do sell both caviar and bananas.

Michael Shoule is founder of [Read Together Books](#) and author of the children's book "My Daddy Loves Boston College Football."

