

**GOURMET TRAVELLER**

THIS PAGE: TAKING  
A CARRIAGE TOUR OF  
HISTORIC CHARLESTON  
OPPOSITE PAGE:  
A TRADITIONAL  
WEATHERBOARD  
HOUSE



*Sweet* **Carolina**

Charleston has always drawn admirers but its appeal lies deeper than its perfectly groomed streets. Endowed with a rich fusion cuisine, a passion for produce and a fierce sense of local pride, Fiona Sims finds it impossible to resist this city's charms

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARL PENDLE

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MEN FROM THE NAVAL BASE IN CHARLESTON; STROLLING RAINBOW ROW; STREETS SURROUNDING THE UNIVERSITY OF CHARLESTON



Perfectly preserved, pastel-painted weatherboard houses and antebellum mansions line the neat grid of crepe myrtle-lined avenues. There are 93 preserved blocks to be precise – the largest in North America

Ray Manigault has got a good pitch at Charleston's weekly farmers' market. Situated on the South Carolina town's vast, grassy Marion Square, the diverse stalls attract the curious and hungry in the thousands. They flock here every Saturday morning from April to December to feast on local delicacies and stock up on produce that benefits from a nine-month growing season. The better off will transport their purchases in one of Ray's sweetgrass baskets.

They're not cheap at £95, but that's nearly 400 years of tradition you are buying – Ray's ancestors brought the craft with them from West Africa; the baskets were once used to collect rice and cotton.

He's from one of 25 families in Charleston who continue the tradition of basket-weaving. 'Back in 1986, there were 1,200 families,' he shrugs. Urban development has meant the sought-after grass Ray uses is more difficult to get, though a deal with a gated community allows him to take what he needs from the surrounding marshes.

This isn't development inside Charleston's historic old town, you understand. God forbid. The city has the strictest preservation society in the country, where historical fundamentalists wrap the knuckles of those who dare to choose the wrong shade of paint, and where most windows sport original handblown glass. Even the social housing looks smart with its uniform haint blue doors.

Row upon row of perfectly preserved, pastel-painted weatherboard houses and antebellum mansions line the neat grid of crepe myrtle-lined avenues. There are 93 preserved blocks to be precise – the largest in North America, with Rainbow Row the most visited.

Even high-street chains and the multistorey car park sit discreetly behind original or sympathetic facades. Only the brazenly modern Charleston Place hotel is left alone – but it hides cleverly, and swankily, within its own block and is a natural hub for this effusively friendly city. And you can thank, in part, the Mayor of Charleston for that.

Joseph P. Riley is the longest-serving mayor in the US who is still in office. He's proud of Charleston's high ranking on the numerous lists of best US cities to live in and chuffed at the near four million visitors that Charleston gets annually – tourism is South Carolina's biggest industry, generating billions of dollars a year.

People come, like you will, to look at the multimillion-dollar historic homes recreated by Hollywood in *Gone with the Wind*. You can even live out a bit of history by staying in one – the grandest of which

is the wood-panelled Wentworth Mansion, all hush and polish. They come to marvel, too, at the quaint cobbled streets. The cobbles were brought as ballast from Britain in the 1700s to weigh down ships on their outward journeys; they were filled with South Carolina rice and cotton on their return. Yes, the English had their part to play in Charleston. English colonists settled it in 1680 on land granted by King Charles II and Charles Town, as it was once known, became a flourishing port.

By the early 1800s, it was one of the most fashionable cities in the New World, second in importance only to New York. During its heyday, large clippers laden with exotic cargo from China, Europe and the West Indies regularly dropped anchor here, swapping foreign wares for indigo, cotton and prized Carolina rice – a bag of which we spot at Charleston's weekly farmers' market.

The incredibly popular market was all Mayor Riley's idea, says local food writer and historian Sarah Cothran. She does culinary tours of Charleston through Bulldog Tours and knows just about everybody. Cothran used to run the market and she can't help chastising a stallholder for selling an item that isn't strictly local. 'Everything sold here must come from east of the I-95,' she tells me, as we nibble our way along the line of stands. The mayor started the market to bring the community together, and to showcase the region's bountiful produce, including that rice.

Called Carolina Gold, it brought money to Charleston. Many of the city's smartest mansions were bought on the proceeds of rice and the crop flourished for two centuries. When ships arrived from Madagascar to trade in spices, battered from their journey, they exchanged bags of rice for repairs. The area's tidal floods made rice an ideal crop here and production continues to this day, albeit in a much smaller, artisanal form.

No one at the market offers me a rice dish to try but we meet former New York stockbroker Steve Dowdney and taste his butter-laden stoneground grits, along with enterprising young chef Jason Houser and his multitude of sausages from *botifarra* to bratwurst. Retired dentist Ray Oliver sells his own grass-fed beef with an incongruous sideline in kiwi ice-cream made in a traditional wooden chum, while Brian Bertolini offers his southern twist on ravioli, stuffed with crab, corn and bacon.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE PIER AT FOLLY BEACH ON JOHNS ISLAND; A LOCAL PRAWN-CATCHER; PLAYING UNDER THE PIER; EATING OUT; THE GARDENS AT WENTWORTH MANSION; THE STAIRCASE AT THE MANSION; CRABS CAUGHT AT CHERRY POINT LANDING





OPPOSITE PAGE, FIRST ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: CRABCAKES WITH FRIED ONION RINGS; FLEET LANDING RESTAURANT; FLOUNDER SANDWICH; A WAITER AT FLEET LANDING. THIRD ROW: SOUTH BATTERY; MAILBOX; YELLOW BUS; PECAN PIE. FOURTH ROW: CARRIAGE TOURS; HABANERO CHILLIES AT MARION SQUARE; SHOPPING; CUPCAKES



THIS ROW, FROM LEFT: CYPRESS RESTAURANT; THE CHARCUTERIE PLATE; CHEF CRAIG DEIHL; HOMINY GRILL



A few stalls along, Robert Field scoops up a handful of scuppernongs – a variety of sweet, thick-skinned grape indigenous to the southern states that is able to withstand the region's humidity. 'My brother makes communion wine with them,' he chuckles.

Next to him, Grace Scampini silences the hungry crowd around her little stand with her version of 'shrimp' (these are nothing like the minuscule decapod crustaceans we are accustomed to seeing served in British restaurants) scampi – sweet and plump locally caught prawns sautéed with butter, garlic and a hefty slug of brandy.

And there's okra everywhere, destined for the countless variations of okra soup – they call it *gumbo* here, an African word, another throwback to the slave trade. To finish, we try a *benne* wafer, a biscuit encrusted with toasted sesame seeds. Benne is the African word for sesame. There's no escaping Charleston's murky past.

Three out of four enslaved Africans came to America through Charleston. Local planters bought slaves at public auctions in the city and put them to work on their plantations, while others were purchased by townfolk to help out around the home. Their rich influence lives on through the patterns of speech, customs, manners and cuisine among Gullahs, as they are traditionally known.

Gullah is a legitimate Creole language with its own grammar, expressions and vocabulary. It's estimated that about 200,000 African-Americans, descendants of slaves who live in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and neighbouring Georgia, still speak Gullah – run your last word into the next and you're on the way. The Gullahs developed a magnificent makeshift cuisine of one-pot meals, complex seasonings and perfect deep-frying, which form the backbone of Lowcountry cooking.

A 320km stretch of coastal South Carolina and Georgia, few regions in the US deliver as much history, culture and natural beauty as the Lowcountry. The briny air is filled with the shrill sounds of tree frogs – albeit sometimes a tad pungent, thanks to the *pluff* mud: the dark, marshy soil left after the tide recedes.

An endless silhouette of live oak trees surrounds the town and guards the streets, shrouded, Miss Havisham-like, in a silvery cloak of Spanish moss, accentuating the city's time-warped air.

Beyond Charleston there are wide expanses of grassy marsh. The city itself is alarmingly flat and low lying. The distant shimmering ocean appears higher across the harbour (floods are not uncommon here) where Fort Sumter stands brooding. This is where the first shots of the Civil War were fired; the fort is a constant reminder of Charleston's significant role in the conflict. The city is surrounded by water, from the tidal rivers to the crashing rollers of the Atlantic with its permanent population of prawn boats casting its nets.

Just along from Marion Square is Blue Bicycle Books, where you can pick up a copy of *Charleston Receipts*. First published in 1950, it's the oldest Junior League cookbook still in print and the Lowcountry cooking bible. With 750 recipes, such as James Island prawn pie and Dah's browning, and explanations about Lowcountry ingredients, such as *hominy*, it's an invaluable companion.

Hominy is a kind of corn porridge. Also known as grits – or grist if you're a Charleston purist, and a Lowcountry staple. Boiled with water and salt, it's served for breakfast mixed with



Travel information

Currency is the US dollar (£1=\$1.50). Charleston is 5 hours behind GMT. South Carolina has a humid subtropical climate with hot summers, mild winters and rainfall throughout the year. Temperatures are at their most comfortable (between 20°C and 30°C) during May, June, July, August and September. It is warmest in July and coldest in January, when you will need to bring a warm coat.

GETTING THERE

**United** (unitedairlines.co.uk) operates five flights per day from London to its New York hub, Newark Liberty International Airport, offering timed connections to Charleston.

**US Airways** (usairways.com/uk) offers regular flights from London, via Charlotte, North Carolina, to Charleston, South Carolina.

RESOURCES

Visit **Explore Charleston** (explorecharleston.com) for more information.

FURTHER READING

**Charleston Receipts** (Junior League of Charleston, £12) is the ultimate guide to Lowcountry cooking with more than 750 recipes dating back to the 1950s.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: YELLOW CAB; RICKSHAW DRIVER IN DOWNTOWN CHARLESTON; ASIAN PEARS FOR SALE AT THE MARKET IN MARION SQUARE



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PUFFING ON CIGARS; INTERIOR OF WENTWORTH MANSION; JARS OF CUPCAKE TOPPINGS. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CYPRESS RESTAURANT; WHISKY AND COKE; SLIGHTLY NORTH OF BROAD CHEF FRANK LEE; INTERIOR OF SLIGHTLY NORTH OF BROAD



## Where to eat

Prices quoted are per person for three courses (without wine).

**Slightly North of Broad** Chef owner Frank Lee is a mover and shaker around these parts. The produce supplied by local farmers and fishermen is integral to the menu. From £25. *192 East Bay Street, 00 1 843 723 3424, mavericksouthernkitchens.com*

**Dixie Supply Bakery and Café** Kris and Allen Holmes's traditional Formica diner offers classic Lowcountry cooking, and draws fans from far and wide. Don't miss the tomato pie and Mom's meatloaf. From £11. *62 State Street, 00 1 843 722 5650, dixiecafecharleston.com*

**Fig** A huge hit for award-winning chef Mike Lata, particularly among the teetering heel crowd who enjoy feather-light gnocchi and punchy mains among the smoky mirrors and red tea lights. From £31. *232 Meeting Street, 00 1 843 805 5900, eatatfig.com*

**Charleston Grill** A hotel restaurant to beat them all; Michelle Weaver waves the (lone) flag for female executive chefs in the city. Choose from a seductive line-up of dishes split by region and richness. From £47. *224 King Street, 00 1 843 577 4522, charlestongrill.com*

**Hominy Grill** Award-winning chef Robert Stehling's 'shrimp and grits' have been voted the best in town, though the vegetarian dishes are also first-rate. Try the cornbread-thickened tomato pudding. From £19. *207 Rutledge Avenue, 00 1 843 937 0930, hominygrill.com*

**Cypress** Award-winning executive chef Craig Deihl's charcuterie is a great benchmark for this glamorous modern eatery that attracts the great and the good of Charleston. The others in the group, Magnolias and Blossom, attract equally stellar praise. From £31. *167 East Bay Street, 00 1 843 727 0111, magnolias-blossom-cypress.com*

**Fleet Landing** With its stunning views across the harbour, this former port authority building offers a large, buzzy space and plenty of sea views from the wrap-around deck. Come here for superior crabcakes, a booze-enhanced she-crab soup and oysters on ice. From £19. *186 Concord Street, 00 1 843 722 8100, fleetlanding.net*

**Jestine's Kitchen** There's a permanent queue snaking down the street for this haven of home cooking with its oyster po' boys, steamed prawns and fried chicken. From £12. *251 Meeting Street, 00 1 843 722 7224*

**Husk** Chef Sean Brock is the man of the moment. His restaurant combines comfort with elegance, and all his suppliers are chalked up on a blackboard at the entrance. From £19. *76 Queen Street, 00 1 843 577 2500, huskrestaurant.com*

butter and eaten with bacon, eggs or fishcakes. Or heated up for supper and served with prawns, ham or crab.

And it's addictive. You'll come across grits pretty much everywhere in Charleston, from humble diners to swanky restaurants, each chef vying to make the best. Appetites sharpened, we head to the Dixie Supply Bakery and Café where Allen and Kris Holmes serve up some of the finest around. Their modest diner hums with the sound of contented diners, who lap up large slices of signature tomato pie, and chase fat prawns around gravy-soaked plates.

'Shrimp and grits should never have cheese in them – they are good enough to stand on their own,' insists Allen, whose family has been living here since the 1690s. 'Lowcountry cuisine is about making the best of what is available – it is about lots of slow cooking and being clever with cheap cuts. Everything we use is locally produced. "Farm to table" is not a new concept around here,' he explains.

Inspiring vegetable cooking rules. Okra and tomato gumbo is a favourite, so is squash casserole and fried green tomatoes – all classic Lowcountry dishes. Add to that fried oysters, she-crab soup (more delicate than he-crab) and buttermilk pie, and you realise pretty early on that Charleston orbits around food.

Not just comfort food either. Chefs in Charleston have raised their game in the past decade and have been rewarded handsomely for their efforts. Charleston newcomer Husk, owned by chef Sean Brock, was voted *Bon Appétit's* Best New Restaurant in America. And the venerable James Beard Foundation awarded Charleston chefs its coveted Best Chef Southeast three years in a row: Sean Brock at McCrady's in 2010, Mike Lata at Fig in 2009, and Robert Stehling at Hominy Grill in 2008.

Stehling reckons his 'shrimp and grits' are the best – and judging by the queues that stretch down the street at peak times, maybe he's right. And contrary to tradition, Stehling does add cheese to his grits – sharp, white Vermont Cheddar, which gives the dish a satisfying, savoury depth. Brock, meanwhile, serves his with slivers of smoky sausage, heirloom corn and Sea Island peas.

Brock is obsessed with heirloom varieties. Born and raised in rural Virginia, his family grew their own. 'This was a coalfield town with no restaurants,' he explains, 'so you grew and cooked your own food, and when you weren't cooking, you were preserving.'

It prompted the development of a farm on nearby Wadmalaw Island, and later another

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THIS PAGE,  
CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT:  
FIRE ENGINE;  
CHARLESTON  
MANSION



### Food glossary

- Hominy** More commonly known as grits; it's best eaten with prawns.
- Carolina Gold** The stubby, creamy pedigree rice that made the fortunes of so many in Charleston.
- Scuppernongs** A sweet thick-skinned grape indigenous to the southern states.
- Benne** The African word for sesame, these seeds were considered good luck and now make highly addictive biscuits.
- She-crab soup** A cross between bisque and chowder and made with blue crab meat.
- Fried green tomatoes** These are dipped in beaten egg, then seasoned with cracker meal.
- Gumbo** The African word for okra and a mainstay of Lowcountry cooking in the state.

plot in McClellanville, which supplies all of his restaurants. 'I've been dabbling in resurrecting and growing crops that were at risk of extinction,' he explains. He has become a passionate advocate for seed preservation and heirloom varieties. Like many other chefs in Charleston, he is proud to promote the produce of local suppliers. And yes, he works with a particular prawn boat – everyone here has their preferred prawn-catcher in this part of the world.

It's safe to say that you're pretty much stuffed if you don't like



### Where to stay

Prices quoted are for a double room, based on two people sharing, with breakfast (unless otherwise stated).

**Charleston Place** This is the place to stay, with its sweeping staircase, marble floors and super-friendly staff. The hotel plays an integral part to the rhythm of Charleston, from the killer cocktails to the breakfast signature Palmetto omelette stuffed with crab and lobster. Rooms from £165, including breakfast. 205 Meeting Street, 00 1 888 635 2350, [charlestonplace.com](http://charlestonplace.com)

**Wentworth Mansion** Step through time into this unique hotel, once an opulent private residence, with its hand-carved marble fireplace, Tiffany stained-glass windows and woodpanelling galore. Reese Witherspoon honeymooned here. Rooms from £178. 149 Wentworth Street, 00 1 843 853 1886, [wentworthmansion.com](http://wentworthmansion.com)

**The Mills House Hotel** Right opposite the newly renovated City Market, this historic Charleston hotel boasts an enviable position and its share of big-name guests. Rooms from £107. 115 Meeting Street, 00 1 843 577 2400, [millshouse.com](http://millshouse.com)

**The Battery Carriage House Inn** Built in 1843, this harbourside bed and breakfast serves up plenty of history with its 11 individually designed rooms. And you can watch sailing boats skim across the harbour towards brooding Fort Sumter. Rooms from £88. 20 S. Battery, 00 1 843 727 3100, [batterycarriagehouse.com](http://batterycarriagehouse.com)

prawns in Charleston. Most highly prized are the tiny prawns caught in the creeks and inlets that skirt the coast, but these are far and few between. In fact, prawn boats are casting their nets ever wider these days to chase the coveted crustaceans.

'This year we've had to go 250 miles towards Florida to get a good catch,' explains prawn boat owner Jim Green, at Cherry Point Landing, an hour's drive south of the city. The bad winter didn't help; the currents had swept most of their catch south. But inclement weather aside, the South Carolina prawn business is a dwindling market, with competition from cheap Asian farmed prawns (and the odd oil spill) threatening to destroy the industry completely.

'There used to be over 50 boats in this creek alone, now there's just a couple,' he mourns, tipping a basket of stone crabs that he caught off the pontoon into a bubbling pot for his lunch. His favourite prawn recipe? 'Take the shell off the biggest shrimp, split it open and stuff it with blue crab meat and then put it on the broiler. Just before serving, add a knob of butter, season with paprika, celery salt and pepper.'

An impromptu tour of Jim's beloved boat, the Miss Emilie Ann, reveals a high-tech vessel, complete with GPS, three on-board computers, a giant freezer and a 51,000-litre fuel tank, which costs £13,000 to fill. 'We can stay out on the ocean for two months if we want to,' he says proudly, before casting off. We drive back through sultry forests, over bridges spanning shimmering, reedy water, past peeling 200-year-old homes with their wrap around porches and oyster shell foundations.

It is only as we approach the harbour to Charleston that I can envisage what those English sailors – and African slaves – must have seen all those hundreds of years ago after a long and tortuous journey across the Atlantic. A tiny, bustling town precariously perched just above sea level, fighting back the ocean as much as it has continued to fight against the march of progress and the changes this has inevitably wrought. But Charleston is no dried-up fossil. It is a living, breathing city with a unique way of life, a dynamic community and a vibrant cuisine. There's plenty of life in the old girl yet. □

Fiona Sims and Carl Pendle travelled courtesy of the Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau ([explorecharleston.com](http://explorecharleston.com)).



TOP ROW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SUGARED PECANS; FREE SAMPLES; GRAFFITI SIGN; CINEMA; POLICEMAN; TAKING A DRIVE WITH THE DOG; LADIES OUTSIDE A BRIDAL SHOP



BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: CONSTRUCTION WORKERS POSE WHILE ON A BREAK; A LOCAL RELAXING WITH A CIGAR; DINING OUT AL FRESCO-STYLE BY THE BEACH





**You're pretty much stuffed if you don't like prawns in Charleston. Most highly prized are the tiny prawns caught in the creeks and inlets that skirt the coast, but these are far and few between**

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: INSIDE FIG RESTAURANT; SETTING UP FOR ANOTHER BUSY DAY; STREET SIGNAGE; CHARLESTON GRILL; CUPCAKES; CYPRESS RESTAURANT; CHARLESTON GRILL; AND ITS CHEF MICHELLE WEAVER



## Don't miss

**Charleston Restaurant Week** Held every January, this is one of the most popular dining events in the country. You can fill your boots with Lowcountry cooking at the city's top restaurants, which offer bargain prix fixe menus. [charlestonrestaurantassociation.com](http://charlestonrestaurantassociation.com)

**Nathaniel Russell House** Arguably the finest of Charleston's period town houses, not least for its jaw-dropping 'floating' staircase. Other important historic homes to visit include Aiken-Rhett House and Edmondston-Alston House, complete with original outside privy, now in use for visitors. [historiccharleston.org](http://historiccharleston.org); [edmondstonalston.com](http://edmondstonalston.com)

**Palmetto Carriage Tours** It may sound cheesy but these horse-drawn tours pack in more valuable Charleston history and anecdotes than any guidebook – and there's something about the whiff of dung that brings it all alive. From £13 per person. [palmettocarriage.com](http://palmettocarriage.com)

**Charleston Cooks** If you want to learn about the finer points of Lowcountry cooking, come to this shop-cum-cookery school for demos and generous tastings. Classes from £15. 194 East Bay Street, 00 1 843 722 1212, [mavericksouthernkitchens.com](http://mavericksouthernkitchens.com)