

# Charleston in charge

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Last Updated: 2:10 PM, February 25, 2013

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The historic, walkable, (pleasantly) spooky Lowcountry port city of Charleston, S.C., earned the No. 1 spot on Condé Nast Traveler's "Top U.S. Cities" list for the past two years, and in 2012 readers named it their favorite city in the world. In the world? Really? New York City ranked a measly No. 5, so it all seemed a bit suspicious . . . until we saw it for ourselves.

Turns out, Charleston is truly a "best of" the South: Flickering gas lamps adorn pastel, antebellum mansions; cobblestone streets offer views of colorful, formal gardens; horse-drawn carriages clip-clop alongside cars; and polite shopkeepers and hotel staff ask, "Is everyone 'round here treatin' y'all right?" at every turn. Sealing the deal are a slew of festivals happening throughout the year (besides this week's Charleston Wine + Food Festival, there's the big annual Charleston International Antiques Show March 22 to 24, the 17-day Spoleto performing arts festival that starts May 24 and many more), unconventional sightseeing (graveyard tour, anyone?) and an energetic, sophisticated culinary scene.

Hop on a two-hour direct flight for this week's wine and food fun (JetBlue starts flying to Charleston from New York on Thursday, joining Delta and United) or whenever, because this temperate town is delicious 365 days a year.

## STAY

The grand dame of downtown Charleston is **Charleston Place** (from \$259, [charlestonplace.com](http://charlestonplace.com)), an Orient-Express hotel within walking distance from just about everything. There's a lot on-site, too, including the dark, old-school Thoroughbred Club situated off the buzzing lobby, a large spa with an indoor saltwater swimming pool and fancy retail such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Stay on one of two "club floors" for complimentary daily breakfasts, nightly happy hours and snacks galore. For a more boutique experience minus the big-hotel amenities, there are two Relais & Châteaux properties in town: The centrally located 64-room **Planters Inn** (from \$219, [plantersinn.com](http://plantersinn.com)), a few steps away from Charleston

Place, and the 21-room **Wentworth Mansion** (from \$399, [wentworthmansion.com](http://wentworthmansion.com)), a 126-year-old inn that's an easy 10-minute walk from all the downtown action.

## EAT

The Charleston food set can't stop talking about **The Ordinary** ([eattheordinary.com](http://eattheordinary.com)), the brand-new, classic oyster bar and seafood hall in a former bank building. The chef is Mike Lata, whose first endeavor a decade ago was the wildly popular **FIG** — "Food Is Good" ([eatatfig.com](http://eatatfig.com)); its regionally sourced menu (the ricotta gnocchi lamb bolognese is a standout) still draws crowds. While Lata won the James Beard award for "Best Chef: Southeast" in 2009, Charleston chef Sean Brock earned the title in 2010 with his first restaurant, **McCrary's** ([mccradysrestaurant.com](http://mccradysrestaurant.com)). These days, Brock's second venture, **Husk** ([huskrestaurant.com](http://huskrestaurant.com)), is one of the city's hardest reservations, a restaurant known for its indigenous Southern fare and beautiful bar, located in a separate building adjacent to the dining room. For sumptuous, classic dishes (think beef tenderloin, rack of lamb and the best crab cakes in town), the white-tablecloth **Charleston Grill** ([charlestongrill.com](http://charlestongrill.com)) at Charleston Place can't be beat, while tiny, casual **Cru Café** ([crucafe.com](http://crucafe.com)) is the kind of darling, off-the-beaten-path eatery that serves comfort food — from macaroni and cheese to poblano-and-mozzarella fried chicken — that makes Lowcountry-philes swoon.

## DRINK

If the sight of the young, good-looking throng at hip **Kudu Coffee & Craft Beer** ([kuducharleston.com](http://kuducharleston.com)) doesn't wake you up in the morning, the shop's tasty dark roast will. Weekend afternoons, there's often live music in the courtyard, best enjoyed while sipping a local microbrew like Westbrook Grätzer. Bar-hop downtown with stops at **Bin 152** ([bin152.com](http://bin152.com)) for wine and cheese, the breezy rooftop at **Stars** ([starsrestaurant.com](http://starsrestaurant.com)) for the view, and **The Belmont** ([thebelmontcharleston.com](http://thebelmontcharleston.com)) for perfectly crafted cocktails and a sultry vibe.

## SEE

Get your bearings with an hour-long horse and carriage ride throughout Charleston's most scenic blocks, offered by multiple companies and led by knowledgeable, well-trained and tested guides. There's no need to plan ahead, as one leaves about every 10 minutes. You might pass the grand, Federal-style **Nathaniel Russell House** ([historiccharleston.org/russell.aspx](http://historiccharleston.org/russell.aspx)), a National Historic Landmark built in 1808 that's worth a closer look — for its free-flying staircase alone. The antebellum home has undergone renovations, and reopens for tours again in March. Charleston is known as both "The Holy City," for its many churches, and as a haunted city, thanks to its macabre past. After dark, take a scary tour of a

haunted jail, dungeon, and/or a graveyard ([bulldogtours.com](http://bulldogtours.com)).

## SHOP

Hit King Street's international chains (Calypso, Roberto Coin, Billy Reid, Yves Delorme), plus a few good, high-end local boutiques, such as shoe store **Bob Ellis** ([bobellisshoes.com](http://bobellisshoes.com)) and multilabel clothing and accessories shop **RTW** ([rtwcharleston.com](http://rtwcharleston.com)). Venture a mile north to Upper King Street in the Elliotborough neighborhood to visit the **Old Charleston Juggling Board Company** ([oldcharlestonjugglingboard.com](http://oldcharlestonjugglingboard.com)), and another city-specific gem, award-winning milliner Leigh Magar's **Magar Hatworks** ([magarhatworks.com](http://magarhatworks.com)).

## THIS WEEK

The eighth annual **BB&T Charleston Wine + Food Festival** ([charlestonwineandfood.com](http://charlestonwineandfood.com)) takes place Thursday through Sunday. This year's highlights include the Waffle House Smackdown (top chefs reinterpret the eatery's iconic dishes) and the New + Notables dinner (a showcase of hot, new talent, such as Sarah Simmons of New York's City Grit) at McCrady's.

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