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## Take a tour of Charleston's grand houses and gardens

When you visit this charming South Carolina city it will feel as if you're walking into a living museum. Explore Charleston's timeless grandeur by visiting its historic homes and gardens

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Handsome: Drayton Hall Plantation House Photo: © 4Corners Images

By Paul Bray  
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Back in the 17th century, when its English founders pioneered the grid layout of broad boulevards that typify today's downtown USA, Charleston was in the vanguard of urban planning.

This is hard to believe because the South Carolina city now seems so firmly anchored in the past that it's often described as a living museum. The grand, antebellum mansions and pastel-washed clapboard houses, the gas-lit back alleys and clip-clopping carriages conspire to lull you into the delightful delusion that your aircraft has traversed not just the Atlantic but the centuries.

As you might expect, a number of Charleston's grander houses are preserved as museums and open to the public. The Aiken-Rhett House, for example, is one of the most complete urban antebellum complexes in America, including outbuildings and slave quarters. Its interiors remain virtually unaltered since 1858 and many of the contents are still in the rooms for which the Aiken family bought them.

But most of the city's treasury of historic houses are still family homes, and in certain seasons their owners generously throw open their doors and allow visitors to experience a slice of living history.

During October, the Preservation Society of Charleston organises its 25-day Fall Tours programme of themed openings, featuring dozens of private houses and public buildings.

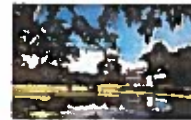


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Interactive map: Get musical in the USA  
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### Charleston



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In video: the evocative beauty of Charleston

Charleston's beauty has inspired musicians, writers and travellers for more than 300 years.

Find out more about the South Carolina city in this video

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Discover the picturesque sights of Charleston

Charleston's historic houses and splendid gardens are must-visits for all those holidaying in the South Carolina city. Scroll through this picture gallery for a closer look at some of the picturesque sports on offer in Charleston

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The glamorous sights of LA

Los Angeles is a city that has it all. Tuck in to a delectable dining scene, relax on a host of beaches and enjoy top family attractions





Colourful flowers along The Battery

Each is manned by a team of dedicated "docents" (volunteer guides) to recount the stories of those who lived there – the planters and socialites, musicians and art dealers, German merchants and French Huguenots – even a slave auctioneer and a Confederate general. There's the enterprising master carpenter who built his own house (still standing) in the 1770s and, 140 years later, the rice broker who loved his two children equally and proved it by building identical houses for them on adjacent plots.

At Christmas time some of Charleston's most historic homes and plantations can be experienced by candlelight and starlight to the sound of spiritual music. The Joseph Manigault House is decorated with authentic arrangements of plants that were cultivated in Charleston in the early 1800s. At the Heyward-Washington House the table is laid with 18th-century heirloom silver, while the Edmonston-Alston House re-creates a Victorian candlelit Christmas with theatricals, hot cider and Gullah spirituals, part of the still-thriving Gullah culture kept alive by West African slaves.

In spring, when the climate is balmy and the city air becomes heavy with the scent of azalea, wisteria and Carolina jessamine, it's the turn of Charleston's gardens to give up their secrets.

Every March and April the wrought iron gates and piazza doors of some of the city's most exquisite private properties are thrown open for the Historic Charleston Foundation's Festival of Houses and Gardens, which also includes traditional oyster roasts, historic boat cruises, an antiques show and concerts ranging from bluegrass to Beethoven in historic settings.

“ The barrier islands are fringed with fine beaches close to the city

There's plenty more history beyond the city streets. Tourist boats dance across the harbour to the ruins of Fort Sumter. Along the Ashley River Road are superbly preserved plantation estates such as Middleton Place, home to America's oldest landscaped gardens. There's even a complete Second World War aircraft carrier, the USS Yorktown, at Patriots Point Naval & Maritime Museum.

The Spoleto Festival USA (May 22-June 7, 2015) is one of the country's top international music and drama events. The Gibbes Museum of Art displays thousands of local and international pieces, and Charleston's unique style of gospel jazz still sets feet tapping in some of the city's buzzing bars.

You must find time for an obligatory plate of shrimp and grits (creamy maize porridge), the local speciality, at one of Charleston's many fine restaurants and grills. The city has become famous in recent years for a renaissance of South Carolina "Lowcountry" cuisine, a feisty fusion of British, European, Caribbean and West African flavours, and locally sourced sea food and farm produce seems to feature on almost every menu.



Take a stroll around Charleston City Market

Don't get the impression that Charleston is only for aesthetes and gourmets, either. The barrier islands are fringed with fine beaches, five of which are in close proximity to the city, including the family-friendly Isle of Palms, Folly Beach where dolphins dodge the surfers, and Kiawah Island with its championship-class golf courses. You can kayak up the Ashley River to look for herons, go fishing for redfish and grouper, or charter a



### In pictures: six must-visit sites in LA

On a holiday in Los Angeles, you'll be spoilt for things to do. Scroll through this gallery for six of the city's must-visit attractions

#### National parks



### The national parks of the USA

Find out why Americans enjoy a love affair with the great outdoors by exploring a host of top parks – national, state and urban – on your outdoor holiday

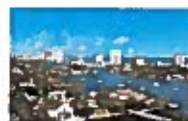
► Why visit the USA's parks?



### In pictures: the must-visit parks of the USA

For inspiration ahead of your next trip to the USA, scroll through this picture gallery to see some of the must-visit parks the country has to offer

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An action-packed playground awaits those lucky enough to visit

Greater Fort Lauderdale, Florida



#### Fort Myers and Sanibel's waters

Discover fine beaches, delightful harbourside restaurants and abundant

wetland wildlife



#### The scenic magnificence of Utah

Marvel at landscapes in Utah's 'Mighty Five' and

immerse yourself in a thriving cultural scene

Shopping in Charleston is an experience in itself. In King Street's shops – many carefully converted from traditional Charleston buildings – big brands sit cheek-by-jowl with specialist businesses selling anything from antique cookbooks to seersucker suits. Or you could pick up a Gullah woven sweetgrass basket at the City Market, which is one of America's oldest and most diverse. Almost as old and diverse as Charleston itself, in fact.

Your trip to Charleston starts at [explorecharleston.com](http://explorecharleston.com) »

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