Look toward the sky from virtually anywhere in the Charleston Historic District and chances are you'll see a steeple. Towering spires decorate the skyline of South Carolina's oldest city, marking religious institutions that hold centuries of stories and an assortment of rich American history. Like living annals, many of Charleston’s oldest houses of worship offer a rare glimpse into the soul of the city, as seen through the lenses of the founders, architects, politicians and everyday citizens who have lived there and visited over the centuries.

Si se mira hacia el cielo desde casi cualquier lugar del casco histórico de Charleston lo más probable es que se vea un campanario. Las torres decoran el perfil urbano de la ciudad más antigua de Carolina del Sur, marcando instituciones religiosas que poseen siglos de historia y de rica y diversa historia estadounidense. Como anales vivos, muchos de los templos más antiguos de Charleston muestran un raro vistazo al alma de la ciudad, como visto por los ojos de fundadores, arquitectos, políticos y ciudadanos comunes que vivieron en ella o la visitaron a lo largo de los siglos.
Many historic tours of Charleston include a select church or synagogue, but there aren’t any companies that offer tours of religious institutions specifically. Each faith community has distinct policies and procedures for accommodating visitors. Some have member volunteers who offer to guide visitors through the facility, and a few congregations have designated visiting hours. While the exterior of these structures is reason enough to plan a visit to Charleston, perhaps the best way to get a glimpse of their interiors is to attend a service of two. Here are five examples of why a trip to the Holy City of the South is both educational and enriching.

French Huguenot Church

Believe it or not, the first question many ask about this church is, “What’s a Huguenot?” Regardless of its etymology (which is subject to debate), Huguenot was a name given to French Protestants, usually Calvinists, in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1706, Huguenot refugees landed near Charleston’s Oyster Point and founded a church that still stands at its original site. The structure has been modified, demolished and rebuilt over the years, with the current Gothic Revival edifice having been completed in 1849. The gridded ceiling appears to be gathered by ornamental rosettes, and the rich wooden box pews spill toward the centerpiece of the altar: the pipes of a rare Erben organ. When Charleston fell to Union forces in 1865, soldiers dismantled the organ and began loading it on a ship. The church organist, however, assembled some influential friends and successfully prevailed for its return.

Circular Congregational Church

Though there may be exceptions to the rule, angular lines dominated the architectural landscape of the South in the 18th and 19th centuries. As such when Charleston architect Robert Mills designed the second iteration of the Circular Congregational Church in the early 1820s, it raised a few eyebrows. That structure, the first major domed building in the United States, was damaged by fire and earthquake, so it was rebuilt in 1880. According to church historians, the 1880 design was “a radical departure from traditional Charleston architecture... [a design that] bespeaks a spirit of nonconformity and high adventure.” The building’s exterior certainly stands out as unique, but the biggest draw for many visitors is the church’s graveyard, which is believed to be the oldest in the city and has been cited as “a repository of distinguished funerary art.”

Kato Williams, Beth Ellis

It may come as a surprise to some that Charleston is the birthplace of Jewish reform in the United States, with many rabbis and leaders of the Reform movement hailing from the city. The exterior of the Circular Congregational Church certainly stands out as unique, but the biggest draw for many visitors is the church’s graveyard, which is believed to be the oldest in the city and has been cited as “a repository of distinguished funerary art.”
After being destroyed by fire in 1898, the Synagogue was reconstructed in 1930 in the Greek Revival-style architecture that was popular in Charleston before the Civil War. A number of individuals from this formerly orthodox synagogue tried to convince the temple's trustees to abridge the Hebrew ritual and introduce English prayers and sermons. The effort was unsuccessful. Noted, however, to the founding of The Reformed Society of Israelites, an organization that influenced much of the modern reform movement in America. After being destroyed by fire in 1898, the synagogue was reconstructed in 1899 in the Greek Revival-style architecture that was popular in Charleston before the Civil War. Upon walking through the massive, handsomely carved pocket door panels, visitors will notice the first of many beautiful brass Yahrzeit tablets, which pay tribute to deceased loved ones by illuminating an adjacent bulb the week of their death. The synagogue’s vaulted ceiling features a lovely plaster medallion that resembles an ornately carved sunburst. Perhaps the most remarkable sight in the temple is the mahogany ark that houses four ornate Torah scrolls. This sanctuary is the second oldest synagogue structure in the United States, and the oldest one in continuous use. The congregation embraced reform in 1847. **Unitarian Church in Charleston**

This magnificent church began as an overflow facility for the Circular Congregational Church in the late 1840s. More than 10 years after the church was rechurched as a Unitarian church in 1847, architect Francis D. Lee renovated and added to the edifice, giving it a spectacular facade. **Habla Español.**

Puede sorprender a algunos de que Charleston sea la cuna de la reforma judía en Estados Unidos. En 1814, miembros de esta antigua sinagoga ortodoxa intentaron convencer al consejo de que introdujese el uso de la lengua hebrea e introdujese oraciones y sermones en inglés. El esfuerzo fue infructuoso, pero condujo, sin embargo, a la fundación de The Reformed Society of Israelites (Sociedad Reformada de Israelitas), una organización que tuvo mucha influencia en el moderno movimiento reformista en Estados Unidos. Después de resultar destruida en un incendio en 1898, la sinagoga fue reconstruida en 1899 en el estilo arquitectónico griego que fue muy popular en Charleston antes de la Guerra Civil. Al atreverse la magnífica puerta tallada, los visitantes verán la primera de muchas tabletas Yahrzeit de bronce que rinden homenaje a seres queridos fallecidos envolviendo una bombilla la semana de su muerte. Los techos abovedados presentan un espectacular rosetón de yeso que recuerda un sol prismáticamente tallado. Pero quizás lo más llamativo del templo sea el arca de caoba que contiene cuatro ornamientos rústicos de la Torah. Este templo es el segundo sinagoga más antigua de Estados Unidos y la que mejor tiempo lleva en funcionamiento. La congregación se acogió a la reforma en 1847. **Unitarian Church in Charleston**

Esta majestuosa iglesia fue originalmente una instalación perteneciente a la Circular Congregational Church a finales del siglo XVIII. Más de una década después de que la iglesia fuera rechurched como iglesia uníta en 1847, el arquitecto Francis D. Lee hizo remozaciones y adiciones al edificio, dandoles un espectacular atractivo gótico del siglo XIX. El exterior de la iglesia es cincelado, con su torre adornada de cuatro pisos, ventilería de piedra y un fascinante cementerio estilo jardín inglés. Recientemente se instaló un monumento en homenaje a los numerosos esclavos que participaron en su construcción. Levantada siguiendo como modelo la capilla de Enrique VII en la abadía de Westminster, el techo se ilumina de día con un clispor de luz que se filtra a través de los vitrales. La Unitarian Church se salvó milagrosamente del "gran incendio" de 1866.
El último resto de la iglesia en Charleston, St. Michael's Church (originalmente St. Philip's) se construyó en 1741. Aunque el arquitecto es desconocido, el diseño de la iglesia está altamente influenciado por el estilo neoclásico (Londres St. Martin-in-the-Fields es frecuentemente citado como un prototipo). El imponente campanario y la linterna de piedra son testigos de la época en que se utilizaban para proporcionar seguridad y vínculos con las comunidades cercanas. El campanario se ha utilizado desde 1881 como un sistema de señales de aviso durante el tiempo de la Guerra Civil. Aunque se desconoce quién fue el arquitecto, su diseño está altamente influenciado por el estilo georgiano. George Washington y Robert E. Lee, entre otros, se encuentran entre los dignatarios que han estado enterrados en el cementerio de la iglesia.