

# The Boston Globe

TRAVEL

## Why does everyone love Charleston so much? We have some thoughts.

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CHARLESTON, S.C. — “Well, look at you in that fancy skirt! Don’t you look sassy,” said the woman at the front desk of the Charleston Place hotel. Frankly, we’d fly two hours from Boston just to be called “sassy” by someone with a Southern accent.

How was it that we’d never visited Charleston before? This gorgeous, historic city in South Carolina has cropped up on so many “best” lists, it should have its number retired. We decided to plan a girlfriend getaway to the Holy City — so-called due to its 400 places of worship — to meet up with an old friend, Courtney, and see what we’d been missing. Would this coastal Carolina burg (population around 60,000) live up to the hype?

We’re suckers for beauty, and this place nails it. The oldest city in South Carolina, Charleston has nearly 3,000 historic buildings reflecting eight architectural styles: Colonial, Georgian, Federal, Classic Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate, Victorian, and Art Deco. Not to mention, it’s a short (just over two hours), nonstop flight from Boston. And the weather is pretty darn fine.

Since we love to explore on foot, we chose lodgings in the heart of the action, the independently-owned Charleston Place (from \$400; [www.charlestonplace.com](http://www.charlestonplace.com)). It sits alongside King Street, a major shopping and dining zone. Good museums are a short stroll away. Oh, and one of Charleston’s must-do restaurants, FIG, is just down the block. Plus, the hotel has a terrific on-site spa — a girlfriend getaway requirement and its own much-lauded eatery, Charleston Grill. (Chef Michelle Weaver, props to you for the best scallops we’ve ever had.)



Craving something sweet? You can't go wrong with Carmella's Cafe & Dessert Bar. DIANE BAIR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Everyone you meet is quick to tell you how friendly Charlestonians are, lest you expect a passel of sour-pussed Lindsey Grahams. “Good cheer” seems to be the default setting. But it’s not all sunshine and sweet tea. Local folks — tour guides, museum docents, pedicab drivers — aren’t shy about discussing the horrifying aspects of hometown history.

In Colonial America, Charleston was the fourth largest city, and the richest, its wealth built on the backs of enslaved people who farmed rice, indigo, and Sea Island cotton. “About 40 to 60 percent of enslaved people in the US came through the port of Charleston,” says Tyler Page Wright, tour guide and owner of Walk & Talk Charleston (\$30; [www.walkandtalkchs.com](http://www.walkandtalkchs.com)). Placards marking slave auction sites dot the city. The Charleston Museum (adults, \$12; [www.charlestonmuseum.org](http://www.charlestonmuseum.org)) offers an in-depth look at the lives of enslaved people on Low Country plantations. And everyone is buzzing about the new International African American Museum, slated to open later this year.

Set between the Cooper and Ashley rivers, which meet to form Charleston Harbor, Charleston is a peninsula. Handsome pastel-hued stucco homes with ornate ironwork line downtown streets, comprising a 2-square-mile historic district. A walking tour offers an excellent overview of all this, including famous sites like the Circular Congregational Church. Horse-and-carriage tours are also popular. Wright is a gregarious guide, happy to answer questions like: What is a haint? (Answer: A trapped spirit.) Why does Charleston have so many window boxes? (Answer: It’s a thing here, and residents are super-competitive about it.) And, who are the ladies selling woven sweetgrass baskets? (Answer: Gullah Geechee women, who are descendants of the enslaved Africans who worked on the plantations.) Their beautiful baskets are the ultimate Charleston souvenir.

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## Goldbugs and pluff mud

Besides sweetgrass baskets, what else makes a wonderful souvenir of Charleston? After prowling the shops on King Street, we'd say a goldbug from Croghan's Jewel Box ([www.croghansjewelbox.com](http://www.croghansjewelbox.com)), a century-old jeweler known for designing every Charlestonian's engagement ring. This sparkly shop sells Charleston-themed pieces like cuff bracelets inlaid with the city skyline. But we fell hard for goldbugs, a whimsical take on the cockroach (a.k.a. Palmetto bug), designed by founder William Croghan's great-granddaughter, Mini Hay, and featured in Vogue magazine. Yep, we're talking gilded cockroaches.

Want to get a conversation going? Ask a Charlestonian about pluff mud. This squishy marshland material, made of decomposed grasses and sea life, smells foul to visitors, but to locals, it smells like home. We got a good whiff (it smells earthy and slightly rotten-eggy) on a sunset kayak tour of Shem Creek with Coastal Expeditions (from \$65; [www.coastalexpeditions.com](http://www.coastalexpeditions.com)), just over the bridge from Charleston in Mount Pleasant. On this guided sea kayak tour, fine for beginners and families, you paddle alongside tall spartina grass and, yes, pluff mud. We saw great blue herons and egrets along the creek; sometimes paddlers spot manatees. Heading back toward a passage lined with seafood shacks, we encountered a pod of dolphins, who came thisclose to our vessels. "Paddles up!" our guide, Morgan, instructed, so we wouldn't coldcock the cetaceans. After that, the creamsicle-hued sunset was anticlimactic.

Speaking of creamsicles, we quickly discovered the place to go for that girlfriend getaway staple, a spiked milkshake: Carmella's Café & Dessert Bar ([www.carmellasdessertbar.com](http://www.carmellasdessertbar.com)) on East Bay Street. And they do mean bar; there's a full bar at this spot, along with gelato, excellent cookies, Italian pastries, and sandwiches. Carmella's has indoor seating, and some outdoor bistro tables, but it's double the pleasure if you munch/sip as you walk along the waterfront. In Charleston, winter temps are typically in the high 50s and lower 60s — that's shorts-and-T-shirt weather here in Boston.

## Nobody goes home skinnier

Charlestonians — and the 6 million tourists who visit each year — are obsessed with food. We were practically delirious to secure a coveted reservation at FIG (Food Is Good; entrees from \$39; [www.eatatfig.com](http://www.eatatfig.com)), a Charleston mainstay co-owned by James Beard award-winning chef Mike Lata. It's a splurgy night out but, wow: The ricotta gnocchi ala Bolognese was a triumph of pillowy deliciousness. Chef Lata also operates a seafood restaurant in the city, The Ordinary. But we were eager to try another buzzed-about seafood place, 167 Raw (from \$8; [www.167raw.com](http://www.167raw.com)). The owners also operate a place on Nantucket (which may explain the lobster roll on the menu), but we went local, opting for crab dip, a shrimp po'boy, and shrimp tacos. We never got around to ordering shrimp and grits during our trip, the most popular dish among the tourist set.

We never made it to the beach, either. Oops. "Everyone comes for the history and the food, so the beaches are kind of a secret," says Ike High of Explore Charleston. Located about 25 minutes from the city proper are beaches including Isle of Palms, Kiawah Island, Sullivan Island, Seabrook Beach, and Folly Beach. We're told they're wide and firm, with tawny sand, but we've never actually seen them. And it wasn't until we were at the airport that we realized we'd forgotten another major item on our to-do list: the 12-layer Ultimate Coconut Cake at the Peninsula Grill ([www.peninsulagrill.com](http://www.peninsulagrill.com)). It is, quite possibly, the best thing to eat in food-crazed Charleston, says everyone.

Guess we'll be back for some cake — maybe in springtime, when the temps edge up to the 70s or so. We'll pack swimsuits for the beach — and a fancy skirt or two. We're aiming for sassy.

[www.explorecharleston.com](http://www.explorecharleston.com).