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ROMANTIC GETAWAYS SPECIAL SECTION

## The charms of CHARLESTON

A destination made for two

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Charleston, S.C. — If there's a more romantic city than Charleston within driving distance of the Atlanta area, we haven't visited it (at least not yet).

For certified romantics and “foodies” like us, few places in the region — or practically anywhere in the world — can rival the port city's blend of grace, beauty, history, tradition and romantic dining spots. Charleston has a way of charming couples with romance around every gas-lamp-lit corner or restaurant table. It's great to visit over Valentine's Day weekend — or any time.

Whether taking a carriage tour, sailing Charleston Harbor, shopping at the popular open-air public market for native sweetgrass baskets, choosing freshly cut flowers at the Four Corners of Law (an intersection surrounded by government and judicial offices), looking for antiques and more along historic King Street, pursuing plantation life or combing beautiful beaches, Charleston always provides a sensory experience for couples.

In the city and out on the plantations, America's oldest gardens explode with vibrant colors and are a delight, as the scent of the flora is like no others and the vision of the alluring azaleas, roses, and camellias is almost too exquisite to capture with a camera. Charleston is beautiful and aristocratic, a place where strolling couples peek at centuries-old houses behind gates that are alive with Carolina Yellow Jessamine — the state flower of South Carolina.

Love of history

It's easy to find many urban treasures within walking distance of historic district accommodations, including the Nathaniel Russell House, a fine example of Federal architecture built in 1808. It's one of many homes targeted by the city-saving work of the Preservation Society of Charleston and the Historic Charleston Foundation.

Other nearby houses open to the public include the Edmondston-Alston House, the Heyward-Washington House and the Aiken-Rhett House. The Edmondston-Alston House has a commanding view of Charleston Harbor and a treasure chest of antique family furnishings. The Heyward-Washington House was the home of prominent rice planter Daniel Heyward and once hosted George Washington. The Aiken-Rhett House provides one of the most complete looks at urban antebellum life (its restoration is ongoing).

Art lovers will appreciate the exhibitions at the Gibbes Museum of Art. Opened in 1905, thanks to an endowment by wealthy Charleston merchant James S. Gibbes, the museum stands as a symbol of cultural leadership in Charleston, displaying an intriguing collection of American paintings, prints, and drawings from the 18th to the 21st centuries.

The museum provides visitors with a comprehensive view of Charleston scenes and South Carolina notables, as well as hundreds of miniature portraits, one of the oldest and finest collections of its kind. Visitors can come face to face with stories of the Lowcountry as seen through painting, sculpture, photographs and more.

For those with more time, Charleston's colorful charms can also be explored a bit further afield, where many plantations are open to visitors. Out Ashley River Road, three Colonial plantations interpret more than 250 years of rural life in the Lowcountry.

Drayton Hall is preserved in almost original condition after more than 2 1/2 centuries. Considered one of the finest examples of Colonial architecture in America, this historic house is the only plantation remaining on the Ashley River that survived the Civil War intact. Visitors can learn how seven generations of Draytons lived and worked at this home and on the surrounding land.

Magnolia Plantation and Gardens features some of America's oldest and most colorful landscaped gardens. Built in the 1670s, it has been the continuous residence for 10 generations of Drayton descendants. Along with the pre-Revolutionary summer home of the Draytons, the famed gardens include a horticultural maze, an herb garden and the Barbados Tropical Garden. Also located at Magnolia, Audubon Swamp Garden encompasses a unique 60-acre blackwater cypress swamp, crossed by bridges, dikes and boardwalks.

Laid out by Henry Middleton in 1741, the landscaped gardens of Middleton Place are considered the oldest in America. Visitors can also explore the stable yards, complete with animals (including two new water buffalo). The house tour provides an inside look at Colonial life. For those who want a truly historic stay, we highly recommend a romantic night or two at the architecturally unique Middleton Inn, located nearby down a pretty path.

On the other side of Charleston, Boone Hall Plantation and Gardens begins with a 3/4-mile drive lined with massive Spanish oaks planted in 1743 by Captain Thomas Boone. Original plantation buildings include nine 18th-century slave cabins, built with bricks made on the plantation, and a gin house, used for processing cotton.

#### Sand and surf

Charleston is also close to many excellent beaches and beach resorts. Just 10 minutes from downtown Charleston, Folly Beach has maintained a small seaside town atmosphere but has modern resort amenities and the state's longest fishing pier.

Other resort beach destinations include Edisto Island, Isle of Palms, Sullivan's Island, Seabrook Island and famed Kiawah Island, where golf and beach resort life reign. Couples can definitely have their romantic Charleston and beach it, too.

#### Bedtime stories

Charleston accommodations options range from modern hotels with romantic amenities to quaint B&Bs ideally suited for visiting couples. Depending on preferences, a few of our favorites for two would be: modern luxury at Charleston Place or Market Pavilion; decadent Wentworth Mansion; historic midsize inns such as Planter's Inn or Lowndes Grove; the truly unique carriage houses of the William Aiken House; and the varied accommodations (and pricing) of lodging groups such as Charming Inns (John Rutledge House Inn, Kings Courtyard Inn, Victoria House Inn, Fulton Lane Inn and Wentworth Mansion) and Charlestowne Hotels (Andrew Pinckney Inn, French Quarter Inn, Anchorage Inn, Harbourview Inn and King Charles Inn). Those looking to extend their stay in the outlying Lowcountry will simply love the aforementioned Middleton Inn, Isle of Palm's Wild Dunes Resort, Summerville's Woodlands Resort & Inn or The Sanctuary at Kiawah Island.

#### Tables for two

For a city its size, the dining scene is truly remarkable, with a wide range of restaurants offering tables for two with world-class cuisine. Tristan's rising star chef Aaron Deal said, "Although there are many great things to do in Charleston, I find a bottle of wine, a great meal, and a long walk at the beach or South of Broad makes for a perfect night." He added that the banquettes at Tristan are particularly popular with couples.

It's hard to have a bad restaurant experience in Charleston, but our recommendations (specifically for couples) have to include: Tristan; Fish (fresh local seafood in a quintessential King Street setting); Trattoria Lucca (chef Ken Vedrinski's new romantic Italian hotspot); longtime Charleston "worth-it" hotel restaurant splurges at Bob Waggoner's Charleston Grill, Robert Carter's Peninsula Grill, or the culinary magic of Marc Collins at Circa 1886; and the varied East Bay options from Maverick Southern Kitchens (High Cotton and

Slightly North of Broad) and Hospitality Management Group (Magnolias, Cypress, and Blossom), two local restaurant groups we've grown to love.

## IF YOU GO

### WHERE TO SLEEP

The romantic month of February, and beyond, generally leads to some varying packages ideal for visiting couples. Charlestowne Hotels (see below) has a range of romantic offerings, including "Just the Two of Us" at highly-recommended French Quarter Inn — including two nights in a deluxe room, a private carriage tour for two, a \$75 gift certificate at tasty Tristan, champagne and chocolates upon arrival, afternoon wine and cheese reception, and gourmet in-room continental breakfast each morning.

The Charming Inns group (see below) has many packages, including a two-night package at Fulton Lane Inn through March 4 that includes deluxe accommodations and dinner for two at Circa 1886 (starting at \$560). For a splurge, their Wentworth Mansion February package includes accommodations at the luxury hotel, a dozen red roses, candlelight turndown, and a \$150 gift certificate at adjacent Circa 1886 restaurant. It starts at \$595 anytime in February, though it's \$995 per night (two-night minimum) over Valentine's Day weekend (with dinner for two at Circa 1886 on Valentine's Day instead of the gift certificate).

For something truly unique, couples who book a comprehensive seven-hour health assessment at King Street's Cenegenics Carolinas ([www.cenegenics-carolinas.com](http://www.cenegenics-carolinas.com)) in February receive a complimentary dinner for two at Circa 1886 and discounted rates at Wentworth Mansion.

Recommended romantic accommodations options include:

> Charleston Place. Doubles from \$389, 205 Meeting St., 843-722-4900 or 1-800-611-5545, [www.charlestonplacehotel.com](http://www.charlestonplacehotel.com).

> Market Pavilion. Doubles from \$209, 225 East Bay St., 843-723-0500 or 877-440-2250, [www.marketpavilion.com](http://www.marketpavilion.com).

> Wentworth Mansion. Doubles from \$470, 149 Wentworth St., 843-853-1886 or 1-800-466-1886, [www.charminginns.com](http://www.charminginns.com).

> Planter's Inn. Doubles from \$275, 112 North Market St., 843-722-2345 or 1-800-845-7082, [www.planterstinn.com](http://www.planterstinn.com).

> Lowndes Grove. Doubles from \$275, 266 St. Margaret St., 843-853-1810 or 877-307-9243, [www.lowndesgrove.com](http://www.lowndesgrove.com).

> William Aiken House. Doubles from \$275, 456 King St., 843-853-1810 or 877-307-9243, [www.williamaikenhse.com](http://www.williamaikenhse.com).

> Charming Inns (varied options). Doubles from \$139, [www.charminginns.com](http://www.charminginns.com).

> Charlestowne Hotels (varied options). Doubles from \$75, [www.charlestownehotels.com](http://www.charlestownehotels.com).

> The Inn at Middleton Place. Doubles from \$179, 4290 Ashley River Road, 843-556-0500 or 1-800-543-4774, [www.theinnatmiddletonplace.com](http://www.theinnatmiddletonplace.com).

> Wild Dunes Resort. Doubles from \$100, 5757 Palm Boulevard, Isle of Palms, 877-221-0901, [www.wildduneresort.com](http://www.wildduneresort.com).

> Woodlands Resort & Inn. Doubles from \$325, 125 Parsons Road, Summerville, 843-875-2600 or 1-800-774-9999, [www.woodlandsinn.com](http://www.woodlandsinn.com).

> The Sanctuary at Kiawah Island. Doubles \$273-\$545, One Sanctuary Beach Drive, Kiawah Island, 843-768-6000 or 877-683-1234, [www.thesanctuary.com](http://www.thesanctuary.com).

### WHERE TO EAT

> Tristan. Entrees \$26-\$55, 55 South Market St., 843-534-2155, [www.tristandining.com](http://www.tristandining.com).

> Fish. Entrees \$17-\$26, 442 King St., 843-722-3474, [www.fishrestaurant.net](http://www.fishrestaurant.net).

> Trattoria Lucca. Entrees \$14-\$20, 41 Bogard St., 843-973-3323, [www.trattorialuccadining.com](http://www.trattorialuccadining.com).

> Charleston Grill. Entrees \$28-\$48, 224 King St., 843-577-4522, [www.charlestongrill.com](http://www.charlestongrill.com).

> Peninsula Grill. Entrees \$25-\$39, 112 North Market St., 843-723-0700, [www.peninsulagrill.com](http://www.peninsulagrill.com).

> Circa 1886. Entrees \$25-\$40, 149 Wentworth St., 843-853-7828, [www.circa1886.com](http://www.circa1886.com).

> Maverick Southern Kitchens. Featuring the varied downtown dining of upscale High Cotton and creative Slightly North of Broad. Both on East Bay Street, [www.mavericksouthernkitchens.com](http://www.mavericksouthernkitchens.com). Couples may also want to consider a cooking class at their Charleston Cooks location on East Bay Street (including several special "Couples Night" offerings).

> Hospitality Management Group. This trio of dining venues features an array of delectable downtown options on East Bay Street with varying atmospheres, menus and prices. [www.magnolias-blossom-cypress.com](http://www.magnolias-blossom-cypress.com).

## INFORMATION

Contact the Charleston Area Visitor Center, 375 Meeting St., Charleston, SC 29403; 843-853-8000 or 1-800-774-0006; [www.charlestoncvb.com](http://www.charlestoncvb.com).

## HOW TO GET THERE

From Atlanta, take I-20 east to I-26 east, which goes right into Charleston. It's about five hours.

On the menu for "foodie" couples

Those who can't make it for Valentine's Day weekend have another very romantic option a few weeks later. The Charleston Food + Wine Festival ([www.charlestonfoodandwine.com](http://www.charlestonfoodandwine.com); March 5-8) provides a particularly tasty and romantic time for a quick trip to the Lowcountry. Star local and visiting chefs (think Bobby Flay and Sara Moulton) make the fourth version of this event better than ever.

The long weekend's "King Street Sip + Stroll" is particularly popular with couples, where there's an opportunity to taste interesting wines and appetizers while shopping on King Street. Shoppers should look for Stolze wine glasses in Charleston shops and restaurants and Le Creuset cookware at the namesake King Street store — both respected "foodie" companies run their U.S. operations out of the Charleston area.

A number of other events are ideal for couples, with food and wine tastings, lots of demonstrations, intimate evening events, and a dine-around highlighting the work of local and visiting chefs and wine experts. Watershed's super chef Scott Peacock said: "I find Charleston to be very romantic. It's a great place to wander around and get lost in the beauty and mystery." Peacock's Decatur restaurant is celebrating a decade of Southern cooking, and he'll be a guest chef at Charleston's Hominy Grill during March's Charleston Food + Wine Festival. Other Atlanta-area chefs heading to Charleston for the dine-around and more include: Richard Blais, Joel Antunes, Kevin Rathbun, Linton Hopkins, Marvin Woods and Gerry Klaskala, and Hugh Acheson from over in Athens.