

A Charleston Girlfriend Getaway

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We're childhood friends, but that doesn't explain why the six of us have stayed in touch. We zoom, text, and take trips together. Call it luck. Call it fate. It's like we're family.

Maybe that's why our recent Charleston girlfriend getaway in South Carolina was such a good choice. It offered enough to satisfy everyone's wish list, from historic homes and museums to kayaking, shopping to dining, and even gazing at creatures great and small.



During our Charleston girlfriend getaway, we saw the Pink House, built around the turn of the 17th century and one of the city's oldest homes.

Charleston is one of our nation's oldest cities, founded in 1670 as Charles Town in honor of the English king. In the ensuing centuries, it suffered natural and manmade disasters. These included earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, fires, smallpox, yellow fever and destruction from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

Despite this, Charleston remains one of the South's most architecturally intact, antebellum cities. In 1931, it became the first city in America to establish a local historic district.

With a population of just 140,000, Charleston is laid-back and mellow. Church steeples rise above pastel-colored homes, and oak trees drip Spanish moss. Narrow alleys lead past pocket gardens while horse-drawn carriages ferry tourists. Colonial, Georgian and Federal homes, cobblestone streets, hitching posts, gas-lit lamps, flower boxes, palmetto trees and ornate wrought-iron gates interweave with the intoxicating fragrance of blooming jasmine.

Walking through history on a Charleston girlfriend getaway



History is one of my particular loves, so on our Charleston girlfriend getaway, we dropped by The Charleston Museum, founded in 1773 and heralded as America's first museum. I learned how the surrounding Lowcountry's salt marshes, coastal waterways, and rice plantations made its owners wealthy. And I learned about Charleston's role in the American Revolution and Civil Wars (South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union). Other museum galleries focus on natural history, historic weaponry, textiles and Charleston silver.



Walking tours of Charleston's compact historic district provide good introductions to the city's history. For example, I learned that on the eve of the Revolutionary War, Charleston was the richest and fourth-largest city in the colonies.

And Charleston owns many firsts, including the nation's first permanent theater (1736), its first municipal college (1773), and its first golf club (1786). Nearer to my heart is the Tavern, the oldest liquor store in the country (1686).

Walking tours also gave us the scoop on local lore and gossip. For example, the young doctor who died from a duel in 1786 but can still be heard whistling in Philadelphia Alley. Another mystery: Theodosia Burr Alston, daughter of Aaron Burr and wife of a South Carolina governor, lived at 29 Church Street. In 1812, she boarded a New York-bound schooner that disappeared.

Learning about the slave trade



Charleston's past includes some very dark pages in history: the slave trade. It's estimated that as many as half the enslaved Africans brought to this country passed through Charleston.

Although the U.S abolished the international slave trade in 1808, that only fueled the domestic slave trade, with Charleston one of the main markets. Charleston's enslaved people provided the manpower for virtually every trade and craft. They worked as cooks, butlers, midwives, nursemaids, housemaids, seamstresses, gardeners, carpenters, stable boys and barbers.

Because of slavery, plantation owners, most of whom maintained homes in Charleston, became incredibly rich. As my guide on "The Charleston Stroll—A Walk with History Tour" offered by [Bulldog Tours](#) said, "Charleston was built on the backs of slaves."

Slave auctions were held at this slave mart from 1856, when outdoor auctions were banned so as not to tarnish the city's 'genteel' image

Probably no place drives that painful point home better than the [Old Slave Mart Museum](#). Established in 1938 as our nation's first museum of slavery, it occupies what was once one of 40-some "showrooms" in the area.

Slave auctions were held at this slave mart from 1856, when outdoor auctions were banned so as not to tarnish the city's "genteel" image, to 1863, when Union bombardment forced its evacuation. Here, I learned that in 1860 more than half of South Carolina's population was enslaved. And of the 15 Americans who owned more than 500 enslaved people, eight lived in South Carolina.

In addition to displaying historic documents and items related to the slave trade, the museum often hosts speakers who give voice to the enslaved people who passed through here. For example, they describe what it may have felt like to stand on the auction block and be sold for whatever purpose the new owner wanted.

Touring Charleston's historic homes



During our Charleston girlfriend getaway, I indulged my love of history and visited museums and historic houses. This is the dining room at Nathaniel Russell House Museum, one of several antebellum homes open to the public

Knowing about Charleston's slave history colored my perception of Charleston's historic antebellum homes. Most of those open to the public are opulently furnished to convey the lifestyle of the city's privileged class. Virtually all owned enslaved people. Nathaniel Russell's

house, for example, dates from 1808 and is famous for its free-floating staircase, but Russell's wealth came mainly from his work in the slave trade.



Likewise, William Aiken, Jr. served as governor of South Carolina. The third-largest slaveholder in the state, Aiken owned upwards of 900 enslaved people. What struck me about his home, now the Aiken-Rhett House Museum, was not what was there but what wasn't.

Instead of serving as a showcase of the rich and famous, the 1820 home stands mostly empty in maintained disrepair. Its haunting shell is a fitting metaphor for the unspeakable misery suffered by the enslaved. Its original slave quarters are preserved, without windows and looking much as they did in the 1850s.

Middleton Place: Glorious gardens and inglorious history



Middleton Place is home to the oldest landscaped gardens in the country, designed to impress visitors arriving by boat from Charleston.

Several plantations near Charleston are open to the public, but we chose Middleton Place for its acclaimed gardens. Home to four generations of the Middleton family from 1741 to 1865, the property also has the oldest landscaped gardens in the country. The 65 acres of formal gardens were designed to impress visitors arriving by boat from Charleston via the Ashley River. Inspired by the geometric symmetry of Versailles' gardens, the landscape is divided into various "rooms," from secret gardens to inner ones. Other features include terraces, sculptures, and lakes in the shape of a butterfly. In season, flowering plants and trees include azaleas, magnolias, camellias and hydrangeas.

The grounds also include a guesthouse with items belonging to the Middletons, stables, a carriage house, a blacksmith shop, a sugar cane mill and animals ranging from horses and sheep to chickens and goats. Union forces burned Middleton's plantation house to the ground in 1865.

And it was here, amidst the beauty of scenic vistas, that I learned the horrors of plantation life for the enslaved. What sets Middleton Place apart, in my opinion, is that in addition to its striking gardens, it offers “Beyond the Fields: Enslavement at Middleton Place.” Presented several times daily and included in the admission price, it’s a frank presentation about the brutality of slavery and the resilience of the enslaved.

Insights into the life of an enslaved person



Eliza's House was built in 1870 after the Civil War for freed slaves working at Middleton Place.

In addition to creating Middleton's landscaped gardens, the majority of the enslaved toiled as field hands. Working in the Lowcountry's rice fields, they tended livestock and grew all the plantation's food. Others were artisans, producing everything a plantation needed, while the most privileged worked in the plantation house.

Regardless of status, enslaved people lived in constant fear. And they were “treated as less than humans from the moment they were put in chains,” said the man giving our presentation. They could be tortured (public whipping was the primary form of punishment). Children could be sold or sent to work the owner’s other plantations, never to be seen again. “All women and girls were fair game to all men and visitors,” he added.

What struck me is that despite the extravagance of Middleton Place and its gardens, it served only as the family’s winter home. Like other plantation owners, the Middletons spent spring and autumn in Charleston, entertaining and attending social events. Then, in summer, the family decamped to their mansion in Newport, R.I. And Middleton Place was just one of 19 plantations the Middletons owned.

Learning about Fort Sumter and the Civil War

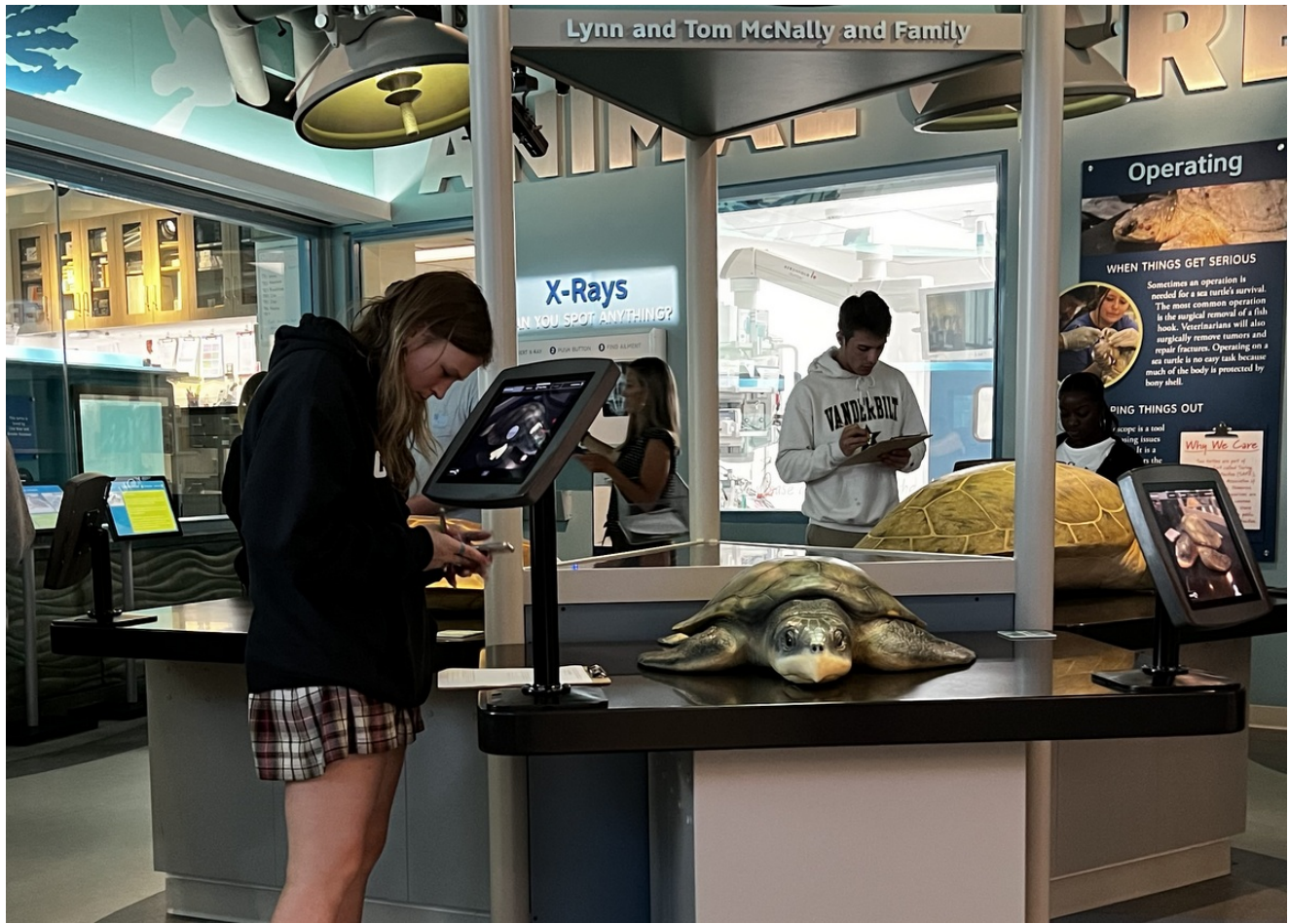
You’re probably not surprised to learn that Fort Sumter’s 3.5 million bricks were made chiefly by enslaved people. However, Fort Sumter is most famous as the birthplace of the Civil War.

Southern forces fired upon Union troops occupying the fort on April 12, 1861. Vastly outnumbered, Federal forces evacuated after just 34 hours. And Confederate troops occupied Fort Sumter over the next four years despite heavy bombardment by Union forces that reduced the stronghold to rubble and destroyed much of Charleston.

Today, Fort Sumter National Historic Park bears little resemblance to its original, three-tiered brick structure. Access to the island fort is by ferry. And with timed entry and departure, that translates into just one hour at the fort. I found that much too short.

Yet Fort Sumter is one of the most visited sites in Charleston. It’s worth the trip for the views of Charleston’s waterfront, the raising of the American flag, cannons and ruins that include the former men’s barracks, officers’ quarters and casements (gunrooms). And I easily could have spent two hours in its excellent museum.

Exploring Charleston’s water world



The South Carolina Aquarium specializes in turtle rehabilitation and describes how humans can help nesting turtles by leveling sand castles and picking up debris.

Luckily, my friends on our Charleston girlfriend getaway rescued me from my obsession with history. After Fort Sumter, we visited the [South Carolina Aquarium](#), located right beside the ferry dock for Fort Sumter. This accredited aquarium presents around 5,000 animals in habitats ranging from salt marsh to a two-story ocean tank (the museum claims it's the deepest tank in North America).

Because most of us are former Girl Scouts who canoed and sailed, we also took to the water. We spent two hours kayaking with a guide from [Castaway Island Excursions](#). Sandpipers, seagulls, pelicans and even some dolphins accompanied us as we paddled down the Folly River past Lowcountry wetlands and marshes.

We also paddled a boat at [Cypress Gardens](#), an 80-acre swamp that was once part of rice plantations but has been a family destination since 1932. It's home to an estimated 200 alligators, including many young ones. But in the heat of the day, we saw only one six-footer. Wildflowers bloom throughout the year. And the 4.5 miles of trails draw birders to see resident and migratory species.

Shopping and dining during our Charleston girlfriend getaway



Sweetgrass baskets, for sale at Charleston City Market and from sidewalk vendors.

While many shoppers concentrate on the shops in Charleston's historic district, especially on King Street, we especially enjoyed walking through Charleston City Market. One of the country's oldest public markets, vendors here sell crafts and food products. These include stone-ground grits, mustard-based barbecue sauce, pickled okra, and sweetgrass baskets. Basket-making, a tradition passed down from generation to generation, has roots going back to African-Americans on Lowcountry plantations.

As for meals during our Charleston girlfriend getaway, we didn't plan anything in advance. Instead, we asked locals for recommendations wherever and wherever hunger struck. Fleet Landing Restaurant & Bar paired waterfront views with the creamiest shrimp and grits I've ever had. And Chico Feo at Folly Beach (recommended by our kayaking guide) was the perfect Bohemian outdoor place for street tacos and beer.

But our most memorable meal was at The Middleton Place Restaurant, which specializes in Lowcountry dishes featuring seasonal, organic ingredients from its own gardens. The buffet lunch included fried chicken, fried catfish, pulled pork with mustard barbecue sauce, collard

greens, pecan pie and other enticing dishes. We enjoyed our meal in a sun-drenched room overlooking oaks and palmettos.

Next time: More time



Angel Oak is estimated to be about 400 years old, making it older than Charleston, which is one of the reasons we chose this for a group photo to remember our girlfriends' getaway in Charleston.

When I visited The Charleston Museum, a staff member asked how long I was staying and answered that five nights were not enough. She was right.

Although we didn't see everything I'd hoped for, our Charleston girlfriend getaway gave us time to catch up, reminisce, laugh and relax over glasses of wine. In any case, in early 2023, the International African American Museum will open with the mission of honoring untold stories of the African American journey.

I'm looking forward to visiting that and the Gibbes Museum of Art and Magnolia Cemetery when I return.

What's appealing to the over-50 luxury traveler?

- We rented a three-bedroom house through Airbnb so we could hang out and socialize during our girlfriends' getaway in Charleston. But there are many other options for lodging, including luxury hotels, historic inns, bed-and-breakfasts in former mansions and resorts in nearby beach communities.

- Charleston is a treasure trove for people interested in history, architecture, gardens, shopping and dining.

Take note:

- Although Charleston's historic district is compact, you'll do a lot of walking, so wear appropriate shoes.
 - Charleston is hot in summer, so dress accordingly. Spring and autumn are the best times to visit weather-wise, but these are also the most popular times of the year.
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IF YOU GO

Pick up maps and brochures at the Charleston Visitor Center or visit the [official Charleston tourism website](#),

Photo credits: All photos by Beth Reiber (except the group photo at [Angel Oak](#), taken for us by a stranger).

Disclosure: *The author paid for her own transportation and lodging, but [Explore Charleston](#) provided a pass that gave free entry to many of the city's attractions.*

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ON A CHARLESTON
GIRLFRIEND GETAWAY

