



Charleston's walkable downtown entertains both kids and parents

southern charmer

• For the author's family, a visit to **Charleston, South Carolina**, brings history—and appetites—to life.

By Graham Averill

FIRST THING you should know about Charleston: there are cannons everywhere. In the parks, downtown, on the waterfront ... and they're going to slow you down. You see a Civil War monument, your kids see a jungle gym. When you're traveling with 4-year-old twins, as we were, detours to climb cannons are unavoidable. But getting sidetracked is part of the charm of a visit to Charleston.

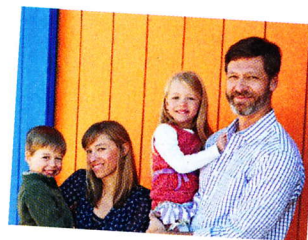
A harbor town best known for its history and its foodie culture, Charleston, especially its lively downtown, is packed with stunning architecture, monuments, and pocket parks. Some of the South's best chefs also call the city home. I can't think of anything my kids care less about than food and history, but the city somehow turns these nonstarters into exclamation points for Cooper and Addie. "Daddy, try this

mac-and-cheese!" "Mom, can we get inside that jet?!"

The aircraft in question is a TF-9J Cougar sitting inside the hangar bay of the USS *Yorktown*, a World War II-era carrier anchored across the harbor from the city (see "What to Do," page 76). Helicopters and airplanes dot the ship's flight deck, and you can descend belowdecks until you find yourself sitting in the captain's chair. And yes, on a recent trip, our kids got to crawl into the cockpit of the jet fighter (hello, Facebook photo).

After the *Yorktown*, we visited the South Carolina Aquarium, where we saw a rare albino alligator and discovered (when my daughter dared me to touch one of the baby reptiles) that gators aren't as slimy as they look. Stingrays, on the other hand, "feel like bubblegum" according to my son.

You won't find a roller coaster within 75 miles of the city, but beaches? Take your pick from those that edge the barrier islands separating downtown



meet
the
family

Writer Graham Averill and his family (from left, Cooper, wife Liz, and Addie) live in Asheville, North Carolina.



Colorful architecture along Rainbow Row. Below, surf's up at Folly Beach.

from the Atlantic. We like Folly Beach for its gentle surf and the laid-back atmosphere.

A typical evening stroll through downtown Charleston means eating cupcakes, more cannon hopping for our kids, and the ogling of the city's many churches for my wife and me. To us, Charleston's cathedrals can hold their own against those of most European towns. But the best way to delve into Charleston's past is through a pirate walking tour, where the history is as vibrant as a Saturday morning cartoon.

The town is full of paradoxes like this. Charleston is South Carolina's oldest city but also its most progressive. It's part edgy beach town, part southern belle preservation society, with history that hits kid-friendly

high notes (helicopters! scurvy!) and food that's adventurous but grounded in down-home roots. And of course, the cannons double as playgrounds.

what to do

Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum: "Museum" doesn't do Patriots Point justice. This harbor has a submarine, a gunship, and the massive USS *Yorktown* aircraft carrier, all lovingly restored and open for exploration. The 888-foot-long flight deck of the carrier, packed with helicopters and jets, is a highlight. Fun fact: in 1968 the ship recovered the Apollo 8 capsule, which you can see in the hangar bay. \$18 ages 12 and up, \$11 ages 6 to 11, free for kids 5 and under; patriotspoint.org

South Carolina Aquarium:

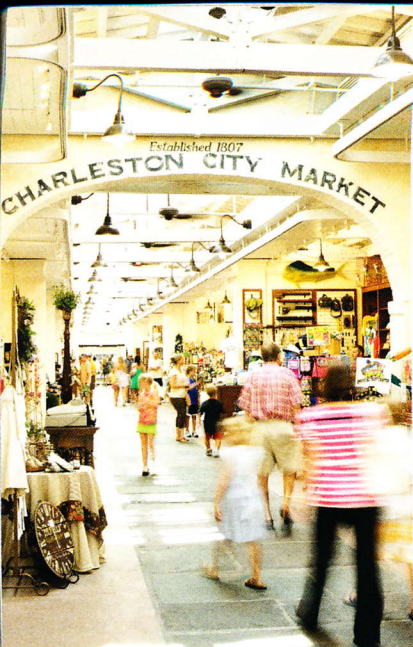
Charleston's aquarium may not be as massive as Atlanta's, for instance, but its offerings are totally worth the price of admission. In an hour, my kids saw a pile of lemurs snuggling in a tiny hammock, petted way too many reptiles, and watched divers clean the reef in the deep sea shark tank, a job that my son noted is "dangerous, dangerous, dangerous." \$24.95 adults, \$14.95 kids, free for kids 3 and under; scaquarium.org

Folly Beach: A handful of kitschy souvenir and surf shops line the main street of this funky beach town 20 minutes south of downtown Charleston. Grab a snack from the lobby of the Tides Folly Beach Hotel and walk 1,000 feet out into the Atlantic on the Folly Beach Fishing Pier. Charleston SUP Safaris will drop off rental stand-up paddleboards at the beach or guide your family on a two-hour tour of the island's inner channels to see bottlenose dolphins. Rentals: \$40 for a



WHERE TO STAY

Charleston hotels are pricey, but the newly renovated **Town & Country Inn and Suites**, just 10 minutes from downtown, has large suites with boutique amenities for half the cost. The kids thought our massive bathtub was their private swimming pool. (From \$109 a night; thetownandcountryinn.com; 843-571-1000) The **Embassy Suites Historic District**, located downtown in the historic Citadel building, is a worthy splurge. (From \$149 a night; historiccharleston.embassysuites.com; 843-723-6900) The beachfront **Tides Folly Beach Hotel** has a swimming pool and walk-out beach access. (From \$149 a night; tidesfollybeach.com; 843-588-6464)



half day; guided tours: \$45 adults, \$35 ages 14 and under; charlestonsupsafaris.com

Downtown Parks: White Point Gardens, a waterfront park with harbor views on Charleston's southern point, is lined with

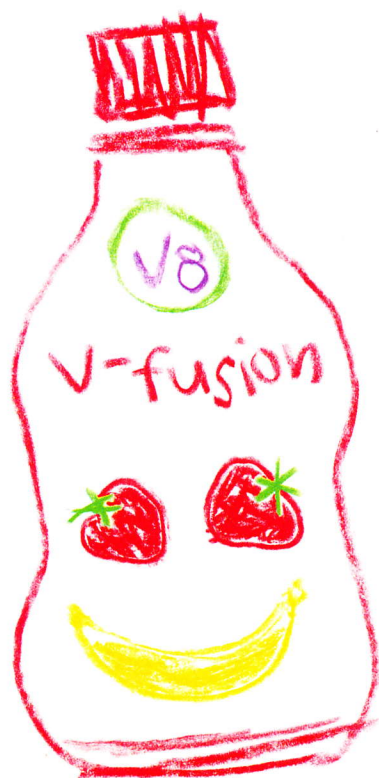


gorgeous live oaks. Several blocks north, the Waterfront Park has a pineapple-shaped splash fountain for younger kids to explore and family-size swings overlooking the water.

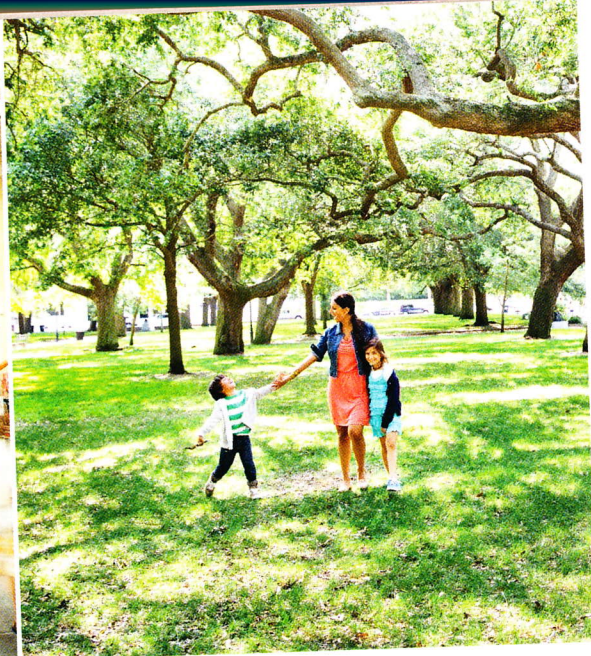
Under the oaks at White Point Gardens. Far left, inside the newly expanded Charleston City Market. Opposite page, snack time at Cupcake.

Historic Pirate Tour: Dressed like a character from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Eric Lavender and his parrot, Captain Bob, lead you through Charleston's French Quarter recounting the shenanigans of Anne Bonny and the infamous Blackbeard. My kids loved the parrot; older kids will love the sordid tales, such as how Blackbeard held the harbor hostage in 1718. \$19.50 adults; \$13 kids 4 to 12; charlestonpiratetour.com

Splash Zone Waterpark: Speaking of pirates, kids can lay siege to the Caribbean-themed playhouse in this small but well-



XUMMINESS



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* serving = ½ cu

planned water park. Tube slides, waterfalls, a lazy river, and a kiddie pool keep landlubbers of all ages entertained. *Open weekends in May, daily in summer until mid-August, then weekends until Labor Day; \$11.99 adults, \$8.99 kids under 48 inches; splashparks.com*

Water Taxi: The ferry that runs across the harbor between downtown and Patriots Point is more than just convenient transportation. On our 20-minute ride, the kids spotted a dozen dolphins. *All day pass, \$10; charlestonwatertaxi.com*

Getting Around: The free trolley makes downtown supremely walkable, even with younger children. Also consider splurging for a pedicab ride. *\$4.50 per person for 10 minutes; biketaxi.net*



WHERE TO EAT

Charleston's food scene isn't all about shrimp and grits. Sometimes it's about banana pudding, as it is at **Fiery Ron's Home Team BBQ**, in the West Ashley neighborhood, where kid-friendly BBQ Sliders (\$2.95) are paired with impeccable mac-and-cheese (\$1.85). The real delicacy here is that pudding, which for the very hungry can even be ordered by the pan (\$50). There's plenty of outdoor seating and a bean-bag toss to keep the kids happy (hometeambbq.com). Downtown, you'll find hand-breaded chicken fingers at **The Kickin' Chicken** (kickinchicken.com) and all-natural cupcakes at the aptly named **Cupcake** (freshcupcakes.com). And for the quintessential Charleston shrimp and grits (\$10.99) or chocolate chip and banana pancakes (\$6.99), head to **Page's Okra Grill** in nearby Mount Pleasant (pagesokragrill.com).



GOODNESS

Kids and moms love V8 V-Fusion® 100% juice for totally different reasons. Kids because the fruit makes it taste great. Moms because it has 1 full serving of fruits and 1 full serving of vegetables* with no sugar added. A family favorite for a reason. (Or two.)