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Travel The Big Trip

Soul-stirring music, moving history and lip-smacking food are with you all the way on this two-week road trip. It's the USA at its most atmospheric, says *Chris Haslam*



Downtown Charleston, South Carolina

It's beautiful but disconcerting; spooky yet welcoming; the apogee of good manners yet largely untamed. It's the Deep South, and this two-week road trip gets you deep under its skin and close to the bone. It's not one holiday, but three: a musical journey from the soulful chants of the Lowcountry to the syncopated beats of New Orleans; a gastronomic odyssey from soul food to Cajun cuisine; and an exploration of American history.

DAYS 1-3 CHARLESTON

British Airways' direct flight to Charleston lands at 9.25pm, so it'll be late by the time you've picked up the hire car and driven the 25 minutes downtown. Check in at the stylish Market Pavilion Hotel (doubles from £175, B&B; marketpavilion.com) or the more intimate Fulton Lane Inn, in the city historic heart (doubles from £166, B&B; fultonlaneinn.com).

They call this twee little town of art galleries and antiques shops the Holy City – a nickname earned because of its religious tolerance – but, like a dowager with a dark past, Charleston's origins are anything but righteous. An estimated 40% of all the slaves brought to America stepped ashore here, and that Southern charm sits uneasily alongside a shameful human-rights record. In January, work started on the long-overdue International African American Museum, at the exact spot on Gadsden's Wharf where the slaves came ashore. It's due to open next summer.

Across the harbour is Fort Sumter, where the Civil War kicked off in April 1861 (guided tours £18pp; fortsumtertours.com). A few blocks west is the extravagantly furnished Aiken-Rhett House museum, virtually untouched since the mid-19th century. The slave quarters are out at the back (£9; historiccharleston.org).

Slavery enriched America in other ways. African people brought with them the culture that created the rhythms underpinning almost all American music. It's called gullah, and the Grammy-winning Charleston quintet Ranky Tanky are its most famous exponents – check rankytanky.com for gigs. Otherwise, go dancing at the Commodore – the core of the Charleston music scene (thecommodorechs.com). Dine late, either posh at the Darling

Oyster Bar (mains from £16; thedarling.com) or soulful at Dave's Carry-Out (mains from £4; 42 Morris Street).

Start day three at the beach. The South Carolina shore is America's frayed cuff: shreds of ragged land torn by hundreds of rivers. You should come back and explore properly one day, but for now head out to surfy, bohemian Folly Beach, or the dune-backed wilds of Kiawah Island, to see how Charleston spends the weekend.

DAYS 3-5 SAVANNAH

If you leave the beach after lunch, you'll be in Savannah, a two-hour drive away, in time for cocktails. This is the dark heart of the Lowcountry: a city of hoodoo and fevers, and the home of Southern gothic literature. Hottest property here is the designer Drayton Hotel, near City Hall (doubles from £174; thedraytonhotel.com). For a more atmospheric experience, try the 17Hundred90 Inn, the oldest and reputedly most ghost-infested hostelry in Savannah (doubles from £141, B&B; 1790restaurant.com).

To comprehend Savannah's obsession with the supernatural, you need to visit the cemeteries. In Colonial Park, there's the mass grave of 666 victims of the 1820 yellow-fever epidemic. It's said that some of those interred here were only comatose, and that, years later, some of the coffins were found with scratch marks inside. On an after-dark tour of the Bonaventure cemetery – overhung with Spanish moss and foreboding – guide Shannon Scott tells ghost stories and explains why the dead are so important to Savannah's revered hoodoo root doctors, or healers (£35; shannonscott.com).

There's a different kind of magic in a half-day guided kayak trip to the coastal wilderness of Little Tybee Island, or a four-hour paddle through the blackwater swamp of Ebenezer Creek (from £50; savannahcanoeandkayak.com). It's much prettier than it sounds.

Savannah's fixation with the spirit world ensures that the drinking is good. Breakfast cocktails are a thing here: Millers All Day serves mimosas and a terrific frozen eggnog from 7am (from £5; millersallday.com). And the party continues after sunset at joints such as the Little Duck Diner – famous for its lavender bubble-bath bellini with a rubber duck on top (littleduckdiner.com)