

Historic Charleston Coastline Driving Tour

A GUIDE TO DRIVING ALONG SOUTH CAROLINA'S CENTRAL COASTLINE



The state's central coastline on and near US 17 is as steeped in history as a glass of sweet iced tea – quite literally. Among many other historical landmarks, America's only working tea plantation is located along the central shoreline.

Crossing over the Sampit River, the beautiful drive down 17 continues to Charleston and features several insider adventures. The stops start quickly, with the entrance to the can't-miss [Hampton Plantation State Historic Site](#) just down the road.

Hampton Plantation State Historic Site

Less than two miles from 17, the Hampton Plantation is a fascinating state historic site well worth a stop, and you might even find yourself staying several hours. Hampton Plantation provides a perfect introduction to the various plantations located along US 17.

Most evidence points to the original construction of the plantation's mansion at around 1750. It was originally a modest six-room farmhouse, but by the mid-1780s it had become a mansion with at least six more rooms. The huge portico was evidently added just before a visit by President George Washington in 1791.



Three prominent South Carolina families were linked with Hampton Plantation. Harriott Pinckney married Daniel Horry, the plantation's original owner, in 1768. Their daughter, Harriott Horry, would go on to marry Frederick Rutledge.

The descendents of the Rutledge-Horry union would go on to make Hampton Plantation one of the grandest homes and most prosperous pre-Civil War agricultural operations (mostly rice) in the nation.

The state carries on the legacy with interpretive programs both inside the mansion and on the grounds. It's free to enter the plantation, but a tour of the mansion – which has been left unfinished and includes cutaways of walls and ceilings – requires a small admission fee.

Yawkey Wildlife Heritage Preserve



Back on the eastern side of 17, the adventurous might want to look into planning a visit (in advance) over to the [Yawkey Wildlife Center Heritage Preserve](#). More than 30 square miles of undisturbed marshland, maritime forests, ocean beach and more await exploration. However, access to this South Carolina Department of Natural Resources land (it was generously donated by the late Tom Yawkey in 1976) is available only by guided tour call (803) 734-3886.

McClellanville

The charming little town of [McClellanville](#) is next and it's located just to the eastern side of 17. Highlights here might include: a meal featuring fresh local seafood and a laid-back atmosphere with lots of locals at the T.W. Graham & Co. Seafood Restaurant ; a visit to [The Village Museum](#); and shopping at a "A Creative Department Store" known as Sassafras.

Bulls Island Ferry & Cape Romain NWF

Back on 17, drivers may notice a couple of signs pointing to the [Bull Island Ferry](#) and [Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge](#). For those with time, this 30-minute, naturalist-hosted ferry ride provides a true insider's look at 62,000-acre Cape Romain Wildlife Refuge and the six-mile-long Bull Island.

Here, passengers disembark for birding, shelling and 16 miles of trails through a maritime forest and along deserted "Boneyard Beach," which features lots of driftwood. The cost to visit is currently \$30 for adults and \$15 for children 12 and under, but it's well worth it.

Sweetgrass Basket Makers Highway



When heading south, this is the part of 17 where one will start seeing sweetgrass basket-makers at work in rustic little stands along the road. The highway's official name along this stretch is "Sweetgrass Basket Makers Highway."

Depending on the time of year (and day), it's relatively easy to pull over to one of these stands, learn about the history and craft of sweet grass baskets, and purchase a unique souvenir that's likely taken many hours to produce.

This area is also the home of the [Sewee Visitor and Environmental Education Center](#). Located on the eastern side of 17 just south of McClellanville, this relatively new facility has lots of exhibits and is a great place to stop to learn about Cape Romain Wildlife Refuge, red wolves, and more.

There's also an easy one-mile nature trail along a pond, by the red wolf enclosure, and through the wooded area around the center. The Sewee (or possibly Seewee) were Native Americans in this area.

Just a few miles further south, an insider's dining experience awaits. Quite simply, [SeeWee Restaurant](#) welcomes locals and 17 travelers who slow down in time to enjoy "simply good food."

The food's great, but so is the atmosphere and the staff. Starting in the 1920s, it was originally a general store. The current owners purchased the store in the 1960s, and it stayed a general store until a tasty change in 1993 when it became a restaurant.

Many general store items remain, as does the old shelving, well-worn painted floors, tongue-and-groove paneling, and a red tin roof. Serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner, anytime is the right time to stop at SeeWee.

Breakfasts are hearty, while lunches and dinners feature standard southern favorites like she crab soup, fried green tomatoes, lots of local seafood, country fried steak, grilled ham and a selection of sides like butter beans, collards, sweet potato casserole, and more. Just make sure to save room for homemade desserts).

Boone Hall Farms

Back on the road to Charleston, look for a market called [Boone Hall Farms](#) on the left. Located on land originally known as Boone Hall Plantation from a 1681 grant, Boone Hall Farms opened in 2006 and specializes in South Carolina produce, meats and specialty products.

The building also houses Mount Pleasant Seafood, a local favorite from down on Shem Creek in Mount Pleasant to the south (see Shem Creek insider info below).

Fresh-picked fruits and vegetables, a butcher shop, specialty foods, wine, flowers and other gifts await those in-the-know, as does a “Snack Bar” featuring coffee, homemade ice cream, fudge, Jake’s Market Dogs and selections from Serena’s Kitchen like homemade pimento cheese or fresh salads.

Jack’s Cosmic Dogs



Another unique and tasty stop for hot dog lovers is just down the road on the left and is typically hard to miss thanks to the colorful building and all of the cars parked out front. [Jack’s Cosmic Dogs](#) was founded by Jack Hurley (“The Big Dog”) in 2000 and carries on the tradition of a roadside hot dog joint.

The menu features combos like Cosmic Dog (with blue cheese slaw and sweet potato mustard); Galactic Dog (chile, cheese, slaw, and spicy mustard), Earth Dog (plain with yellow mustard and ketchup, if desired), and Vegeriod (a tofu dog with mustard, ketchup, and onions). The eclectic atmosphere and tasty dogs quickly made this a US 17 Mecca.

Isle of Palms

The left-hand turn for the [Isle of Palms](#) is next. Taking this detour provides a great way to check out the coastal islands and beaches just outside Charleston, as well as historic Mount Pleasant and Shem Creek, before re-joining US 17 and the bridge over to the Charleston peninsula.

The Isle of Palms is about seven miles long and a mile wide. It’s a great place for a walk on the beach (lots of easy access points) and lots of outdoor activities on or near the water (check out the city-run marina). The Isle of Palms is also a great place to learn about efforts to make turtle nesting on South Carolina beaches as successful as possible. They even have an Island Turtle Team!



For the night, [Wild Dunes](#) is a popular full-service resort. [The Palms Hotel](#) is a smaller “beachy” option and provides great access to the islands many restaurants and activities.

Sullivan’s Island

[Sullivan’s Island](#) is next on the down drive to Mount Pleasant. Highlights here include more public beach access, Revolutionary War and Civil War–era Fort Moultrie, and a great dining and shopping scene along the island’s main drag, Middle Street. Here, gourmet burgers like the “Raven” and “Pit & Pendulum” are particularly popular at [Poe’s Tavern](#).

Mount Pleasant

Route 703 then leads to historic [Mount Pleasant](#). Though now a suburb of Charleston in many ways (with lots of chains for dining and shopping), Mount Pleasant still has many charms including several historic buildings and many restaurants.

The Historic Old Village features colonial and antebellum homes and churches, as well as the [Old Village Post House](#), which is part of Charleston’s Maverick Southern Kitchens restaurant group.

Shem Creek

Route 703 crosses right over Shem Creek, which is lined with restaurants specializing in local seafood straight off the shrimp and fishing boats docked at their back doors. Also located on the creek, [Coastal Expeditions](#) offers a variety of kayak trips and they even run the ferry trips out to Bull Island.



Arthur Ravenel Bridge



Back on 17, it’s a short drive over the sparkling Arthur Ravenel Bridge, which opened in 2005 and replaced the fabled 1929 and 1966 versions. At about 2 1/2 miles, it’s the longest cable–stayed bridge in North America.

For something truly unique, head to [Bike the Bridge Rentals](#) to rent a seven–speed comfort bike. There’s a popular 12–foot bike and pedestrian lane on the bridge. A ride across the bridge, as well as around historic Charleston, provides some of the best views in South Carolina.

US 17 runs right through the Charleston peninsula, where there’s likely more world–class history, culture, shopping and dining per square mile than any other city.

West Ashley

Upon leaving Charleston, 17 crosses the Ashley River and heads into an area known as West Ashley. This portion of the drive features a wide array of out–and–back detours to appeal to almost any interest. The first potential turn happens quickly with Route 30 and then Folly Road heading down to Folly Beach.

Along the way, look for the small sign for the [Charleston Cookie Company](#) on the right. Located in a nondescript warehouse, this tasty company has become locally and nationally famous for a wide variety of tasty cookies.

This isn't really a retail location, but those in-the-know know they can stop by to place an order or buy cookies. Just after 11 a.m. when many of the cookies are fresh and still warm out of the oven is the perfect time to buy. If founder and owner Judith Moore is there, ask her about her favorites. Baker Judy Papadimitriou is also a tasty resource for insider info on her latest creations.

James Island County Park

There's also a turn-off for [James Island County Park](#). Part of the Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission system, this peaceful 643-acre park has 10 vacation cottages that provide a unique place to stay in the heart of the Lowcountry and include great hiking and biking right in the park.



Once on Folly Beach proper (signs call it "The Edge of America"), local highlights have to include: a stop just across the Oak Island Creek at Crosby's Fish & Shrimp Company where one can buy fresh seafood and also rent kayaks next door; the long and wide [Edwin S. Taylor Folly Beach Fishing Pier](#), with great food and views at [Locklear's Beach City Grill](#); the short walk to view the historic [Morris Island Lighthouse](#); and maybe even a night or two at the marsh front [Water's Edge Inn](#).

Fat Hen Restaurant

Heading back up Folly Road, Maybank Highway (just before 17) leads toward Johns Island and one of the area's most unique dining experiences.

Paying tribute to the Huguenot culture of the Lowcountry, [Fat Hen](#) serves regional southern cuisine with some serious French flair—all in an eclectic farmhouse setting that matches the menu perfectly. Ask if owner/chef Fred Neville is there to get his take on what's best on the menu that particular day.

Rosebank Farms

Next, at Fenwick Crossroads, turn left toward Kiawah Island. Just before getting to the turn for Kiawah, look for [Rosebank Farms](#) on the right. This unique place is one of the last working family farms in the area and draws both locals and veteran visitors.

The purchase possibilities include: farm-fresh produce (including famed Johns Island tomatoes and South Carolina peaches, in season); local seafood; Rosebank Farms signature bottled and baked good; fresh flowers (often in stunning bouquets); and art (with three rustic galleries featuring local and international works).

Kids and kids at heart can't miss the barnyard, with Bab-ba-lu the Macaw, I-Declare the miniature Brahma cow, Bluebell the mule, Marsh Tacky the miniature horse, and many other animals.

In addition, the tiny Johns Island Museum is located in a former 1868 one-room schoolhouse, with artifacts ranging from 4,000-year-old Native American items to Civil War cannon balls and much more.

Kiawah Island

Kiawah Island is to the south and is a classic South Carolina beach getaway. Day visitors will want to head to [Kiawah Beachwalker Park](#), located before the main gate to Kiawah Island. It's a classic wide state beach that's ideal for its namesake activity—beach walking.

Those lucky enough to be near Kiawah Island on a Monday night from spring to fall will want to call for reservations at the weekly Lowcountry Oyster Roast & Barbecue at Mingo Point. Featuring roasted oysters, barbecue chicken and ribs, and lots of southern sides, this popular tradition also offers music, dancing and spectacular sunsets.

Angel Oak



Heading back up toward Fenwick Crossroads, look for the sign for the “[Angel Oak](#)” just before the intersection. Here, a dirt road leads to a sprawling live oak tree on the right that is about 1,500 years old.

The huge oak is 25 ½ feet in circumference and its spreading limbs supply shade of about 17,000 square feet. Though the draping limbs and resulting canopy provide an angel-like aura, the tree's name was taken from its previous owners—Martha and Justin Angel.

Charleston Tea Plantation

Turning right out of the parking lot (in the opposite direction), continue on the dirt road and then take a right back on Maybank Highway. A pretty drive leads to Charleston Tea Plantation and it's well worth the out-and-back trek.

As America's only tea garden, [Charleston Tea Plantation](#) is truly a special place on Wadmalaw Island. A visit can include an informative factory tour, a trolley ride through the vast plantation, and shopping in the expansive gift shop for a variety of teas, tea-related items, and other possibilities.



Irvin House Vineyards



Back up Maybank Road for a few miles, look for the left-hand turn on Liberia Road. Then, turn left on Bears Bluff Road for the pretty drive out to [Irvin House Vineyards](#). With vineyards nestled below beautiful live oaks and Spanish moss, this 48-acre winery offers tastings for a small fee (call for hours), as well as Saturday tours often led by founder Jim Irvin. It's a great spot for a picnic as well.

Though they can't offer samples, Irvin has partnered with Scott Newiss of Coastal Wine to produce [FireFly Vodka](#) and other related distilled spirits. The Sweet Tea

Vodka and Muscadine Vodka have been huge local hits. Their spirits and Irvin House wines can be found in many local and state stores and restaurants.

Back at Fenwick Crossroads, a left-hand turn leads out to US 17 and the drive down to Hilton Head Island. Further insider adventures await before reaching the state line.