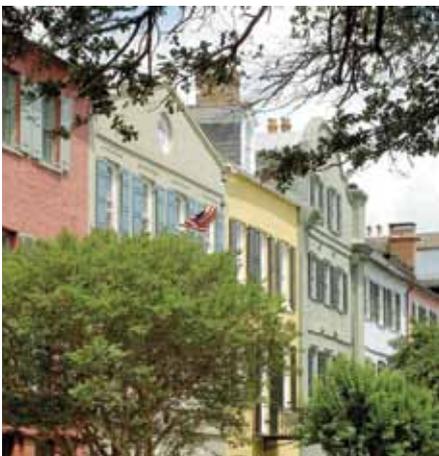




A Christmas tree at the John Rutledge House Inn. Opposite page (clockwise from top left): the Nathaniel Russell House; Marion Square; houses line the streets.



Southern Bells



THE HOLIDAYS IN CHARLESTON OFFER SOUTHERN-STYLE CHARM AND RICH HISTORY.

BY ROBERT RAGAINI

The magnificent homes in Charleston's Historic District are beautiful any time of year, but Christmas is a gift that keeps giving, with homes on the streets perched like gaily decorated packages for all to enjoy.

Marion Square, a small park on the edge of the Historic District, draws visitors to listen to gospel, folk and classical music, choirs and storytellers, as well as visit with Santa and Mrs. Claus. At night, revelers bask in the glow of the magical web of Christmas lights strung on a hollow, 60-foot-high metal tree.

A short walk from the square,

two museums have been dressed in their Charleston holiday best. In rice merchant Nathaniel Russell's Federal townhouse, beautifully restored carved mantels and expensive furnishings attest to a very comfortable way of living.

The second Historic Charleston house museum, the Aiken-Rhett House, has the unsettling distinction of possessing some of the best-preserved slave quarters in the South. Governor William Aiken Jr. owned more than 700 slaves at his plantation, while a dozen maintained his mansion in town.



Clockwise from far left: Charleston is referred to as "The City of Churches"; Middleton Place on the Ashley River; travel by horse-drawn carriage for the Christmas Progressive Dinner.



Another marvelously restored must on the magical history tour is the unique Dock Street Theater, where a kid-friendly version of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* graces the stage in December.

Farther afield is Middleton Place, a vast plantation whose original appearance has been meticulously maintained, and today includes a house museum, inn and restaurant. Holiday diners are treated to a traditional Southern-style dinner, with shrimp and grits, collard greens and pecan pie. And don't miss the extensive gardens, dating to 1741, the restored and active work areas, and the grassy plateaus leading to stunning terraces on the Ashley River. An evening tour by torchlight is a unique way of conjuring the Christmas spirit.

After seeing fully furnished mansions and plantations, the eerie emptiness of Drayton Hall comes as a shock. But knowledgeable tour guides bring to life a working plantation, placing it in a time without electricity, air conditioning, plumbing or bathrooms.

Preservation is not a word commonly associated with Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman, yet he left Charleston relatively unscathed, and there is a fabulous concentration of antebellum buildings, many of which are now lovely inns.

The Wentworth Mansion tops many award lists, including *Condé Nast Traveler's Gold*. In 1886, cotton king owner Francis Silas Rodgers added Tiffany windows, marble fireplaces, crystal chandeliers and

other evidence of wealth. In modern times, the spa, whirlpool baths, king-size beds and a giant Grand Mansion Suite have been added. Then and now, drinks are proffered each afternoon in the Rodgers Library.

John Rutledge, a signer of the U.S. Constitution, owned the house dating to 1763 that today is an inn bearing his name, with 19 guest rooms in the original residence and in two carriage houses. Also on *Condé Nast Traveler's Gold* list, the spacious accommodations contain antiques, fireplaces and canopied beds. Equally special is the lavish breakfast brought to your room and liqueurs in the late afternoon along with tasty tidbits.

A Christmas tradition, Charming Inns' Progressive Dinner transports guests by horse-drawn carriage to three lovely properties. It begins at the Kings Courtyard Inn with brandy apple cider or "moonshine-infused eggnog," followed by a variety of hors d'oeuvres. Dinner is at the Wentworth Mansion's famous Circa 1886 restaurant. Among dishes one might find on the menu are butterbean soup, sundried peaches, grilled swordfish with vermicelli noodles, and grass-fed beef tenderloin with white cheddar grits. The horses clip-clop last to coffee and dessert at the John Rutledge House Inn, where



Drayton Hall is festively dressed for the holidays, and represents a true Southern scene, where guests can stand on the portico and look out at the expansive lawns and gardens.



the Christmas tree, roaring fireplace and easygoing ambience enhance one's appreciation for the maple bourbon pecan pie.

Another option is the special Christmas Eve dinner served at Charleston Place. Guests walk to the Charleston Grill past a sweeping double staircase wrapped with swaths of vanilla-scented sweet grass and a display of antique toy trains chugging under snow-capped mountains. Later, near midnight, following the Christmas Eve service at St. Philip's Church, the congregation steps into the coal-black night, where twinkling lights peek out of Victorian windows.

On Christmas Day, Charleston Grill Executive Chef Michelle Weaver replaces her customary menu with a sumptuous Christmas feast. As usual, music in the elegant dining room is supplied by Quentin Baxtor's fine jazz trio, although he might be sporting a jaunty red Santa cap over his dreadlocks. A dinner of crab cakes, lamb chops and hazelnut gingerbread cake enjoyed to the sounds of soothing music provides the perfect wrapping to a Southern Christmas. ♦

Clockwise from top left: The Dock Street Theatre puts on an annual production of *A Christmas Carol* (inset); the model trains chug away at the Charleston Grill; for the Progressive Dinner, dessert is served at the John Rutledge House Inn.

