

DESTINATION: CHARLOTTE

Welcome to the Queen City

Drive into adventure with these must-see, must-do and must-eat places in Charlotte, North Carolina, which are filled with southern hospitality, style and fun.

BY MELISSA L. KAUFFMAN

CHARLOTTESGOTALOT.COM/RYO H. NAM PHOTOGRAPHY

These days, you'll spot Charlotte, North Carolina, on all the top 10 lists of best places to live or retire due to its quality of life, affordability and great job market. However, the city also should be on all RVers must-travel-to list. No matter your age or hobby, America's 16th largest city has something for you.

History buffs, like my husband and me, love that Charlotte takes its name and nickname, the Queen City, from King George III's queen consort, Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (romance fans may recognize this name from Netflix's "Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story"). The city's county — Mecklenburg — also follows suit.

You'll find two statues of Queen Charlotte in her city. A bronze, life-sized sculpture named Queen Charlotte Walks in Her Garden is located at the entrance of the World Trade Center on North College Street. The second statue, which stands 15 feet tall and weighs 2.5 tons, lived just outside the Charlotte Douglas Airport. It has since been removed for cleaning during the airport's current expansion. When the upgrade is completed, the statue will be in the newly expanded terminal lobby.

One of the first things I learned is that the heart of Charlotte is called Uptown, not downtown. The area's main street, Tryon, slants upward to Independence Square where it intersects at the top with Trade Street. Built on this hill, Charlotte stands higher than its surrounding neighborhoods, thus the name Uptown.

Longtime residents repeatedly tell newcomers that Charlotte sits in the perfect location because it is within a half day's drive to the mountains, lakes and ocean. No matter the direction you're coming from, you'll find Charlotte easy to get to. It's located close to the South Carolina border (about 30 minutes), a two hours' drive south of Virginia and a three hours' drive east of Tennessee. Of course, you don't need to leave Charlotte to have plenty to do.

I recommend visiting Charlotte any time of the year, except for July and August because of the heat and humidity. The weather is nice the rest of the time, and Charlotte rarely gets snow.

Here's my list of the coolest things to do and see in the Queen City.



Try your hand at whitewater rafting at the U.S. National Whitewater Center.

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WORLD-CLASS RAFTING

Don't pass through Charlotte without stopping at the **U.S. National Whitewater Center**, which ranks as my favorite place to take visitors. It sprawls across 1,300 acres by the Catawba River right outside of Charlotte. There are more than 30 different outdoor activities, including whitewater rafting, kayaking, ziplines, hiking, climbing, ropes courses and biking.

It's best known for whitewater rafting on the world's largest manmade whitewater river. If you've never been white-water rafting but would love to learn how, this is a great introductory experience with professional guides. I've taken my sister and nieces and nephews here for their first try, and we all competed to see who could stay in the raft the entire time (my husband won).

Charlotte residents typically get a yearly pass, but visitors can get an adult or youth all-day, all-activity pass or just a single-activity pass. Musical entertainment, fun food, paddle and trail runs happen throughout the summer. During winter, the Whitewater Center

lights up a special trail in the woods, depicting the history of the center, plus hosts ice skating and hockey on the Upper Pond.

5000 Whitewater Center Parkway; 704-391-3900; center.whitewater.org. Day passes are \$75 for adults, \$65 for youth. Activities are subject to change depending on season and weather.

A GARDEN FOR NATURE LOVERS

If you love gardens and gardening, don't miss this "garden for all seasons." The **Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden** covers 30 acres of specially created gardens. It's fun to follow the 3.2 miles of walking trails and come upon fountains, statues, and annuals and perennials. The gardens are themed and have names like the Children's Garden, the Scroll Garden, the White Garden and the Four Seasons Garden. Love tropical plants and orchids? Enjoy the special habitat created for them. My favorite is the Butterfly Bungalow, where you can spend a lovely afternoon among these winged insects.

The garden hosts a variety of events and classes throughout the year like Summer

FRANKIE LOPEZ/JUNSPASH



GETTING AROUND CHARLOTTE

Enjoy Charlotte without driving the RV all through the city. Charlotte expanded its **Lynx Blue Line** (pictured above) light rail system, which provides an easy way to get to, through and from the city. It now has 26 stations (with more coming), ranging from South Charlotte's I-485/South Boulevard Station to UNC Charlotte's Main Campus. It's clean and easy to ride. Just download the CATS-PASS mobile app from the Apple Store or Google Play to buy your tickets.

If you prefer walking through the great outdoors, then step out on the **Mecklenburg County Greenway System**, which is one of the most amazing things about Charlotte. There are 62 miles of developed greenway trails (with more coming). These dog-friendly walking trails take you through wildlife habitats all over the county. You can also bike the trails and there are dog poop bag stations and human bathrooms at specific locations. Check out the trails at parkandrec.meckncgov/places-to-visit/greenways.



JILL LANG/ADOBE STOCK

Enjoy Charlotte's scenic routes as you make your way to an RV park like Carowinds Camp Wilderness Resort.

Lights, Garden Night Group Hike, and Run and Sip and Paint. For those who like shopping, don't miss The Garden Store. It's practically a garden in itself with garden art, décor, books, jewelry, soaps and lotions, honey and other treats.

The garden does not have a restaurant but you can buy snacks at the gift shop. If you want to eat out, try Nellie's Southern Kitchen (nelliessouthernkitchen.com) in Belmont. It's owned by the parents of the Jonas Brothers, and the musical trio have been known to stop by on occasion.



MELISSA KAUFMAN

6500 South New Hope Road, Belmont (about a 20-minute drive east of Charlotte); 704-825-4490; dsbg.org. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors, \$8 for children, free for 2 and under. Open Wednesday through Sunday, closed on major holidays.

A SPORTS' FAN PARADISE

My husband has a passion for sports and he fits right in with the residents of Charlotte who love their sports teams. Note that all the Uptown stadiums and museums are accessible by light rail (see sidebar), so leave your RV at the RV park and don't worry about parking.

PET-FRIENDLY PLACES RV PARKS

The **Charlotte/Fort Mill KOA Journey** is a simple and clean urban campground, conveniently located next to a Publix grocery store. Just a quick drive to Carowinds theme park and located right off the I-77, it's only 20 minutes from Uptown. Like most KOAs, it has the amenities RVers enjoy, such as Wi-Fi, a pool, picnic pavilion and mini golf site. Plus, there is pet playground. Check in is at 3 p.m. (940 Gold Hill Road, Fort Mill, SC; 803-547-5416; koa.com/campgrounds/charlotte)

If you love to explore our nation's state and national parks, drive over the border to South Carolina to stay at the **Andrew Jackson State Park**, less than 45 minutes from Uptown. We love parking our RV here as it combines history and outdoor activities. There's a lake at this park, and some of the RV spots are lakeside. Learn about President Jackson's boyhood at the museum in the park and check out an 18-century replica schoolhouse along with camping, hiking and fishing. Get your reservation in early as the park has only five paved RV sites and 20 gravel sites. (196 Andrew Jackson Park RD, Lancaster, SC; 803-285-3344; southcarolinaparks.com/andrew-jackson)

The **Carowinds Camp Wilderness Resort** sits right next door to Carowinds. This 55-acre campground packs in plenty of RV sites and offers its own pool and store. Walk right over to Carowinds or hop on the I-77 and get to Uptown Charlotte in 20 minutes. (14609 Carowinds Blvd.; 704-588-2600, option 4; carowinds.com/resorts/camp-wilderness)



ZAC GUDAKOV/UNSPASH

Kicking off with football, the **Carolina Panthers** call the beautiful Bank of America Stadium (800 S. Mint St.) home. We've found there's not a bad seat in this house. Pose in front of any of the impressive six crouching, snarling giant panther statues — named the Indomitable Spirit — guarding the stadium gates. Trust me, they make great Instagram pictures. Ticket pricing varies with \$109 being the average for non-premium seats. Information on the stadium and the Charlotte Panther's game schedule can be found at panthers.com.

Here in Charlotte, we love our soccer. The Queen City recently entered the major leagues with its **Charlotte FC** (football club), founded in 2019. The team competes in the Eastern Conference and plays at the Bank of America stadium, too. Ticket prices vary, although I've seen them for as low as \$15. Get more information at charlottefootballclub.com.

More into hoops? Charlotte slam dunks that sport, too, with the **Charlotte Hornets**,

a member of the NBA's Eastern Conference. We've taken our basketball-loving family members to a Hornet's home game at the Spectrum Center (333 East Trade St.) in Uptown. Ticket prices vary, with an average price of \$46. Find the game schedule and tickets at spectrumcentercharlotte.com.

If you have a passion for cars, get up to speed on the history of NASCAR at Charlotte's **NASCAR Hall of Fame** museum (400 East Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.) in Uptown. You'll find hands-on interactive exhibits along with a state-of-the-art theater, NASCAR Hall of Fame Gear Shop and a NASCAR Productions-operated broadcast studio. Tickets start at \$36. Hours and info at nascarhall.com.

CELEBRATE "AMERICA'S PASTOR"

Evangelical and history lovers have made the 40,000-square-foot **Billy Graham Library**, which shares the mission of "America's Pastor," one of the top visitor spots in Charlotte. You'll find multimedia presentations

The Carolina Panthers and Charlotte FC play at Bank of America Stadium in Uptown Charlotte.



BERNARD GOTTFRYD/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Billy Graham was known for his indoor and outdoor rallies and crusades that were often broadcast on radio and television. It's estimated that he reached billions of people.

and a variety of exhibits organized around these four themes: The Man, The Message, The Ministry and The Mission. The tour only takes about 90 minutes to complete.

My friends and I particularly liked learning about how Graham provided spiritual counsel to many world figures, including 12 U.S. presidents. You can also see Graham's beautifully restored childhood home, which is part of the library complex. I recommend visiting during the holidays when the library celebrates with a beautiful tree, music and an actual live nativity.

4330 Westmont Drive; billygrahamlibrary.org. Admission and parking are free. There is RV parking! The library is closed on Sundays and holidays.

CARRIED AWAY AT CAROWINDS

Another favorite for any visiting family to Charlotte is **Carowinds** amusement park, which is located about 20 minutes south of Charlotte. Although known for its spectacular roller coasters — fan favorite is the steel coaster called Fury 325 — it offers more than 60 different rides, including Camp Snoopy's attractions for young children.

During the hot summer months, visitors can jump into the **Carolina Harbor**, the largest water park in the Carolinas with wave

pools, cabanas and extreme water slides, which is included as part of the daily ticket. Carowinds and Carolina Harbor stay open all summer from June to August, then expand to select days year-round.

If Halloween is your favorite holiday, say yes to "SCarowinds," which takes place on select nights from September through the end of October. What better way to be spooked than being chased by zombies and vampires, finding your way through haunted mazes and scary zones, enjoying not-so-alive entertainment and, of course, braving spooktacular rides all under the cover of darkness?

If you have young children, they'll enjoy the Great Pumpkin Fest, which takes place Saturday and Sunday from September through October, and offers family-friendly fun with a bit of boo!

On select nights from November to January 1, the holidays descend on Carowinds with magical lights displays, ice skating, seasonal entertainment, gift shops and select attractions.

14523 Carowinds Blvd.; 704-588-2600; carowinds.com. Ticket prices vary by event. Summer daily tickets start around \$45.

A WORLD OF DISCOVERY

If children are along for the ride on this trip, satisfy their curiosity at Charlotte's



ALEX WARE/UNSPASH

science museum — **Discovery Place Science**. Wander through three floors of featured and permanent exhibits, guaranteed to keep you entertained. I recently spent several hours with my niece, nephew and husband playing tug of war, laying on a bed of nails, and viewing a tropical jungle, fantastic frogs and amazing aquarium displays. We also checked out the recent featured exhibit, "MARVEL: Universe of Super Heroes."

Looking for something interactive? The museum puts on live shows and labs, too. Top it off with the 79-foot screen and 12,000 watts of sound at the Accenture IMAX Dome Theatre, where you can see some of today's latest top movies, as well as thought-provoking films like "Serengeti: Journey to the Heart of Africa" and "Antarctica."

301 N. Tryon St.; 704-372-6661; discoveryplace.org. Tickets are \$28 for adults, \$23 for children and free for kids under 2. The featured exhibit and Accenture IMAX Dome Theatre have separate hours and ticket prices. 🚗

Melissa L. Kauffman is the former editor of *Dogster* and *Catster* magazines. For the past 10-plus years, Melissa and her husband have vacationed in their RV, traveling around the country with their dogs and parrots. They live in Charlotte and has future plans to RV to North Dakota and Vermont. 🚐

GOOD EATS!

One of the best things about visiting a new place is trying the local food and making some amazing food-eating memories. Bring your taste buds and try these four restaurants that I love and my visitors enjoy too.

BEST CAFÉ: Amélie's French Bakery and Café — Pastries, specialty coffee and tea, soups, sandwiches and desserts — all of this wrapped up in a café full of whimsy. You'll love the décor — art, sculptures, funky mismatched seating — and will be snapping away with your phone as you enjoy a café mocha and pastry. I love the croissants, Amelie's Signature Chicken Salad Sandwich and the matcha latte. There are four locations in and around Charlotte and one just over the border in Rock Hill, South Carolina, all with their own personal touch. (flagship restaurant located at 136 E. 36th St.; ameliesfrenchbakery.com)

BEST BARBECUE: Midwood Smokehouse — This local Carolina

chain consistently makes it on the "Best of Charlotte" lists voted on by locals. My husband and I dine here every Sunday like clockwork. We recommend the Fixin' to Chicken pulled-barbecue chicken salad topped with chipotle ranch dressing, the Prime Beef Brisket or Burnt Ends (caramelized bits of brisket tossed in cola barbecue sauce). For dessert, you can't go wrong with the Nutty Pecan Cobbler and Vanilla Bean Ice Cream. The restaurants are easy to find with six different locations — three in Charlotte. (midwoodsmokehouse.com)

BEST BREWERY: Olde Mecklenburg Brewery — If you have the dogs along (or even if you don't), you'll love Charlotte's oldest brewery in a city that's known for its breweries. It's home to the largest beirgarten, or beer garden, in the Southeast, where you can take your leashed dogs, sit at a picnic table, get a delicious sausage (we like the bratwurst) and sample a variety of the OMB core or seasonal beers. I love the OMB Copper so much that it has soured me on all other beers. There is an inside restaurant along with the outside beirgarten for those who prefer nice, cool air-conditioning. (4150 Yancey Road; ombbeer.com)

BEST SOUTHERN COOKING: Mert's Heart & Soul Restaurant — One of Charlotte's favorite restaurants, this family-owned eating spot has been around since 1998. The menu lures you in with Low Country and Gullah-inspired food. Mert's Famous Salmon Cakes is one of the favorites on the menu, but I also recommend the fried green tomatoes, cornbread, fried catfish and the mac and cheese. (214 North College St.; mertscharlotte.com; closed on Sundays)



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