

This week's dream: South Carolina's old-fashioned charm

One of the smallest and least-known US states, South Carolina has a "gentle" beauty and "unassuming" charm, says Chris Leadbeater in National Geographic Traveller. Founded as the lower half of the colony of Carolina in 1663, it has some of the US's loveliest antebellum architecture, concentrated in the graceful old port of Charleston. Most tourists stick to the coast, with its pristine marshlands and palm-lined beaches, but there's much to see inland too, including sleepy old towns, eerie blackwater swamps and the glorious Blue Ridge Mountains.

This is the Deep South, and it often feels a world away from big-city America – deeply traditional, and "staunch" in religion. Billboards luring sinners into churches clutter its suburban highways, and in the capital, Columbia, the Confederate battle flag still flies outside the State House, where it was deployed in protest against school desegregation in 1962. But Columbia is surprisingly "cosmopolitan and multicultural" for



Myrtle Beach: a charmingly "faded" 1930s resort

such a small city (population 130,000), and it has some "fascinating" sights: its Museum of Art displays works by Botticelli and Monet alongside Richard Samuel Roberts's 1920s photography of local African American life.

The 1930s seaside resort of Myrtle Beach has plenty of tacky shops and arcades, but is charmingly "faded and old-fashioned" too – and the wild backwaters around it are great for kayaking (guides might even fish out banded water snakes for you to examine). Still, the state's most spectacular landscapes lie far inland, where the Blue Ridge Mountains rise to meet the Appalachians. The Chattooga River here featured in John Boorman's

1972 thriller *Deliverance*. You won't run into murderous "hillbillies" today – but the "quiet beauty" of the scenery is unchanged, and the white-water rafting is as exhilarating as ever. *America As You Like It* (www.americaasyoulikeit.com) has a 12-night trip from £1,045pp, incl. flights and accommodation.

Hotel of the week



The Drunken Duck, Ambleside, Cumbria

A 300-year-old inn set in 60 acres of private land above Lake Windermere, The Drunken Duck is one of the Lake District's most popular pubs – and deservedly so, says Condé Nast Traveller. Its situation is pretty, it produces great beer in its on-site microbrewery, and its food is "outstanding" (especially the signature drunken duck, cherry-glazed and served with braised red cabbage and roast potatoes). Bedrooms are spread between the inn and an outbuilding; the best is the Garden Room, which has French windows opening onto a balcony overlooking the valley.

Doubles from £105 b&b. 01539-436437, www.drunkenduckinn.co.uk

Getting the flavour of...

A secret Greek island

It has been attracting attention from the rich and famous lately, but the lush and beautiful Greek island of Meganisi is still "firmly off the tourist radar", says Caroline Phillips in The Times. Part of the Ionian archipelago, just off the country's west coast, it feels lost in time, with patchy mobile reception and a population of just 1,200, none of whom locks their house or car. The Hotel Meganisi offers excellent cooking lessons, and there's a nightclub on neighbouring Nidri, to which there are regular ferries. But the true joy here is to do nothing but sunbathe, or bounce around "hidden bays" in a speedboat, or to swim with dolphins and picnic on the shore. *Ionian Holidays* (020-8459 0777, www.ionianislandholidays.com) has a seven-night trip incl. flights and car hire from £566pp.

An exquisite Cuban sugar town

Trinidad is Cuba's prettiest town, and one of the New World's oldest – a peaceful and perfectly preserved colonial gem, says Brendan Sainsbury in The Independent on Sunday. Its cobbled streets are largely car-free (horse-drawn carriages are a common sight), and the "handsome" 19th century sugar-merchants' mansions that line them have been meticulously restored in the past few decades. Since the country's recent economic reforms, many new private guest houses and some excellent restaurants have opened in

them, and even the old government-run hotels are improving. There are several fine museums in the town, and other attractions nearby: the Escambray Mountains are great for riding, and there is a dazzling beach at Ancón, 12km away. *Scott Dunn* (020-8682 5030, www.scottdunn.com) has a seven-night Cuba trip from £1,965pp, incl. flights.

A great Australian resort

A hippie Queensland surf haven that's now reached a "classy maturity", Noosa is like "a montage of Australia's greatest hits", with fantastic beaches, food and wine, and glorious wilderness all around, says Tom Fordyce in The Sunday Times. Situated 90 minutes' drive from Brisbane, the town retains a wonderfully laid-back atmosphere despite the sophistication of its new restaurants and boutiques. Its seafront is alive with swimmers, surfers and t'ai chi classes from dawn to dusk; and even complete novices can take part in the races held every Wednesday by its yacht and rowing club. For those seeking an escape, the forests and "surf-smashed coastline" of Noosa National Park are an easy walk away, while to the north lie the only everglades outside Florida, a "watery forest of peeling paperbarks" best explored by canoe. *Travelbag* (0845-543 6615, www.travelbag.co.uk) has a seven-night trip from £1,399pp, incl. flights and car hire.

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

Chill-out Chicago

Enjoy fabulous cocktails and famous steaks at The James Chicago during a 3-night stay at prices from £860pp (2 sharing) room only, incl. flights. 0844-557 3859, www.virginholidays.co.uk.

Cumbria's Langdale Valley

Dulcanter Fold, a 1-bed, pet-friendly cottage at Chapel Stile, offers a perfect base for a walking couple. A week's discounted stay from 1 March costs £349. 01228-599960, www.cumbrian-cottages.co.uk.

Rabat short break

Spend 4 nights at Riad El Maâti in Morocco's capital – a city rich with history dating back to the Romans – at prices from £350pp b&cb, incl. flights. 020-7112 0019, www.fleewinter.com.

5-star Lisbon

Three nights at the Real Palácio, located close to the Estoril coast, cost from £159pp incl. flights. 0800-088 7018 (quote: Ref DLH-PRFEB7-LIS), www.directline-holidays.co.uk. Feb-Apr dates.