

What to See While Visiting the “Best Small Town in the South”

Aiken, South Carolina, a relatively undiscovered gem, was recently found by *Southern Living* magazine, who proclaimed it “Best Small Town in the South.” What *Southern Living* learned was what natives and winter visitors alike have known for the past one hundred years.

There was a time when Aiken, South Carolina was called the “Newport of the South,” and “Queen of Cities.” It was a time when a new visitor would be taken aback to see an Astor, a Vanderbilt, a Hitchcock, a Whitney, or celebrities such as Bing Crosby, Paul Newman, Fred Astaire, and Andy Williams walking the downtown streets, or riding to the hounds in Hitchcock Woods, the largest urban forest in the country.

The rich and famous who came to Aiken by private railcar each winter, escaping the harsh northern winters, brought their thoroughbreds, polo ponies, hunting hounds, and a love for certain outdoor sports preferred by genteel society. They built mansions they called “cottages,” held balls, musicales, high tea, and set in motion traditions that continue to resonate in Aiken to this very day.

For three successive weekends in March, today’s visitor can experience Aiken’s Triple Crown, which kicks off at the Aiken Training Track with “The Trials,” (www.aikentrainingtrack.com) designed to introduce untested two-year old thoroughbreds to racing. The second leg of the crown is the “Aiken Steeplechase” (www.aikensteeplechase.com) which attracts some of the most accomplished riders and jumpers in the southeast. Held at Bruce’s Field, and as much a social event as an equestrian contest, it is attended by ladies in their finery and bow tied gentlemen, there to see and be seen. Closing out this three-week tradition at Powder House Polo

Field, is “Pacers & Polo,” (<https://www.usca.edu/pacersandpolo>) where tailgaters line the field while competing polo teams vie for trophy and bragging rights for the coming year.

For polo enthusiasts and novices alike, Aiken’s polo tradition is on full display every Sunday afternoon from April through mid-June at historic Whitney field. Sponsored by the Aiken Polo Club (www.aikenpolo.org/spring-2018), matches take place on the same field where Tommy Hitchcock, Jr. and other giants of the game have played since 1882.

To capture the essence of Aiken’s southern charm and unique history, Aiken’s Trolley Tour includes interesting descriptions of historic homes and churches. As the trolley wends its way under the live oak canopy of South Boundary, and the unpaved equestrian district peppered with majestic mansions from a time gone by, visitors learn about a fascinating time when gilded age millionaires and robber barons dominated the scene during winter months. Included in the tour is a guided walk through Hopelands Gardens, a fourteen-acre peaceful haven of landscaped trails, dotted by hundred-year-old live oaks, deodar cedars, various plant species, fountains, a labyrinth, and a reflection pool.

Located within the Gardens is the Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame & Museum which honors the racing accomplishments of some forty celebrated flat racers and steeplechase thoroughbreds that have trained in Aiken. The museum’s exhibits include memorabilia, photos and trophies. And on Monday evenings, during spring and summer months, the Gardens’ Roland Windham Stage becomes the scene of the very popular, free “Concerts in the Park.”

Trolley Tours are conducted every Saturday at 10 am (weather permitting) and leave from the Aiken Visitors Center and Train Museum (<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/aiktrolley-tour-tickets>).

To be fully immersed in the Aiken experience, The venerable Willcox Inn (www.thewillcox.com), voted #2 “Best in the World “ by *Travel + Leisure* 2017, and #2 “Best Hotel in the South” by *Southern Living* 2018, welcomes the overnight guest to relax with locals in its English club-style lobby bar, and its gourmet dining experience is one of the best in the city. The Willcox has hosted many members of the rich and famous set since its founding in 1898, and guests may choose to reserve the Churchill or Roosevelt suites, so named for two of its most famous guests.

A visit to Aiken would not be complete without a downtown stroll on Laurens Street. Its eclectic restaurants, and quaint specialty shops ranging from equine fashion to antique and art galleries line the way along with Aiken’s own microbrewery. Turn onto “The Alley,” a pedestrian only walkway, where an assortment of casual restaurants with outdoor seating can be found. Also located downtown, and for those who enjoy the cultural scene, the Aiken Community Playhouse (www.aikencommunityplayhouse.com) produces an April through August season of comedy, drama, and mystery. During the fall and winter months the Aiken Symphony Orchestra (www.aikensymphonyorchestra.com), performs at the University of South Carolina Aiken’s Etherredge Center. These represent only two of a myriad of activities offered throughout the city (www.visitaikensc.com/calendar/all) throughout the year.

Yes, there is no wonder why, at least to those who have already discovered Aiken, *Southern Living* magazine now calls Aiken “The Best Small Town in the South.” Many who have come have returned, and there are those who have come and never left.