

Travel

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Hardly trifling
The Charlotte skyline from Marshall Park; (below) a NASCAR racer

The Fast and the pure-ious

Charlotte, the de facto capital of the Carolinas, is known for its barbecue, NASCAR and, as Rob McGovern discovers, the world's most famous evangelical Christian

Called a 'trifling place' (along with nearby Greenville) by George Washington when he visited back in 1791, Charlotte has transformed into a modern metropolis that is well worth a visit.

The Carolinas (North and South) are known for, among other things, barbecue. Southern barbecue conjures images of tin-roofed shacks with hand-painted signs and stainless steel chimneys pumping out perfumed smoke in a rural setting. Kathleen Purvis, the food editor at the *Charlotte Observer*, confirms that at least part of that Hollywood-inspired vision was right – in North Carolina, barbecue is a rural art. Places that come with recommendations but not necessarily tin roofs are Bridges Barbecue Lodge in Shelby (45 minutes from Charlotte, 2000 E Dixon Blvd, Shelby, +1 704 482 8567; bridgesbbq.com), Lexington Barbecue No. 1 in Lexington (75 minutes away, 10 Highway 29-70

South, Lexington; +1 336 249 9814), or the Skylight Inn in Ayden (three hours away, 4618 S Lee St, Ayden, NC, +1 252-746-4113; skylightinnbbq.com).

Barbeque Bill

Bill Spoon opened his humble place in 1963 and it's been run by a Spoon to this day – Steve Jr, Bill's grandson, being the latest to take over. There can be little doubt Bill Spoon's Barbecue (5524 South Boulevard Charlotte, NC, +1 704 525 8865, spoonsbarbecue.com) has changed very little since 1963, unless the wood panelling and faux gas lamps are recent additions. The barbecue here is the pulled variety, from a whole roasted beast ("We cook the whole pig, it makes a difference," says Steve). The large plate comes with deep-fried hushpuppies and coleslaw and two sides, including local Brunswick stew. Wash it all down with some sweet tea (or unsweetened if you

prefer). The pork is good, especially when doused in homemade barbecue sauce, but it is far from mind blowing. The fried pickles are definitely worth trying though, especially dipped in ranch dressing.

Touring the city

Charlotte's a compact city and is ideal for walking, depending on the time of year (average temperatures in June and July are above 30C and can be humid).

To stay out of the heat, the Gold Rush rubber-wheeled trams that run along Trade Street resemble historic streetcars and are free to hop on and off. The LYNX Light Rail Line (lynxcharlotte.com) connects South Charlotte with the city centre.



Homestead
Billy Graham's
childhood home



Independence Square, where Trade and Tryon streets meet, is a central point of the city and the four corners at the intersection are each marked with a 2.2 ton bronze sculpture on a granite plinth. Each one represents the city in one way or another – Future, Commerce, Transportation and Industry – and look down from their lofty perches on what is considered to be the historical crossing of Indian trade paths. There are plenty of walking tours, both guided and self-guided. Art lovers should try the Public Art Walking Tour podcast (charlottecultureguide.com), while history buffs might enjoy

the Charlotte Liberty Walk tour (meckdec.org/charlotte-liberty-walk) as it tells the story of Charlotte during the American Revolution. There are also food tours (tourdefood.com) and even Segway tours (charlottencitours.com).

Food and drink

When you feel you have earned another meal, head to Mert's Heart & Soul (214 N College St, Charlotte, +1 704 3424222, mertscharlotte.com). Places like Mert's make people want to travel. Loud but convivial and very welcoming, gluttonous feasts at Mert's often start with the obligatory corn bread and sweet tea. Decorated with signed theatre posters and Motown record covers, Mert's is the genuine article. The menu looks appetising from top to bottom, but the Low County Combo of barbecued beef rib and fried chicken breast quarter with sides of macaroni and cheese and black eyed peas is a good a plate a food as you will get. The portion sizes are, ahem, generous and with the ice tea and corn bread you will leave Mert's utterly sated.



Billy Graham has preached in Pyongyang and Beijing

After a meal at Mert's you won't be able to waddle too far. Best to let your body do its thing. Sipping a local beer while you wait couldn't hurt. Fortunately North Carolina has more breweries and brewpubs than any other Southern state. There are currently around 15 in Charlotte alone, and almost 20 in various stages of planning.

NoDa Brewing Company (2229 N Davidson St, Charlotte, +1 704 9006851, nodabrewing.com) is a microbrewery that specialises, and seems to revel, in exploring the limits to which beer making can be pushed. They say that they have never made the same beer twice and they never will, and every Tuesday they release a 'NoDable small-batch beer' that's only available in their

taproom and their Hop, Drop and, Roll IPA won gold at the 2014 World Beer Cup. If you can't make it out to the taproom, use their website's handy Brew Finder to find out where their beer is near you.

The racing spirit

Beer aside, this region is historically known for producing moonshine, and the illicit hooch has a long and enduring story in the Carolinas. The name Junior Johnson means something in these parts and not just because of his Junior Johnson's Midnight Moonshine (juniormidnightmoon.com). North Carolina resident Robert Glenn 'Junior' Johnson was a moonshine runner, and a damn good one at that (he was imprisoned for having an illegal still but was never caught transporting moonshine). By virtue of his work he needed a fast car to haul up to 100 gallons of white lightning at a time. The runners souped up their cars to evade the police and eventually got into competitions with each other, leading to the birth of stock car racing. NASCAR was eventually set up to regulate the new sport. Seven years later, Junior Johnson made his debut, and with his particular skill set he took to it like a duck to water, retiring 11 years later as one of the sport's greatest drivers. In 1973 an article in *Esquire* that eulogised Johnson was used as the basis for a film called *The Last American Hero*.

Heaven sent

He may be the last American hero, but Junior Johnson has nothing on Billy Graham. The Carolinas are part of the Bible Belt and Billy Graham is to Protestantism what Elvis was to rock'n'roll. A divisive figure, he has preached in the traditionally secular bastions of Pyongyang and Beijing and attracted millions. He has also acted as spiritual advisor to presidents, three of which – Clinton, Carter and Bush senior – were at the dedication ceremony of the Billy Graham Library, a fairly modest 40,000 sq ft public museum and library documenting his life and the 'extraordinary ways God used an ordinary North Carolina farm boy' (4330 Westmont Drive, Charlotte, +1 704 401 3200; billygrahamlibrary.org).

From one temple of worship to another: The NASCAR Hall of Fame (400 E Martin Luther King Jr Blvd, Charlotte, +1 704 654 4400; nascarhall.com). A must for petrol heads, the hall of fame is packed with classic and present-day cars and simulators. If you want to see the real thing, The Charlotte Motor Speedway track (5555 Concord Pkwy S, Concord, +1 704 4553200, charlottemotorspeedway.com) is just outside town. Despite Washington's words, a trip to Charlotte, North Carolina is definitely worth the effort.

Get here

Charlotte-Douglas international airport serves 39 million passengers a year with over 700 flights a day to 138 national and international cities. Flights from Hong Kong go via a number of hubs in the US, Canada and Europe. United airlines (united.com) fly to Charlotte via Chicago from \$10,356.

Where to stay

The Ballantyne Hotel and Lodge (10,000 Ballantyne Commons Parkway, Charlotte, +1 704 248 4000; theballantynehotel.com) is a few miles away from the South Boulevard LYNX station, making it a viable option whether you have hired a car or not. Its Gallery Restaurant is recommended. Rooms from \$2,550 a night. Right in the centre of town is Aloft Charlotte Uptown at the Epicentre (210 East Trade Street, Charlotte, +1 704 3331999; starwoodhotels.com). This modern chain hotel has all the room amenities and is just a short walk from most of the sights. From \$1,542 per night.



Traditional eats
Mert's restaurant