

## Dozen Distinctive Destinations

NATIONAL TRUST FOR  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION

### Aiken: A Distinctive Destination

Each year since 2000, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has selected 12 vacation destinations across the United States that offer an authentic visitor experience by combining dynamic downtowns, cultural diversity, attractive architecture, cultural landscapes and a strong commitment to historic preservation and revitalization.

The destinations selected in 2008 range from a French colonial village along the banks of the Mississippi River that captures the pioneer spirit of the early settlers, to a small Texas town that serves as a gateway to the unspoiled terrain of the 19th century western frontier, to a gorgeous Southern city with roots three centuries deep, and a coastal town renowned for its seafood and historic buildings.

"These twelve communities represent the richness and diversity of America's cultural heritage," says Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, "and in preserving their historic fabric and spirit of place are models for other towns and cities."

#### Aiken, SC

Few counties in the United States have a more varied history than Aiken, South Carolina. Once home to a Native American culture that developed the earliest known pottery in North America, Aiken was also one of the first railroad towns to emerge in the 1830s. It soon became the darling of the burgeoning wealthy elite as people in the Northern United States and Canada flocked to this "Winter Colony" to escape the bitter weather. First used as a health resort because of its healing combination of warm dry air and spring water, wealthy horse enthusiasts eventually took advantage of Aiken's climate and established an enduring tradition of equestrian sports that continues to the present day.

Aiken has long been committed to preserving its rich historic fabric. More than 70 stately homes and buildings of historical and architectural importance are located within three National Register Historic Districts, which can be explored on foot or horse-drawn carriage. Attractions include The Willcox Inn, an

exquisite example of southern Neo-Classical architecture built in 1898 and once the winter hideaway for Winston Churchill, Averill Harriman and Fred Astair; Banksia, a historical museum housed in an 1860s-mansion that allows visitors to venture back in time through period rooms and exhibits; Hopelands Gardens, a 14-acre public garden and museum; and the Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame. Aiken has also worked hard to preserve its African-American history through the rehabilitation of Friendship Baptist Church, Aiken's oldest African American church, and Aiken Colored Cemetery, which dates from 1852 with more than 100 veterans, slaves and former slaves interred there.

"Aiken has long been a visitor's paradise," said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "The past and the present merge seamlessly to offer all the necessary ingredients for a great vacation."

"With the history, the beautiful parkways and gardens, quaint shops and art galleries added to the recreational venues, you can understand why unique is the word most visitors use to describe our charming city," said Carla Cloud, executive director of the Aiken Downtown Development Association.

Aiken's commitment to protecting its historic core has not been limited to its architecture but has also included its lush and impressive landscape. The city is home to Hitchcock Woods, a 2,000-acre preserve for equestrian pursuits and peaceful walks. A treasure like no other, it is closely associated with Aiken's early history as a winter resort and center of sporting activity and stands as the largest urban forest in the United States.