



A LOWCOUNTRY WEDDING GUIDE

Married in *Charleston*

Seasons, settings, permits, timelines & photo tips
for couples planning a wedding in the Holy City

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2026 – 2027 EDITION

Hello, you two.

Charleston has a way of making a wedding feel like it was always meant to happen here: live oaks and Spanish moss, church bells over the rooftops, salt air at golden hour.

I've put this guide together for couples at every stage — whether you're just daydreaming about a Lowcountry wedding or you've already booked a venue and want to fill in the details. It covers the things I wish every couple knew before they started: when to come, where to marry, what paperwork you'll need, how to plan around the heat and the weather, and how to build a day that photographs (and feels) beautiful from start to finish.

Charleston is one of the most sought-after wedding destinations in the country, which means the best dates, venues and vendors book early. A little planning up front goes a long way. Take what's useful, skip what isn't, and reach out anytime if you have questions.

With love from the Lowcountry,

Emmy

Section	What you'll find
1. Choosing your season	Month-by-month weather, crowds, and sunset times
2. Choosing your setting	Downtown, the islands, riverside estates, and rural Lowcountry
3. The legal side	Marriage license, officiants, park and beach permits
4. Your planning timeline	What to book and when, from 18 months out to the week of
5. Weather, heat & logistics	Rain plans, bugs, tides, parking, and busy event weekends
6. Taking care of your guests	Lodging, transportation, welcome bags, and local flavor
7. A photographer's notes	Golden hour, first looks, portrait spots, and a sample day
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Choosing your season

There's no bad season in Charleston — but each one asks for a slightly different plan.

Season	What it's like	Good to know
Spring March – May	Peak season. Azaleas, wisteria and jasmine in bloom; highs roughly in the 70s to mid-80s°F.	Most in-demand dates of the year. Book venues and vendors 12–18 months out. Pollen is heavy in late March and April.
Summer June – August	Hot and humid, with highs around 90°F and frequent late-afternoon thunderstorms.	Often better availability and pricing. Plan an evening ceremony, shade, fans and cold drinks, and a solid rain plan.
Fall September – November	Second peak season. Humidity eases by October; highs in the 70s and low 80s.	October is a favorite and books fast. Hurricane season runs June 1 – Nov 30 and is most active Aug – Oct, so consider wedding insurance.
Winter December – February	Mild and quiet; highs mostly in the high 50s to 60s°F, cooler evenings.	Best value and flexibility. Oyster-roast season! Plan for early sunsets and have heaters or an indoor option for the reception.

Emmy's take

If you have flexibility, late April–May and mid-October–early November are hard to beat for comfortable weather and gorgeous light. If you love a deal and an intimate feel, don't overlook winter — the city is calm, the light is low and golden all day, and vendors often have more availability.

Choosing your setting

Within an hour of downtown you can marry in a centuries-old church, under a moss-draped oak, on a dock over the marsh, or barefoot on the beach.

The Historic Peninsula

Carriage houses, courtyard gardens, historic homes, rooftop terraces, and some of the oldest churches in the country. Ideal if you want walkable, romantic streets and a “city” feel.

Keep in mind: Parking and load-in are tight; guest-count limits and noise ordinances are common. Build in time for traffic and transportation between ceremony and reception.

Riverside Estates & Gardens

Along the Ashley River and throughout the surrounding Lowcountry, grand oak allées and sprawling gardens make for dramatic outdoor ceremonies with room for large guest lists.

Keep in mind: Many of these properties are former plantations. Take time to learn a venue’s history and how it’s acknowledged and shared today — it matters to many couples and guests.

The Islands & Beaches

Folly Beach, Isle of Palms, Sullivan’s Island, Kiawah and Seabrook offer oceanfront resorts, beach houses, and relaxed barefoot ceremonies.

Keep in mind: Each town sets its own beach rules (see Section 3). Check tides and wind, and remember that sand, sun and salt air change what you’ll want to wear.

Marsh, Creek & Rural Lowcountry

Johns Island, Wadmalaw, Mount Pleasant and beyond: barns, farms, waterfront docks and wide-open marsh views with incredible sunsets.

Keep in mind: Farther-flung venues usually mean guest shuttles and fewer nearby hotels. Ask about bug control and restroom facilities for outdoor sites.

Questions to ask every venue

- What’s the guest capacity — seated and standing — and is there a noise or music curfew?
- What is the rain plan, and when do we have to decide on it? Is a tent included or extra?
- Is there a required or preferred vendor list (caterers, planners, rentals)?
- How many hours are included, and what time can vendors arrive for setup?
- Where will guests park, and is shuttle drop-off allowed?
- Where are the best spots on the property for portraits at different times of day?

The legal side

The paperwork in South Carolina is refreshingly simple — you just need to plan for it.

Your marriage license

- **Apply through the Charleston County Probate Court.** The application is available online, which makes it convenient for out-of-town couples. A South Carolina license can be used anywhere in the state.
- **There's a mandatory 24-hour waiting period** between applying and receiving your license, so you can't apply and marry on the same day. Apply at least a few days to a couple of weeks before the wedding.
- **Bring valid ID** for both of you — a driver's license, passport or similar.
- **You don't need to be South Carolina residents**, and there's no blood test.
- **The fee is currently about \$70** in Charleston County. Fees and procedures can change, so confirm on the probate court's website before you apply.
- **Once the license is issued, it's valid for a limited time** — check the expiration so your wedding date falls inside it.

Who can officiate

In South Carolina, ministers and ordained clergy can officiate, and so can a **South Carolina notary public** — a unique option that many elopement and small-wedding couples love. If a friend is getting ordained online to marry you, confirm with the probate court that their credentials meet South Carolina requirements.

Ceremonies in public parks

The City of Charleston's waterfront parks — including **White Point Garden** (at the Battery) and **Waterfront Park** — are beautiful spots for small ceremonies and elopements. A few things to know:

- A permit is required for organized gatherings like weddings in city parks.
- White Point Garden and Waterfront Park have a limit of about **25 people** for events.
- Submit your permit application at least **10 business days** ahead; more complex events may need 30 days. Approval isn't guaranteed, so apply early — and expect tourists and carriage tours nearby.

Ceremonies on the beach

Every beach town has its own rules. **Folly Beach**, as an example, allows ceremonies but not receptions on the beach, and its current rules are below. Isle of Palms, Sullivan's Island and the resort islands set their own rules, so always check with the town for your date.

- Weddings with more than 25 people need approval from the city's Special Events Committee.
- No alcohol, glass or cans on the beach — non-alcoholic drinks in plastic or paper cups only.
- Chairs, arches and tents must be removed before sunset or before the tide reaches them.
- No balloons, plastic streamers or confetti; birdseed and real petals are fine. No loud music.

Your planning timeline

For a Charleston wedding in peak season, the earlier the better. Here's a realistic rhythm.

When	What to do
12–18 months out	Set your budget and rough guest count. Choose a season and tour venues. Book your venue, planner, photographer and videographer — these book up first for spring and fall Saturdays.
9–12 months out	Book caterer, band or DJ, florist and officiant. Reserve hotel room blocks (downtown hotels fill fast on peak weekends). Send save-the-dates, especially for traveling guests. Start dress shopping.
6–9 months out	Book rentals, hair and makeup, transportation and cake. Build your wedding website with travel info. Consider wedding insurance, particularly for August–October dates. Schedule engagement photos.
3–6 months out	Order invitations; plan rehearsal dinner and welcome events. Finalize your ceremony and reception layout with your venue. Pull any park or beach permits you need.
6–8 weeks out	Mail invitations. Have your final dress fittings. Share your draft day-of timeline with your photographer and planner.
2–4 weeks out	Apply for your marriage license (remember the 24-hour wait). Confirm final headcount, seating chart and vendor arrival times. Assemble welcome bags.
Week of	Watch the forecast and make your rain call with your venue. Confirm transportation. Pack an emergency kit. Hand off final payments and tips in labeled envelopes. Then rest!

A note on budgets

Charleston is a premium wedding market, and peak-season Saturdays carry peak pricing. Fridays, Sundays and off-season dates can stretch your budget meaningfully. As you build your budget, remember the line items that are easy to forget: guest shuttles, tent and climate-control rentals, permits, service charges, gratuities, and welcome-weekend events.

Weather, heat & logistics

The Lowcountry is lush for a reason. A little preparation keeps everyone comfortable.

Plan for rain — even in sunshine season

Pop-up afternoon storms are common from late spring through summer and often pass within an hour. Ask your venue when you need to make the call on your rain plan, and consider a tent with sides as a backup even if you hope not to use it. Clear umbrellas make for lovely rainy-day photos.

Beat the heat & humidity

- Schedule outdoor ceremonies for late afternoon or early evening, and keep them to around 20–30 minutes.
- Provide shade, fans or parasols, and cold water or lemonade as guests arrive.
- Let guests know about outdoor elements on your website so they can dress for them — linen, breathable fabrics and block heels.
- Choose flowers that hold up in heat, and keep bouquets hydrated until the last minute.
- Hair and makeup artists who work locally know how to set looks for humidity — lean on them.

Bugs, tides & terrain

- **No-see-ums and mosquitoes** come out near dusk, especially near the marsh. Ask your venue about treatment, and set out bug-spray wipes and fans.
- **Tides** can change a beach or dock site dramatically. Check tide charts for your ceremony time.
- **Cobblestones and grass** are tough on stilettos. Block heels or heel protectors are your friends.

Getting around

- Downtown parking is limited and streets are narrow. Shuttles or trolleys between hotels and venues are worth every penny and keep guests safe.
- Allow extra drive time to the islands and outlying venues, especially over the bridges at rush hour and on beach weekends.
- Book a guest shuttle for the end of the night, too — rideshares can be scarce at farther-out venues.

Check the city calendar

Charleston hosts major events that fill hotels and roads — among them the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition (February), Charleston Wine + Food (March), the Cooper River Bridge Run (spring), Spoleto Festival USA (late May into June), and college graduation weekends. Dates change each year, so look them up before you lock in yours; they may affect room rates and availability.

Taking care of your guests

Most of your guests will be traveling. A thoughtful welcome makes the whole weekend feel like a gift.

Where they'll stay

Offer two or three lodging options at different price points and share them early. Downtown hotels put guests within walking distance of restaurants and sights; Mount Pleasant, West Ashley and North Charleston are often more affordable; beach rentals are great for families and wedding parties. Negotiate room blocks as soon as your date is set.

The wedding weekend

- **Welcome party:** an oyster roast in the cooler months or a Lowcountry boil in the warmer ones is a classic way to kick things off.
- **Farewell brunch:** shrimp and grits, biscuits and a mimosa bar send everyone home happy.
- **Free time:** share a short list of favorite things to do — a walk along the Battery and Rainbow Row, a harbor cruise, the beach, a historic house tour, or a visit to the City Market.

Welcome bags with a local touch

- Benne wafers, pralines, cheese straws or boiled peanuts
- A bottle of water, sunscreen, bug-spray wipes and a hand fan
- A local map with your favorite restaurants, coffee shops and walking routes
- The weekend schedule, with addresses, shuttle times and dress codes

Help them dress for the day

Spell out the setting on your website and invitation: “ceremony on the lawn,” “beach ceremony — sandals welcome,” or “the reception is outdoors under a tent.” Guests appreciate knowing whether to bring a wrap for a breezy evening or leave the stilettos at home.

Accessibility matters

Many historic buildings have stairs, uneven floors or narrow doorways, and outdoor sites can have soft ground. If you have older guests or guests who use mobility aids, ask your venue about accessible routes, reserved seating, golf-cart transport and restrooms.

A photographer's notes

A few decisions early on make a big difference in how your photos — and your day — feel.

Chase the light

Charleston's midday sun is bright and harsh, especially in summer. When you can, time your ceremony so that portraits land in the last hour before sunset. If your ceremony is earlier, we'll slip away for 15–20 minutes of golden-hour portraits during the reception — it's often a couple's favorite part of the night.

Consider a first look

Seeing each other before the ceremony means we can finish wedding-party and family portraits beforehand, so you actually get to enjoy your cocktail hour. It's especially helpful in fall and winter, when the sun sets early.

Plan your portrait locations

- Downtown favorites include the Battery and White Point Garden, the side streets and alleys south of Broad, Rainbow Row, and the Pineapple Fountain at Waterfront Park.
- Many of the city's prettiest gates and gardens are private homes. We'll stay on public sidewalks and be respectful of residents — no stepping onto porches or into gardens.
- Moving between locations downtown takes longer than you'd think. I recommend one or two spots, not five.
- Your venue itself is often the best backdrop. Walk the property with me ahead of time if you can.

Sample timeline: an October Saturday

Time	Moment
1:30 pm	Photographer arrives — details, dress, getting-ready candids
3:00 pm	Dressed and ready; first look, then couple portraits
3:45 pm	Wedding party portraits
4:15 pm	Family portraits (share a list of groupings in advance)
4:45 pm	Tuck away before guests arrive; ceremony and reception details
5:15 pm	Ceremony
5:45 pm	Cocktail hour — you're free to mingle!
6:45 pm	Grand entrance, toasts and first dance
7:00 pm	Sunset portraits (sunset is about 6:50 pm in mid-October)
7:15 pm	Dinner, dancing, cake cutting
10:00 pm	Sparkler or send-off exit (check your venue's rules)

Adjust this backward or forward based on your sunset time. Build in about 10% buffer throughout — Charleston runs on Lowcountry time.

Approximate sunset times

Golden hour is roughly the hour before sunset — the softest, warmest light of the day. Build your ceremony and portrait time around it.

Month	Approx. sunset	Month	Approx. sunset
January	5:20 – 5:50 pm	July	8:15 – 8:30 pm
February	5:50 – 6:15 pm	August	7:45 – 8:15 pm
March	6:15 – 7:35 pm*	September	7:10 – 7:45 pm
April	7:35 – 7:55 pm	October	6:30 – 7:10 pm
May	7:55 – 8:20 pm	November	5:10 – 6:30 pm*
June	8:20 – 8:30 pm	December	5:10 – 5:25 pm

**Daylight saving time begins in March and ends in early November, shifting sunset by an hour. Always check the exact sunset time for your date once it's set.*

Checklists

Keep these handy as you tour venues and interview vendors.

Questions for every vendor

- Are you available on our date, and how far in advance do you typically book?
- Have you worked at our venue (or similar venues in Charleston) before?
- What's included in your packages, and what costs extra? Are there travel fees for island or rural venues?
- What is your deposit and payment schedule, and what's your cancellation and rescheduling policy — including for hurricanes or severe weather?
- Do you carry liability insurance? (Many venues require a certificate.)
- Who will actually be there on the day, and what's your backup plan if you're sick?

Quick-reference checklist

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|---|--|
| ☐ Budget and guest count set | ☐ Hotel room blocks reserved |
| ☐ Date chosen (event calendar checked) | ☐ Guest transportation booked |
| ☐ Venue booked, rain plan confirmed | ☐ Wedding website with travel info |
| ☐ Planner or coordinator booked | ☐ Park or beach permit (if needed) |
| ☐ Photographer and videographer booked | ☐ Wedding insurance considered |
| ☐ Caterer, music, florist booked | ☐ Marriage license (24-hour wait!) |
| ☐ Officiant confirmed | ☐ Heat, bug and accessibility plan |
| ☐ Hair and makeup booked | ☐ Day-of timeline shared with vendors |
| ☐ Save-the-dates sent | ☐ Family photo list finalized |
| ☐ Invitations mailed | ☐ Tips and final payments ready |

A note on accuracy: permit rules, license fees and event dates in this guide were current when it was written (fall 2026) but can change. Always confirm with the Charleston County Probate Court, the City of Charleston, and the relevant beach town before finalizing plans.

LET'S CONNECT

*I'd love to hear
about your day.*

Whether you're planning a hundred-guest celebration under the oaks or a quiet vow exchange at the Battery, I'd be honored to document it. Reach out to check availability for your date, or just to talk through your plans.

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