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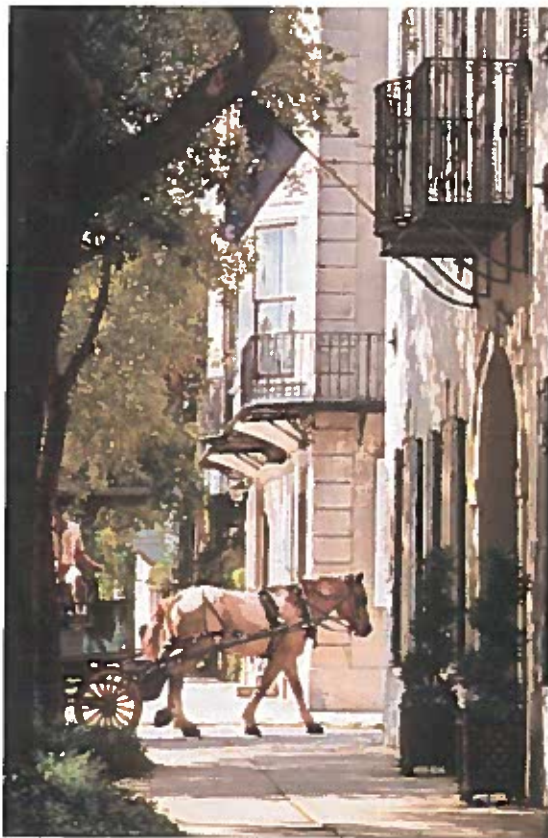
Southern Charm in South Carolina

Explore the stately city's complicated relationship with its history

BY BECCA HENSLEY



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I'm a big girl. But when I open the door of my room at Charleston, South Carolina's Planters Inn and see a teddy bear lounging on my four-poster bed, I squeal with glee. He's wearing a T-shirt that shows he belongs to this Relais & Chateaux property, a restored 1844 grand estate, smack in the city's historic district on vibrant Market Street.

Though I have my daughter celebrating a birthday in tow, the bear isn't a treat just for us. This cute teddy greets every guest, young or old. This is the kind of Southern grace and hospitality that is standard in this old port city, a leafy haven by the sea that is home to stately and well-preserved architecture.

Located in a part of South Carolina called the Low Country for its

marshy coastal plain, Charleston benefited from the success of surrounding plantations that grew indigo, cotton and rice. As a shipping hub, Charleston became the South's richest and most powerful city from Colonial times to the Civil War—just the sort of wealthy place where ornate buildings and refined manners were prized.

The complexity, of course, comes from Charleston's role in the slave trade. Home to one of the South's largest slave markets, the city was an entry point for those whose forced labor would enrich their owners and Charleston itself. The intermingling of these connected and conflicting legacies have shaped and are apparent throughout the city today, and make exploring Charleston endlessly fascinating.

On the one hand, visitors should allow themselves to fall sway to the allure of Charleston's

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romantic ways. The streets of downtown Charleston remain cobble-stoned, for instance, and traffic can sometimes mean a backup of horse-drawn carriages. Where else can you take to the streets with Rhett Butler flair? Do it right by jumping aboard a horse-drawn carriage from family-owned Palmetto Carriage Works, which has whisked generations over the cobblestones of Charleston. You'll be treated to an appropriately slow journey through a downtown where the salty sea air fuses with magnolia and jasmine while drivers will remind you that the Southern storytelling tradition is alive and well.

To be sure, not much imagination is required to conjure what life was like for the power brokers of Charleston during its heyday. Tour the nearly 10,000-square-foot Nathaniel Russell House, a Neoclassical gem built for the home's namesake in 1808. A successful merchant and one of Charleston's wealthiest residents, Russell spared no expense, incorporating a grand entryway, a wide spiral staircase connecting all three floors and a second-story balcony made of wrought iron that spells out Russell's initials. Designated a National Historic Landmark in the 1970s, the home is open for public tours, as are other stately mansions, like the Aiken-Rhett House, a mishmash of architectural styles where former Gov. William Aiken once lived.

Though it's easy to immerse yourself in the fineries of privileged Charleston—the area around Charleston's Battery, a Civil War seawall and promenade that's a favorite for sunsets is full of antebellum mansions—it's also not hard to remind yourself of Charleston's tragic past. You'll be humbled at the Old Slave Mart Museum's small and informative exhibit that tells the story of Charleston's role in the slave trade from within the walls of the 1800s-era market itself.

Though these physical markers of Charleston's distinctive past are obvious, the different cultures and traditions have mixed together to create a new city. While the genteel Southern influences are apparent, so too are the undertones of Gullah culture. Named for the African-American ancestors of slaves, the Gullah still live in the Low Country and sea islands of South Carolina and their food, language, folklore, artistry and heritage enliven the city as much as fancy dress balls and well-manicured gardens.

It's in the food where these two strains of Charleston's history come together, though you might need to be a **culinary anthropologist** to figure out who to thank for different flavors. Don't miss Husk, Sean Brock's vitrine for Southern cuisine with ingredients seized from South of the Mason-Dixon Line. Housed in a Queen Anne mansion with a sigh-worthy verandah, this casually elegant eatery gets decadent with Southern fried chicken **skins** topped with pimento cheese **dressing**, cornmeal fried pickles and **shrimp** and grits with chunks of savory Low Country sausage. At Fig, another **culinary bastion** helmed at various times by two James Beard Award-winning chefs, you'll swoon to another version of locally derived, Low Country fare. The menu boggles the mind, but don't leave without snarfing some chicken liver pate.

If the food doesn't convince you, head to some of the city's watering holes for proof that Charleston isn't stuck in time but rather reinventing itself with a mixture of past, present and whatever might be next. You can swig and nibble at 5Church Charleston, a downtown establishment that occupies a retrofitted church. Gothic windows capture light, black leather banquettes invoke chic and the walls exhibit painstakingly etched words from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*—in its entirety. An example of Charleston's more au courant side, this histro-like hangout does brunch to dinner. Its cocktails—try the Rosemary Gin Fizz—rule the day.

Or you may want to sip the fruit of the vine at Mira Tasting Room on Queen Street. Enconced in an antebellum house, Mira's has a ceiling made from the staves of French oak barrels, pours wine from Napa (though it's owned by locals), and has an enchanting al fresco patio. It's an unexpected twist on a local wine bar and quite the rage. It's also a reminder that Charleston is far from finished writing its own story—and thank goodness

for that.

When You Go

Fly American, Delta and United offer one-stop flights from San Antonio to Charleston.

Stay Relish a taste of old Charleston at the 64-room Planters Inn. Located across the street from City Market and walking distance from the area's paramount attractions, this intimate spot has a carriage lantern-lit courtyard, a famous restaurant called The Pennsylvania Grill and rooms bedecked in Baker "Historic Charleston" decor.

plantersinn.com

Eat Save a little room for a treat and head to Kaminsky's Dessert Café for the best Toll House pie of your life. kaminskys.com

Shop You can spend all day on King Street, where you'll find the best antiques, boutiques, design and furniture stores. Hoof it to Bob Ellis Shoes, one of the world's most addictive stores for those with a shoe-shopping fetish. It's family-owned with friendly service and the surprising skill of stocking shoes in an immense range of sizes. Size 12AAAA? Yup, they've got you covered. bobellisshoes.com

This article appears in the [October 2016 issue of San Antonio Magazine](#)

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