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Charleston, S.C., reconciles past and present

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KRT TRAVEL STORY SLUGGED: UST-CHARLESTON KRT PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN C. HEGGER/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH (January 9) The Boone Hall plantation is unique in the Charleston, South Carolina, area. It has nine restored slave cabins, the focus of its educational programs on slavery. (cdm) 2004 SUSAN C. HEGGER — KRT





CHARLESTON, S.C. — This city has always been, for me, the hometown that got away. I was born here in 1971, but I left for Kentucky before I could develop a geechee accent. Instead, I grew up in Lexington, with Charleston only a mysterious name on my birth certificate.

I've been here a few times, seeing relatives, but it had been years since the last funeral, and I'd found no reason to go back. Then a wedding invitation arrived, and I decided to go and do the city in a new way: as a full-on tourist. Charleston knows what to do with tourists. She gets nearly 5 million of them every year and has been named the top U.S. city in the Condé Nast Traveler Readers' Choice Awards three years in a row. In a brief visit, I realized that there are lifetimes worth of things to see, do, taste and hear in this place where

I might have grown up. Here are a few:

See the water meet the sky at Folly Beach: The tourist heart of the city, known as the Peninsula, lies between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, whose currents and marshland don't make for great swimming. If you want to get close to the ocean, it's worth driving about 11 miles to Folly Beach, a community that bills itself on signs and its website as "The Edge of America." This hyperbolic title belies the community's grown-up, laid-back vibe. George Gershwin came here in the 1930s to work on *Porgy and Bess*, and it's easy to understand why.

Folly Island essentially faces southeast and has the Atlantic on one side and the Intracoastal Waterway on the other. That combination means that both sunrise and sunset reflect off water and can be not so much stunning as humbling. From my room on the eighth floor of the Tides Hotel Folly Beach, I looked out directly on the Folly Beach Fishing Pier, which stretches about 1,000 feet into the ocean. One morning, the mist settled in, claiming gulls and sky, and I watched as the gazebo at the pier's end slowly, slowly disappeared.

Take a walk around Charles Towne Landing: This gorgeous 664-acre state park marks the spot of the first permanent European settlement in South Carolina. Charles Town Landing State Historic Site is full of loblolly pines and live oaks dripping with Spanish moss. In fact, the place looks like a Southern Gothic movie set assembled by an overachieving set designer.

Some of the park's six miles of walking trails border a marshy portion of Old Towne Creek, a tributary of the Ashley River. On a hot day, the idea of sticking your fingers or toes in the water might sound appealing, but don't. Charles Towne Landing is home to alligators, a discovery that, I confess, sent me into momentary spasms of what could be described as Yankee panic.

According to assistant park manager Jason Sellers, if you keep your distance from the gators, they're unlikely to bother you. "I've been here seven years and we've never had an incident," he said. "They're more scared of you than you are of them." I find this hard to believe.

Taste barbecue and cupcakes: The Los Angeles Times called Charleston a "food lover's paradise" and the city's dining scene has drawn praise far and wide with trendy restaurants including Husk, Fish, Xiao Bao Biscuit and others. My favorite Charleston-area restaurant remains the decidedly downscale Robert's Bar-B-Q, "Home of the Super Pig."

Located in an otherwise numbing section of sprawl off North Charleston's Ashley Phosphate Road, Robert's marries meat and mustard in a way that coats every salty, sour and sweet sensor on my tongue with tangy bliss.

For dessert, the discovery of the trip happened on King Street, at a place called Cupcake Down South. Among its offerings: the bourbon pecan pie cupcake. It's made with Jim Beam and pralines, and did I mention it's a cupcake? It sells for \$2.99, and it's worth every penny and calorie.

Hear stories of Charleston's past on a carriage tour South of Broad: This place is so full of history, of old tales it wants to tell, that it seems rude, somehow, not to listen. For about 40 years, Palmetto Carriage has offered horse-drawn historical tours through Charleston's historic avenues, specifically the area between Broad Street and the Battery that faces the Atlantic. In the back of the carriage, I listen as a twentysomething guide takes us through neighborhoods older than America itself. This reasonably priced one-hour tour (\$23) is a great introduction to Charleston, which was founded in 1670 in a place that our guide says the Kiawah tribes called Chicora, "the land of the healing breezes."

I tried to listen to his stories as we clip-clopped along East Bay Street, but I preferred to gorge myself on the architectural feast of these houses, with their palm trees and wrought-iron fences. I retained only a hodgepodge of facts: An earthquake rocked the city in 1886. Charleston was home to the country's first chamber of commerce. In 1770, more than half the people in Charleston County were slaves. During a Civil War siege that lasted 545 days, a shell struck the city, on average, every seven minutes.

In the stories I heard on this warm December evening, I tried to listen between the words for how slavery,

secession and the darker, sadder parts of the city's past found a place in its gleaming present. It's a reconciliation process that isn't easy for any community, be it city or family.

The reason I left Charleston as a baby was the divorce of my parents. The last funeral I attended was that of my Charlestonian father, a man I met only when I was an adult. He was the man who introduced me to this city.

From my seat in the tourist carriage, I got the sense that here, past and present have found a way to accept each other. If old and new Charleston were people, I imagine that they'd have their arguments, sure, but there would be plenty of evenings when they'd stroll together down one of these cobblestone alleyways, looking for a good place to eat, one with a view of the water and maybe a nice breeze.

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