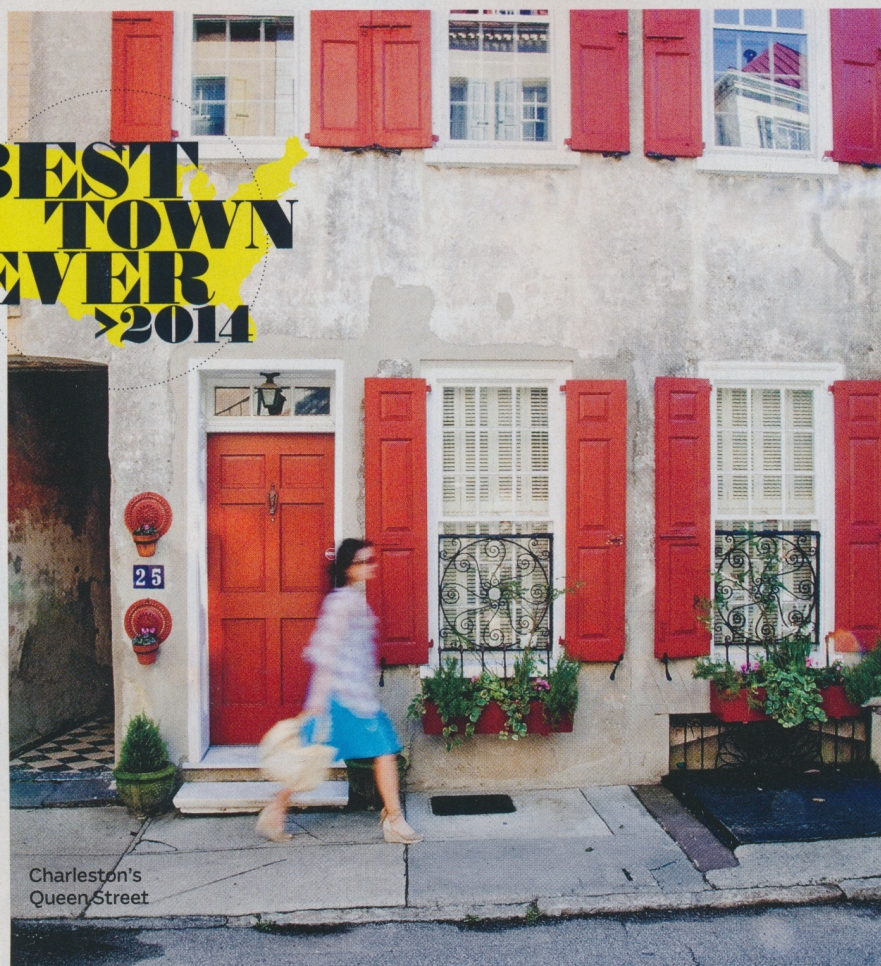


BEST TOWN EVER 2014

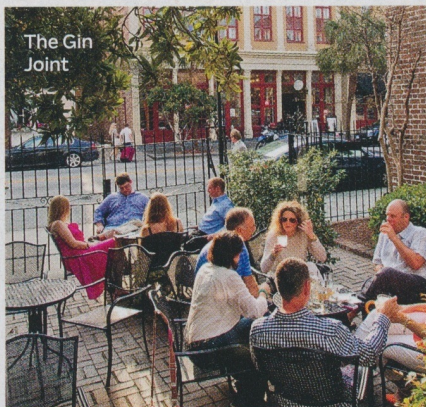


Charleston's Queen Street

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

TOTAL VOTES: 32,178

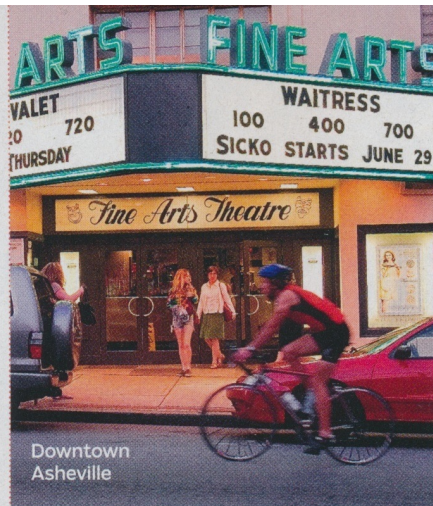
The South's coolest coastal city oozes hospitality and has one of the country's finest culinary scenes. But what really sets it apart is the water. Charleston (pop. 125,583) sits at the tip of a peninsula shielded from the Atlantic by outlying islands and surrounded by Charleston Harbor and its web of estuaries. "There are so many options," says Josh Wilson, 34, a triathlete and former professional surfer. "Surf, paddleboard, fish, kiteboard—any sort of water-based adventure, you can do it here." Hunting redfish by kayak in the marsh is a local obsession, and for more rugged adventure (think deserted islands, sun-bleached trees, and gators) residents catch a ferry to Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge for oceanfront wilderness kayaking. For the best surf in South Carolina—particularly in the fall—Wilson recommends the Washout, a consistent, user-friendly break on Folly Beach, and points paddleboarders and kayakers to the Folly River's expansive maze of marshy inlets. Of course, remaining on land is just as fun. Charleston's notable chefs, like Sean Brock at McGrady's, are



the most famous people in town, so expect adventurous twists on southern fare in practically any of the city's restaurants. Wilson's favorite is the Vendue hotel's Drawing Room, where fresh-from-the-boat seafood is paired with fingerling potatoes fried in duck fat. —GRAHAM AVERILL

MAKE THE MOVE: James Island, a ten-minute drive from Folly Beach and downtown Charleston, has homes for \$265,000 (citywide median: \$225,000). The city's largest employers are the military base and the Medical University of South Carolina (median household income: \$50,873).

O-SCORE
84



Downtown Asheville

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

TOTAL VOTES: 70,665

Few towns force you to make the kinds of decisions you're faced with in Asheville (pop. 85,712). Do you hang out downtown amid the dizzying number of breweries? Or do you road-bike the Blue Ridge Parkway? Do you paddle the Class V juggernaut Green River or hike the Appalachian Trail? Professional kayaker and avid mountain biker Pat Keller grew up in the area and watched it become one of the South's most vibrant hubs of culture and adventure. "It's hard to touch Asheville if you're into adventure sports," Keller says. He suggests expert boaters looking to go big head to the Class V-plus Toxaway River, while mere mortals should look to Ledges Whitewater Park, a string of Class II rapids on the French Broad River 15 minutes north of downtown. Mountain bikers have all of the Pisgah National Forest in Asheville's backyard. Bent Creek, located ten miles from town, is some of the nearest singletrack, but Keller likes Staire Creek, located in Big Ivy, a largely forgotten tract of the Pisgah. "It's rutted out with big rocks—you have to hop from one side of the trail to the other," says Keller. Asheville treats foodies just as well.

The Small Plate Crawl shows off the city's finest dishes, like ginger-spiced potato cake over garbanzo bean stew at James Beard Award nominee Chai Pani. But the city is best known as a beer hub. Keller's favorite: Wicked Weed Brewing, which is turning heads with its sour beers. —G.A.

MAKE THE MOVE: West Asheville has 1920s-era bungalows going for as little as \$189,000 (citywide median: \$195,500). Outfitters, health care, and the food and beverage industries make up the largest share of the local economy (median household income: \$42,333).

O-SCORE

80