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**Gary Walther**, Contributor  
I solve the key hotel mystery: Which rooms are best?

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## Southern Comfort: Charleston And Charleston Place, The City's Top Hotel

City nicknames, in The Hotel Detective's opinion, fall into two categories: brilliant branding or mysterious monikers.

Paris is the City of Light because it lit the Champs Elysées with gas lamps early on (1828), but also because it was a center of the Enlightenment, a nice conjunction of the literal and the metaphoric.

Chicago is The Windy City not because it is prone to bloviate, but because of the blustery enfilades that come off Lake Michigan. However, it also scores on the figurative side for being The City of Big Shoulders, which Carl Sandburg bestowed upon it in his poem "Chicago." And when in Chicago, one does feel that the city rests on a stolid foundation of common sense and hard work. It's a bulls-eye metaphor.

On the other hand, Baghdad by the Bay (San Francisco) has always perplexed The Hotel Detective, even though it was coined by that city's journalist laureate, Herb Caen, well before the U.S. had it in for Saddam Hussein. Most sources say it is a reference to the city's ethnic mix, but many American cities can claim that: Baghdad on the Sound (Seattle), Baghdad on the Hudson (New York), Baghdad on the Strip (Los Angeles). Slightly off-key, right?

Which brings us to The Holy City. No, not Jeddah, not The Vatican, not Qum, not Salt Lake City, but Charleston, South Carolina.

Right, The Hotel Detective would never have guessed that either.

On the way in from the airport, the vignettes confirmed The Hotel Detective's image of Charleston as being about Georgian architectural grace (a masterful use of brick), consummate Antebellum architecture, an extraordinary setting (a bullet-head peninsula on the Ashley and Cooper rivers), and manners. Southern Living magazine once called Charleston "the most polite and hospitable city in America." That's too long to fit on a license plate, but it is apparently true. A social insider told me, "Even if people don't like you, you will never know." Perhaps Charleston should style itself America's Courtly City.

The Holy City seemed a stretch until THD checked into room 833 at Charleston Place. From here and from the Club Floor lounge, another side of

Charleston emerged, a little forest of steeples. They are Charleston's skyline—from the upper floors of Charleston Place, the city looks like an 18th-century print. But the steeples attest not to religious zeal, but to religious tolerance, a diversity of faiths on a narrow peninsula: In 1702 Charleston was 42% Anglican, 45% Calvinist, 10% Baptist, and 2.5% Quaker and Jewish. It's freedom of religion in steeple form.

At street level, though, Charleston is a very worldly city, but in a manner that vibrantly mixes past and present.

There is the then that seems very now, as at Husk, the city's top restaurant. Here traditional ingredients grown or harvested only in the South are given an electrifying resurrection, as in the ethereal cornbread and the Kentuckyaki, glazed pig ear lettuce wraps. (It's easier to comprehend as a bacon sandwich married to a spring roll.) It's there, too, at Cru Café, home of gourmet Low Country comfort food and housed in an 18th-century Single House, a one-room wide residence that is the city's most characteristic style of residential architecture. "A lady walked in five years ago who was born in the middle room," chef John Zucker tells me as we're dining on the front porch. (Husk gets more national attention, but there are those in Charleston who say Cru is the city's best restaurant.)



The entrance to Charleston Place

There is the now varnished onto a very deep then, as along Rainbow Row, the sherbet palette of townhouses lining a pinky-length street that ends at Waterfront Park. The then blooms in the afternoon tea service at Charleston Place, and it is on offer all along King Street, Charleston's vibrant shopping thoroughfare of shops that go back two, three, even four generations. My favorite was Geo. C. Birlant & Co. (founded 1922), Charleston's leading dealer of English and Continental antiques. Here you'll likely find a member of the Birlant family offering up a mixture of fact and rhapsody on a piece of 18th-century furniture, say a secretary bureau in a School of Chippendale style, that points out the mahogany fretwork ("blind, not pierced") framing the doors, and the minute dovetail joints in the drawers. The store itself is pleasant in all the right ways: slightly musty, crammed (the center is a trove of Highboys), and Anglophilic—if your heart's desire is a Loo Table, named for a Regency card game, you've come to the right spot.

And then there is the then that is still then, the palpable sense of the past, which has always been Charleston's long suit. You find it especially in SOB—that's not an epithet, but an acronym meaning South of Broad, home to an extraordinary trove of residential architecture from before the Civil War. The styles blaze forth on High Battery (the Edmonston-Alston House, from which General P.T. Beauregard watched the bombardment of Fort Sumter in 1861) and Meeting Street (the Nathaniel Russell House, a paragon of Neo-Classical architecture), but they also hide in come-hither shadowed alleys like Longitude Lane. You learn that those wide, long mansion porches, sited to catch the breeze off the water and where even wealthy families slept in the sweltering summers, are called terrazzas, but pronounced with a soft, sleepy z rather than a hard Italian double-stress.

The place to stay is Charleston Place, another case of the now grafted onto the then. It's new-ish (1985) and sizable (at 440 rooms, the largest hotel in the Belmond portfolio), but it has been cleverly insinuated into the historical fabric of King and Meeting streets. It was only on the third or fourth pass down King Street that I realized the brick expanse I was seeing was the back side of the hotel, which in fact, helped spark King Street's renaissance.

The hotel restaurant, Charleston Grill, doesn't get the accolades of Husk, so let me offer two here: Michelle Weaver can do everything from Deep South (a densely luscious crab cake, southern fried catfish) to Deep Cosmopolitan (Tom-Yum-Goong fish and Salmon á la Plancha), and manager Mickey Bakst not only runs the dining room with the touch of a great conductor, but he knows everyone there is to know in Charleston.

Charleston Place has two room-views, bridge (the two-mile-long Arthur Ravanelli Bridge) and harbor—odd-number rooms face the harbor, evens the town. But here it's height that counts: You want a room on the fourth floor or above. The top two floors, seven and eight, compose The Club, 72 rooms with their own concierge and lounge that serves continental breakfast, afternoon tea, hor d'oeuvres, and cocktails gratis. The higher the room number, the farther away from the lounge, which can be noisy in the morning (as I learned in 833), but then the best harbor views are from the 23- and 24-series rooms. (Also from the seventh-floor Presidential Suite, which I only mention because it doesn't have the stilted decor that usually afflicts this room genre.) Below the Club Floor, the best double rooms are the new Premiers (below), done in soft blues, grays, and greens, which will be the hotel's new palate in the forthcoming room renovation.





There are also rooms on the lower floors that The Hotel Detective liked such as 336, which overlooks the corner of Market and Meeting streets and has a Juliet balcony, and the fourth-floor rooms that are overlook a courtyard. The latter lack a view but their high ceilings, courtesy of a Mansard roof, make up for it. Go for 436-444, 489, 480, or Suites 4C, 4F, or 4G.

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