

## Travel

# THE CHARM OF CHARLESTON

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?  
NOW'S A GOOD TIME TO DISCOVER  
ONE OF AMERICA'S GREAT CITIES.

BY ADAM PLATT

I can't tell you why it took me 30 years to get to Charleston. I recommend you not wait as long.

Part of the problem was figuring out what South Carolina's most notable city was really about. Last year *Condé Nast Traveler* readers voted Charleston the No. 1 U.S. city for visitors. *Bon Appétit* named Husk its Best New Restaurant in America. That's a lot of acclaim for a place with a population of 120,000.

People often juxtapose Charleston and Savannah, and though the two have more in common than, say, Spokane and Seattle, they feel quite dissimilar. Savannah is noteworthy for its leafy squares, languid pace, and a sense of charming decay.

Charleston, by contrast, is a jewel box of a period piece. Less green than industrious, it's filled with genteel old Southerners but is also thick with youth (due to The Citadel and College of Charleston, both shoe-horned into its narrow peninsula) and Southern hipster culture.

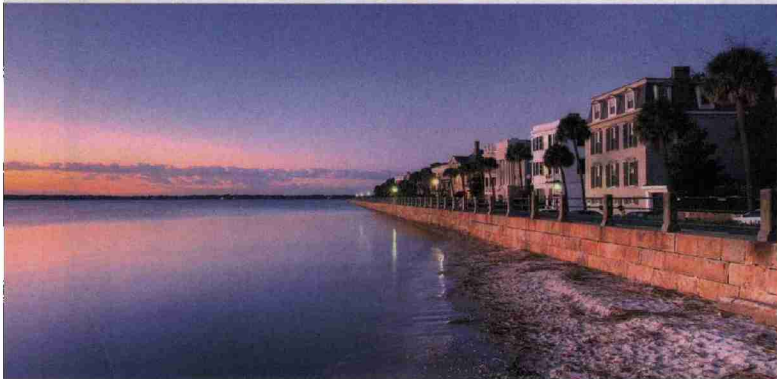
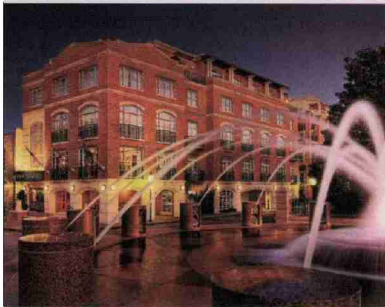
Charleston's also a tourist town, and thus I'd seriously consider visiting off-season, during its mild winter, to get a truer taste of the town. (Like Savannah, Charleston has staggering poverty not far from manicured tourist areas.)

Like many places, Charleston is in the midst of an artisanal food renaissance. Combine that with the undeniable appeal of the indigenous low-country cuisine, and food has to be among the top reasons to visit. History is another draw: The city's historic district of period homes is truly astounding. Intriguingly preserved plantation homes are a short drive out of town, as are a string of rustic Atlantic barrier islands with beautiful beaches. Finally, the annual Spoleto Festival draws a staggering array of performing arts to a city basically the size of Duluth or Rochester.

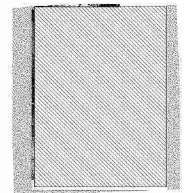
Established in the late 1600s, Charleston is quite old by American standards. By the middle of the 1700s it was one of the largest American ports

### SOUTHERN LIVING

Clockwise from top: The residences of Rainbow Row; grits and eggs with veggie hash from Butcher & Bee; The Battery seawall; HarbourView Inn.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PHOTOS COURTESY OF EXPLORCHARLESTON.COM, ANDREWCEBULKA, CLIMBERJAK/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, HOLGER OBERHAUS



## DOSSIER

and remained the largest economic hub in the South until it was eclipsed in the 1900s. It was the site of key battles in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, and its buildings bear the scars of both, plus a massive 1886 earthquake. Hurricane Hugo hit just as hard 103 years later, but the city bounces back.

A bastion of liberalism in perhaps the nation's most conservative state, Charleston is exceptionally friendly and tolerant, the only asterisk being an ennui that sets in among folks in the tourist trade. But there's no point in venturing to Charleston to avoid tourist haunts, because you will miss too much and you would quickly run out of things to do if you sought out just locals' joints.

My wife, who went to college in the South, insists spring is best in the South and the South is best in spring. Thus spring is the city's festival season. In this peak season, you will encounter crowds, packed restaurants, and high hotel rates. Still, it's one thing to stroll the historic commercial and residential districts, as we did, with David Hinson of Bulldog Tours

**WHEN:** Spring is festival season; book early for events and such. Winter is Charleston's value season; visitors will be rewarded to find the city at peaceful rest, but there is less to do.

**HOW:** There is no longer direct air service from MSP to Charleston. Expect to spend north of \$400 to fly here in season.

**NIGHTS:** Charleston is thick with small inns, many dripping with 18th-century décor—not my scene. I was most taken with the **HarbourView Inn**, nearly on the water, on the edge of the Historic District. The upscale spot boasts the right mix of modern and period, with some rooms in a historic wing that up the ante. 2 Vendue Range, 843-853-8439, [harbourviewcharleston.com](http://harbourviewcharleston.com)



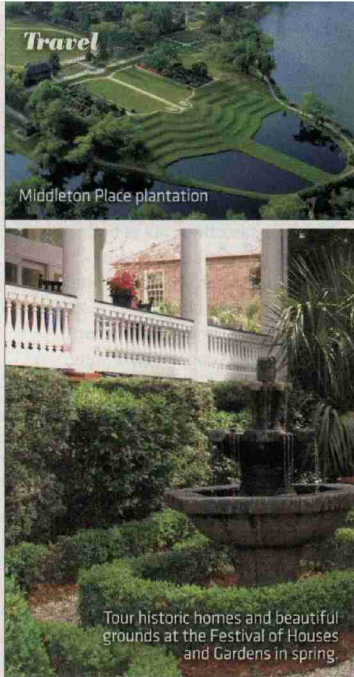
Clockwise from top:  
Spoleto Festival,  
Charleston Place,  
HarbourView Inn



Charleston lacks full-service luxury hotels, but Orient-Express's **Charleston Place** comes closest, with lots of staff, valet parking, a spa and pool, and a retail wing of fine shops. Negatives are that the sprawling hotel

is hard to navigate, and rooms, though well kept, seem dated. Also, CP will not guarantee bedding types, which can lead to unpleasant surprises at check-in. 205 Meeting St., 843-722-4900, [charlestonplace.com](http://charlestonplace.com)





MIDDLETON PHOTO COURTESY OF EXPLORECHARLESTON.COM. PIAZZA PHOTO BY LEIGH HANDAL, HISTORIC CHARLESTON FOUNDATION

(recommended, bulldogtours.com), but quite another to venture inside during the **Festival of Houses and Gardens** (March 21–April 20, 2013, historic [charleston.org](http://charleston.org)). Some of the centuries-old buildings are musty showpieces of period furniture and funky plumbing; others have been restored to mix elaborate moldings with contemporary German appliances. If you find interiors more compelling than history and exteriors, you must visit during the festival to see how (a slice of) Charleston lives.

Similarly, it is one thing to tour the serene grounds of **Middleton Place** plantation, dining on crab soup and Carolina corn bread casserole at its restaurant and strolling its gardens; it's quite another to look out over the ruins of the original house down to the Ashley River as the closing fireworks of the **Spoleto Festival** (May 24–June 9, 2013, [spoletousa.org](http://spoletousa.org)) light the night sky.

Fans of military history love Charleston for its showpieces, historic **Fort Sumter** ([nps.gov/fosu](http://nps.gov/fosu)) on an island in Charleston Harbor, and The Citadel military college. Stroll the grounds of the College of Charleston (a public liberal arts college) and The Citadel on the same afternoon for a bipolar slice of America's youth.

Charleston's colleges balance out the heavy influx of graying tourists and landed retirees and give the city an energy that keeps it evolving. A great

place to encounter students and locals is at Joseph P. Riley, Jr. Park, where the **Charleston RiverDogs** ([riverdogs.com](http://riverdogs.com)) play minor league baseball. The team, a New York Yankees affiliate owned by the same group that runs the St. Paul Saints, plays April through mid-September in the modern ballpark by the water.

My favorite spot to end each day in Charleston was at the bottom of the peninsula at **The Battery**, a seawall that showcases so much of what the city is about. Adorned with decommissioned cannons, the site was long a strategic defensive point. Today some of the city's most fashionable historic homes overlook the seawall and its adjacent park, with gorgeous views of the barrier islands in the distance. Marauding

## DINING SCENE

The low-country fare at the core of Charleston's culinary renaissance is a mélange of abundant seafood and traditional Southern cooking rooted in soul food and African American culinary traditions. Personally, I'd reconsider any dining experience in Charleston that doesn't draw on the city's culinary roots and artisanship. Low-country fare is largely unavailable outside this tiny slice of America—there are other times for pizza, Mexican food, and steak houses. Here are my picks, a diverse array of choices all sampled firsthand:

**Dixie Supply and Bakery.** An unassuming convenience store façade hides an homage to amazing renditions of quintessential low-country dishes with serious chef power behind the stove. Order at the counter and hope to snag one of the few tables. Don't leave without ordering the tomato pie and collard greens, which are life-changing. Dinner Friday only. 62 State St., 843-722-5650, [dixiecafecharleston.com](http://dixiecafecharleston.com)

**Hank's Seafood.** The city's essential seafood house, this classic, expensive haunt has a great 1940s vibe and spot-on service. The kitchen doesn't overwhelm the stars of the show with needless

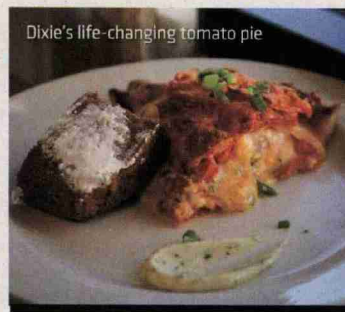


PHOTO BY LANPHER PHOTOGRAPHY

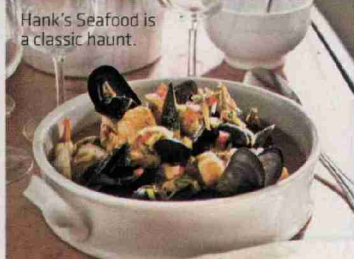
hordes have been replaced by joggers and invading tourists.

Is **Charleston** America's best city to visit? I'm not sure I'd go that far. Any town in which you'd be hard-pressed to find a week's worth of things to do to fill the days can't truly justify that anointing. But is it one of America's most alluring cities, with festivals that are global draws and a cultural and culinary scene that puts many large cities to shame? Without a doubt. ■

### + **More Info**

Contact the excellent Charleston CVB at **800-774-0006** or [charlestoncvb.com](http://charlestoncvb.com).

PHOTO COURTESY OF HANK'S SEAFOOD



Hank's Seafood is a classic haunt.

flourishes. 10 Hayne St., 843-723-3474, [hankseafoodrestaurant.com](http://hankseafoodrestaurant.com)

**Husk.** James Beard Award-winning chef Sean Brock runs the kitchen at the town's most ambitious restaurant (McCrary's), but this more casual one by Brock rooted in artisanal sourcing and Southern ingredients was voted the top new restaurant by *Bon Appétit* last year. Husk's bar may have the town's best burger. 76 Queen St., 843-577-2500, [huskrestaurant.com](http://huskrestaurant.com)

**Butcher & Bee.** Before there was Butcher & the Boar, there was this cool, super-casual sandwich shop on the fringe of the Charleston central business district, taking an artisanal spin on classic sandwiches and Southern sides. Highly recommended. It's open for lunch and late night, but no dinner. 654 King St., 843-619-0202, [butcherandbee.com](http://butcherandbee.com)

**The Macintosh.** This stylish, youthful spot is the hot locavore brasserie of the moment and boasts a great bar with a bacon happy hour. 479 King St., 843-789-4299, [themacintoshcharleston.com](http://themacintoshcharleston.com)

**FIG.** Delivering the more chef-y take on regional fare, FIG has less ambiance than Macintosh but a more ambitious menu. 232 Meeting St., 843-805-5900, [eatatfig.com](http://eatatfig.com)