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

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.
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 tourism 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

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

DOSSIER

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, near 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

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., 843-722-4300, charlestonplace.com
place to encounter students and locals is at Joseph F. Riley Jr. Park, where the Charleston RiverDogs (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 snap one of the few tables. Don't leave without ordering the tomato pie and collard greens, which are life-changing.

Dinner Friday only. 637 State St., 843-722-5650, dixiecoffecharleston.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

**Dixie's life-changing tomato pie**
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 charlestonvb.com

flourishes. 10 Hoyne St., 843-723-3474,
honkseafoodrestaurant.com

Husk. James Beard Award-winning chef
Sean Brock runs the kitchen at the town’s
most ambitious restaurant (McCrady’s),
but this more casual one by Brock rooted
in artisanal sourcing and Southern ingredi-
ents was voted the top new restaurant
by Bon Appetit last year. Husk’s bar may
have the town’s best burger. 76 Queen St.,
843-577-2500, 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, tak-
ing an artisanal spin on classic sandwiches
and Southern sides. Highly recommend-
ed. It’s open for lunch and late night, but
no dinner. 654 King St., 843-691-9702,
butcherrandbee.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. 429 King St., 843-789-
4259, themacintoscharleston.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

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