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Ghosts of civil war stir in old South

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On April 12, 1861, the first shots in the American Civil War were fired on Fort Sumter, an artificial island in Charleston Harbour. Confederate guns pounded the fort for 34 hours before the Union flag was lowered. Two years later, it was the Union's turn to bombard the Confederate-held fort, whose three-storey fortifications were smoking ruins by the war's end.

Today, Southerners and Northerners explore Fort Sumter together, the United States flag flapping above what is now a national monument. Hefty black cannon crouch behind red-brick fortifications, rebuilt to a single storey after the war, but on this sunny, peaceful afternoon it is difficult to imagine the hell this tiny island must have been, under siege.

The fort's museum humanises the scene. A highlight is that battle-scarred 1861 Union flag, but more humble artefacts include soldiers' letters and archaeological finds: buttons, pipes and crockery.

Passing the huge World War II aircraft carrier at Patriots Point Maritime Museum and the new Arthur Ravenel Jr Bridge with its vast fanned cables, we make the 30-minute boat ride back to Charleston.

It is one of the South's oldest and most charming cities, and its historic downtown is made for strolling, unless you fancy a ride on a horse-drawn carriage.

Some streets are still cobblestone and many glow by gaslight at night. Dignified 18th and 19th-century architecture abounds, such as the classically columned United States Custom House, delightful university square, and St Philip's Church, whose steeple remains a prominent landmark.

There are many museums in historic buildings, including the Old Slave Mart Museum, a reminder of what the US was fighting about 150 years ago.

History dwells in the city's stones and bricks, but also seems to hang in the air, which in summer is humid and heavy with the scent of magnolia.

I stumble upon a secluded garden path called Gateway Walk, which connects St Philip's with three of Charleston's other picturesque old churches and their graveyards. Past and present merge among time-worn headstones, some of which date back to the 17th century, and trees swathed in Spanish moss, dappling the late-afternoon sunlight.

Beautifully preserved heritage homes are everywhere, including along East Bay Street's colourful Rainbow Row, and several welcome visitors. At Edmondston-Alston House overlooking the harbour, our guide tells how an elegant home would have been during the Civil War, relating the stories behind numerous family portraits and objects.

She points out an original print of the Ordinance of Secession, whose signatures include that of the home's then owner, Charles Alston. It is the textual equivalent of those first shots on Fort Sumter, which can be seen through the window where General Beauregard once watched it burn.

A few former plantation properties endure on Charleston's outskirts. At Middleton Place, which has discounted combination tickets with Edmondston-Alston House, war and an earthquake reduced the mansion to rubble, but the guided tour of an erstwhile guest house provides glimpses into the Scarlett O'Hara lifestyle. Outside, we learn that 100 slaves laboured for 10 years to create their owners' vast playground, including the gracious terraced lawn sloping down

to the Ashley River.

As peacocks and wild turkeys wander through the grounds, horses haul visitors in old wagons, while costumed guides demonstrate some of yesteryear's skills. The bespectacled and bewhiskered cooper turns out a small barrel in no time, while the smithy sweats over his forge. Another gentleman reveals the secrets of candle-making, soap-making and coffee roasting, 19th-century style.

Charleston's only plantation property with its main house still intact is Drayton Hall. Although unfurnished, this 1793 building is impressive. While Boone Hall's 1930s Hollywood-inspired plantation house is of limited interest, the original slave quarters still stand, as does the spectacular oak avenue. Hundreds of years old and hundreds of metres long, its cathedral-like branches are draped with Spanish moss, a symbol of the South's atmosphere of easy elegance.

Downtown again, I am reminded that past and present are firm friends here. Charleston offers timeless homewares, classic fashion and handmade treats for body and soul.

The Belmont is also a pleasant mix of old and new, both in its decor and drinks, with smart, subtle twists on classic cocktails. This bar makes you want to linger, so we order cheese. It arrives on a wooden board with a generous array of accompaniments, including the Southern taste sensation of pickled okra.

The facts

FLY [United](#) flies Melbourne-Charleston return from \$1550.

EAT In bright and breezy vintage surrounds, Hominy Grill serves contemporary interpretations of classic Southern fare. Brunch options include grits, fried green tomatoes, biscuits (slightly salty scones) and Planter's Punch (hominygrill.com).

STAY Starting at \$US420 (\$450) a night, [Wentworth Mansion](#) is at the luxe end of Charleston's many accommodation options.

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