There is a certain vibe that radiates from the cobblestone streets of Charleston. Wooden carriage wheels bounce to the trills of the red-and-white-striped coachmen ringing a bell through a shower of pollen being swung from hundred-year-old trees. The clatter of the horses making their way along the century-old streets is interrupted by their steady huffs in the 100-degree southern heat. A horse stops at a red light and shakes his silken mane, braided like a Han Dynasty warrior, as the calls of vendors hawking sweetgrass baskets bounces off the wall of turn-of-the-century mansions. This kind of tangible energy is what吸引er Charleston. From the echoes of history found atcountry-estate plantations to the laughter, aroma, and flavors found at a hot new restaurant, Charleston is a city that all your senses will appreciate.

Located in the city's Historic District, Belmond's Charleston Place (205 Meeting St. Tel: 843-722-490. www.belmond.com) is the city's go-to luxury hotel. While encompassing many blocks in the area, the main entrance is down a small alley where a fourhorse fountain greets guests before they enter the porte-cochère (where horse-drawn carriages can pull up). Inside, a hand-blown Venetian chandelier that looks like it belongs in a palace rather than a hotel, is 12 feet in diameter and in height, and comprises more than 3,000 individual pieces of glass, hand-blown in Murano, Italy. The buzzing hotel is filled with weddings, reunions, and families, providing a focal point of Charleston social life (some even credit it for revitalizing a major portion of the city). Opt for a room on one of the two club levels where guests have access to free beverages (including alcoholic drinks throughout the day and breakfast, lunch, and tea).

My first night in Charleston I head for a revitalizing facial in the hotel's spa. The humidity in Charleston can kill your skin if you're not used to it, and the therapist who treated my face knew just how to take care of this New Yorker's skin. All-natural exfoliation, cleansing, and protective, sweetgrass masque worked perfectly throughout the week.

The Historic District, you will be tempted to take one of the many elegant carriages that weave through various routes around the city, but do your research as not all of these tour companies treat their horses with the care and compassion that Old South Carriage Co. (120 Anson St. Tel: 843-722-9712. www.oldsouthcarriage.com) does. Our gay guide is dressed in an early 19th-century uniform and begins the tour by telling us exactly how much care goes into maintaining the horses and ensuring that they have the proper rest and water needed. It's not just the driver reprimand that makes us feel better, but our horse is so happy-go-lucky he could be a Disney character. This is a great way to get your bearings and discover areas of the city that you may want to explore in greater detail later on.

We tilt our heads left and right, avoiding drooping Spanish moss and wave to housekeepers maintaining these endlessly beautiful colonial homes. For architecture buffs, the city offers an overwhelming amount of styles. Colonial, Georgian, Victorian, and Gothic Revival all compete to form the story of this city.

Of course, these impressive homes wouldn't exist without slavery, and the money to build them most likely wouldn't have existed without the slave trade. This point was left off our tour carriage. Charleston is currently working to complete a much-needed museum, the International African American Museum that will house an astonishing amount of knowledge and memorabilia about the slave experience in the city and the Civil Rights Movement here. The museum is set to open in 2020, but for those visiting before, be sure to arrange for a tour that specifically focuses on the history of the African American community and the unique culture that has evolved here (called Gullah). You can search for a tour at www.charlestonvbc.com.

Now this year is an incredible look at gay life in the city with the The Real Rainbow Row (www.realdaytour.com) walking tour. This two-hour interactive exploration of Charleston's rich gay history and current LGBTQ community works to highlight the once underground world of the gay people that lived in 19th-century city. Some of the highlights include the story of Down Lyally Hall, one of the first transsexuals in the US, the gay artists that helped create Charleston's Art Renaisssance, the significance of The Battery in LGBTQ, The Spoleto Festival (www.spoletos.org) a vibrant LGBTQ arts, dance, and cultural festival, and the historic Charleston landmark (7 Gibbs St.), where Germute Stein and Alice B. Toklas spent Valentine's Day.

When it comes to food, Charleston's cuisine is as diverse as the people who call it home. During my stay, I first head for some Southern barbecue at Lewis barbecue (464 North Nassau St. Tel: 843-805-9500. www.lewisbarbecue.com). Here, you can casually dine outside on some secluded pieces of meat cared for by award-winning pit master John Lewis. Using his own custom-designed smokers, the meat cooks smoked brisket, spareribs, and beef rib that literally melts in your mouth.

You'll feel like you've stepped onto the set of the Gilmore Girls when you walk into the popular local hangout Honiny Grill (267 Rutledge Avenue. Tel: 843-937-0930. www.honnysgrill.com) where James Beard Award-winning chef Robert Stehling cooks up a Lowcountry breakfast that is sure to give you the energy needed for a day of exploring. I order a mountain of buttermilk pancakes, that I drench in pure maple syrup, and a side of crispy bacon, but my eyes wander, and I quickly become envious of my friend's Nasty Biscuit, which is a delectable gravy-covered piece of fried chicken sandwiched between a freshly baked Southern biscuit. This honey spot turns into a micro-southern lounge later in the evening with students from the nearby hospital who take advantage of the wonderful outdoor bar/cafe.

In the evening, I am invited to Doug Wamzer (the director of public relations for the Charleston CVB) and his husband Trumon Smith's wonderful home along the Ashley River. When I arrive, there is an open bar, an infinity pool surrounded by his closest friends in the LGBT community, a hipster country band, and a setting that created a goldenn anbrance during magic hour. As I twist around from person to person, I am able to meet locals who work in politics, real estate, art museums, and cultural foundations. It is so wonderful to meet the fascinating, creative, and dedicated people who have gathered here.

Before we move on to a fabulous Alice in Wonderland long table for a dinner, one of the founders of Charleston's Alliance for Full Acceptance (AFFA) takes to a microphone to describe just how far the city has come since she decided to come out in the late 80s as a lesbian. Remembering the moment, she tells us, "Oh my god, I didn't know anyone else who was all the way out in Charleston 19 years ago... except Lady Chablis, so I got seven people that I really didn't know together and we started AFFA. There were maybe 15 people there, and we asked how many of us were out to everyone, and maybe two hands went up." "We decided, the seven of us to come out... and we would be the cousins in the coal mine. We went on TV, we went on billboards, and we suddenly began to let people know that we were neighbors, and now we hardly even have a gay bar, because we are like San Francisco, we go everywhere, and it's just fine... and ain't that wonderful," she laughs proudly raising her cocktail glass against the setting Southern sky. Glasses clink, the band plays, laughter resounds around the terrace, and the chandelier buzzes on the swaying golden rods. The vibrations of Charleston, I think to myself.