

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 centuries-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 wood of turn-of-the-century manors. This kind of tangible energy is all over Charleston. From the echoes of history found at countryside plantations to the laughter, aroma, and flavors found at a hot new restaurant, Charleston is a city that all your senses will appreciate.

Nestled 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 four-horse 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. An all-natural exfoliation, cleansing, and protective, sweetgrass mask worked perfectly throughout the week.

In the Historic District, you will be tempted to take one of the many horse-drawn carriage tours 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.** (12 Anson St. Tel: 843-723-9712. www.oldsouthcarriage.com) does. Our gay guide is dressed in an



Photo: Cvandylke

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 reassurance 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 houses. 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 out of our carriage tour. 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.charlestoncvb.com.

New this year is an incredible look at gay life in the city with the **The Real Rainbow Row** (www.bulldogtours.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 this bustling city. Some highlights include the story of Dawn Langley Hall, one of the first transsexuals in the US, the gay artists that helped create Charleston's Art Renaissance, the significance of The Battery in LGBT society, **The Spoleto Festival** (www.spoletousa.org) a vibrant LGBT arts, dance, and cultural festival, and the historic Charleston landmark (7 Gibbs St.), where Gertrude 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 succulent pieces of meat cared for by award-winning pit master John Lewis. Using his own custom-designed smokers, the man creates smoked brisket, spareribs, and beef ribs that literally melt 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 **Hominy Grill** (207 Rutledge Avenue. Tel: 843-937-0930. www.hominygrill.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 friends' Nasty Biscuit, which is a delectable gravy-covered piece of fried chicken sandwiched between a freshly baked Southern biscuit. This homey spot turns into a mini-cocktail lounge later in the evening with students from the nearby hospital who take advantage of the wonderful outdoor bar/café.



Photo: Sean Pavone

Wandering around the old city of Charleston, you'd be quick to forget that you're on a peninsula that jets out into one of the most important harbors in America. I go with **Schooner Pride** (Concord Street. Tel: 843-722-1112. www.schoonerpride.com) to take in the city from the sea. As the 84-foot, three-mast wooden schooner pulls out of its dock, you'll get to see a younger side of Charleston. Bathing suit-wearing millennials flood the open-air dollar-oyster porch bars that line the waterway. Our boat cruises into the harbor where pods of dolphin journey with us to a beautiful vantage point of the city. You'll really understand why it's nicknamed the Holy City when you see it from the water. Church towers rise high above the rest of the city, and their bells ring toward the Atlantic with peaceful jubilation. The port is alive with other boats, including a massive Carnival cruise ship that has begun to dock here. The locals are not happy that the Carnival ship is left idling while passengers disembark, and you'll notice signs around the city protesting this practice. The city has even taken legal action against the cruise line to protect the city, its harbor and its residence.

As we continue to sail, we pass gorgeous beachfront homes that line Sullivan's Island. It's here that Edgar Allen Poe called home while he spent time in Charleston. His most famous work created during this time is his last poem he ever completed, *Annabel Lee*, which is said to have been based on local folklore.

The boat passes old Civil War forts, and our guide tells us of the lives lost during the first naval battle of the War that took place here. "The ocean floor is lined with ghosts and memories," he tells us.

In the evening, I am invited to Doug Warner (the director of public relations for the Charleston CVB) and his husband Truman 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 sun that created a golden ambiance during magic hour. As I twirl 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 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 (AFA) 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 AFA. 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 or so of us to come out...and we would be the canaries 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 rouses around the terrace, and the chicadas buzz on the swaying golden reeds. *The vibrations of Charleston, I think to myself.* ■