the charms of CHARLESTON

In Charleston, South Carolina, the tides tell the time. Dawn dances on the ocean and through the palmetto tree fronds—a glimpse into the day ahead. The past shines bright on monumental architecture and cobblestone streets lead to cutting edge cocktails poured by a new friend. Some call it hospitality. We call it the endless welcome.

Explore Charleston
CHARLESTON, South Carolina

While the trappings of this urban (and urbane) gem are assuredly historic, a palpable exuberance is coursing across Charleston’s storied peninsula these days. From the upbeat vibe of upper King Street to the rarefied scenery tucked south of Broad Street, Charleston’s fascinating juxtaposition of new and old exudes a sense of joie de vivre that makes it a "must visit" destination.

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**TABLESCAPE**

**A FRESH START**

Photographer Lucy Cuneo kicks off the whirlwind of summer-wedding season by hosting a luncheon at Charleston, South Carolina’s Lowndes Grove. “I love this sun-drenched space,” she says. In a nod to the formal setting, Cuneo uses crystal, tapers, and lush florals, but block-printed linens, stone-ware plates, and farm-to-fork meals dial down the posh. Her knack for pairing relaxed and refined comes from rustic alfresco dining at her grandmother’s bastide near St. Tropez and the unfussy style of pioneering chef Alice Waters, for whom she once worked: “I strive to balance elegance with ease. But if all else fails, just open another bottle of wine!”

Cuneo, a healthy eater, likes salads made with just-picked vegetables.
Lowndes Grove, a restored circa-1786 plantation, is a local favorite of Cuneo’s.

A piece of scenic wallpaper hand-painted by Paul Montgomery was mounted in front of the windows in the sunroom of J.P. Horton's Charleston, South Carolina, apartment. Many of the furnishings in this small space are multifunctional: The Theodore Alexander Lyre sofa—with pillows in a Duralee ikat—is also used as a guest bed, and the trunk (which once belonged to Horton's great-grandfather) serves as a coffee table and extra storage. Floor lamp, Visual Comfort.
Double or Nothing
J.P. Horton’s petite Charleston rental is both his home and his design office. He wows clients and himself—with vivacious rooms brimming with oversize art and clever furniture hacks.
ABOVE: A round table—an heirloom from Horton's grandparents—is positioned in the transition space between the sunroom and living room. "I often take meetings there," says Horton, whose apartment also serves as his home office, "or I'll use it for game nights or casual dinners." Acrylic chairs, Modway. RIGHT: Benjamin Moore Guilford Green acts as a Fresh neutral on the walls of the living room, while a hand-painted antique chinoiserie silk screen and pillows in a vintage Fortuny fabric extend the verdant theme. The custom sofa is by Bassett. Lamp, John Pope Antiques. BELOW: A vintage bar cart holds an antique decanter and bucket, a Target shaker, and Charlotte Moss linen napkins. OPPOSITE: Horton in his Charleston neighborhood.
“I wanted my bedroom to feel like a relaxing indoor garden, so I focused on botanical textiles and live houseplants,” Horton says. “I also relied on natural textiles like linen and silk to create a sense of comfort, both visually and physically.” The bed is dressed in Pine Cone Hill sheets, the duvet cover is from Pottery Barn, and the custom square shams are in Mary McDonald’s Bermuda Blossoms for Schumacher. The walls are painted in Benjamin Moore Smokey Taupe.
This isn't your typical 28-year-old's home.

J.P. HORTON: Hal! I'm an old soul. I wanted it to look lived-in and loved, like I'd been there forever. That's why I use antiques, which instantly confer history.

JESSICA MISCHNER: It looks so much bigger than 800 square feet! What's your strategy for maximizing space?

I always start by drawing out the floor plan by hand—it gives me the creative liberty to, say, erase a sofa that isn't working, and clearly see what's missing. For instance, my living room is also my foyer, so I had to create the sense of an entry. Other space-saving tricks: buying older pieces, because they're often smaller in scale; utilizing oversize art or gallery groupings to draw the eye upward; and using a variety of lighting—table lamps, floor lamps, sconces—to add depth and dimension to a room.

So almost everything here is multi-purpose?

Yes! For me, function always comes first. That's especially true in a small space, where things inevitably move around. That's not to say that the colors and upholstery in all the rooms must match, but they definitely need to talk to one another. Plus, I get bored easily, so I'm always mixing things up.

It seems like you're a rule breaker in all the right ways.

With small spaces, you have to do whatever works. And, let's be honest, I'm not a minimalist. I have a lot of things, so it was important to me that my house feel collected but not cluttered.

How do you draw the line between the two?

To me, collected means taking a group of objects—travel mementos, family heirlooms, personal items—and editing them down to the most important of the bunch. Accessories, art, and flowers give life to a room and spirit to a home, but you don't want them all lined up on a shelf. Everything needs to be there for a reason, or it feels cluttered.

You clearly relish a good DIY project.

Early in my career, my budget often demanded that kind of creativity. That midcentury bar cart? I bought it years ago, spray-painted it cream, and lined the glass with fabric. I still love it.

What's that showstopping artwork in the sunroom?

It's actually a piece of scenic wallpaper hand-painted by the artist Paul Montgomery. It was a gift from my former design firm, and this was the only room with a ceiling tall enough to accommodate it. I decorated the entire space around it. The walls are in Benjamin Moore Guilford Green; here, it acts as a neutral and helps bring a feeling of the outdoors inside. I'm constantly inspired by nature, and my business partner, Joe Blake, and I also specialize in garden design. The blue ceiling nods to the "haint blue" verandas popular in Charleston. I love historic shades because they have complex pigments and tend to change color throughout the day, depending on the light. It's another subtle way to make a room more interesting. The blue also works with the drapery panels, which help define the space: otherwise, your eye wanders from window to window without a place to land.

But this is about more than aesthetics, right? You don't just live here, you also work from home. How do you create a separation?

It's hard. The dining room isn't only for dinner; it's also for meeting with sales reps and clients. The guest room doubles as my office, so half the room houses my clothing and the bed while the other half is where we stash our materials library and office supplies. My coping method is to stay organized. When I'm in my living room, I don't want to be staring at fabric samples. I want to relax and enjoy my home.
Functional outdoor rooms help make a tiny house feel bigger.

An outdoor covered living room is the perfect spot for hosting company or having an afternoon rest. The sofa and cushions are by RH, Restoration Hardware. The pillows are covered in Robert Allen’s Striped Affair and Perennials’ Ishi in Lime Punch. The hanging rattan chair is by Serena & Lily. For more details, see resources.
History in the Making

Vintage portraits everywhere, a mantel detailed in sidewalk chalk, and a paella pan reborn as a bathroom sink. Welcome to Alaina Michelle Ralph’s quirky, exuberant Low Country condo.
To create atmosphere in the white-box living room of her Charleston, South Carolina, apartment, designer Alaina Michelle Ralph added an antique chandelier, curtains in a vintage fabric, and horse statues flanking the sofa. Floor lamps, Robert Abbey. The walls are in Benjamin Moore Spring in Aspen.
Are we really in a 1990s condo? It feels like one of Charleston’s historic homes. Where did you find all of these antiques?

ALAINA MICHELLE RALPH: One of the occupational hazards of my job as an interior designer is that it’s hard to pass up one-of-a-kind pieces when I’m out shopping for clients. I joke that I foster them in my own space before they find their “forever homes”! I’m particularly drawn to vintage paintings, especially from the 1940s. Their color palettes tend to be more subdued than those from later decades—to me, chartreuse is exciting.

M.K. QUINLAN: What has helped you form your personal color sense? Before going out on my own, I worked here in town for designer Amelia handegan and was so inspired by the hues in her projects—complex colors that you can’t describe with just one word. And she uses a very limited palette, which helps to unify a space. That strategy was helpful here, where there’s a lot going on. In the master bedroom, I paired a quiet wall color—Benjamin Moore Wheeling Neutral—with burlap-lined bed-curtains to create a muted backdrop for art and textiles. Now bright pieces, like the vintage pink sari I use as a bed throw, really stand out. The canopy above your bed is so dramatic! It’s called a corona. I had my drapery workroom make it for me. It was a little gift to myself for Valentine’s Day one year. If you don’t have a four-poster, it’s a nice way to give your bed more presence in a room, and the fabric adds another layer of texture, too. I rented this place for five years before I bought it. It was just a blank box with wall-to-wall carpeting and linoleum kitchen floors—I wanted to do anything I could to make it more special. One of the first things I did was replace all of the lighting with antique fixtures I’d collected over the years. I installed heavy curtains and swapped the generic plumbing with nicer fixtures from Rohl in the guest bath and Newport Brass in the kitchen. If the things you touch and interact with regularly are junky, everything else starts to feel junky!

A pink kitchen is unusual. How did you decide on this color theme? I initially wanted pink quartz countertops, but it was outrageously expensive. My tile vendor found this onyx in
New York, and as soon as I got samples, I knew it was perfect. It has a sophisticated hue—more Himalayan sea salt than baby or ballet pink. But it was too brittle to use as countertops, so I had it cut into tiles that I installed on the backsplash instead. The kitchen originally opened onto the living and dining areas, but I felt it would add to the visual clutter in such a small space, and I also wanted more storage. So I separated off the kitchen with walls, which allowed me to install upper cabinetry. I used IKEA laminate cabinet bases and had wooden doors custom made and painted in a very pale pink.

**Is that an antique dresser masquerading as a vanity in the guest bath?**
Yes. I like spaces to feel as if they've evolved over time, which is hard to pull off when you have identical cabinetry throughout the house. I also think drawers offer much better storage than open cabinets. I installed a vessel sink on top of the dresser to maximize the storage space below. Mine is a vintage paella pan that I repurposed—I have another one just like it that I actually use for making paella! I had a carpenter cut the drawers so they would fit around the sink drain.

**And is that a secretary or a vanity in your bedroom?**
Both! It's a midcentury desk that I use as my vanity. It helps get jewelry and other personal items out of the bathroom, so I have more room there for storing linens and other essentials. And of course, the drawers are filled with fabric that I'm "fostering" for future pillows. Every nook and cranny in this house is filled with fabric!
AFTER LEFT: A Dansk paella pan is repurposed as a vessel sink in the guest bathroom. Faucet, Rohl. ABOVE RIGHT: Even a small bathroom presents an opportunity for a gallery-style display of vintage art. "It was meant to be temporary—I had to get some art off the floor," Ralph says. "But now I think it’s charming." LEFT: Converting an antique dresser into a vanity—as she did in the guest bath—is one of Ralph’s design signatures. The walls are in Benjamin Moore Pleasant Pink. OPPOSITE: The headboard in the guest bedroom is covered in Kelly Wearstler’s Bengal Bazaar for Groundworks. The vintage embroidered pillows are from Antiques & Beyond in Atlanta, and the fuchsia pillow is from the Mommy Pop Shop, owned by Ralph’s friend and fellow Charleston designer Cameron Schwabenton. The walls are in Benjamin Moore Elephant Gray.
Ralph enclosed the kitchen and created a “window” to the dining room.

This onyx has a sophisticated hue—more Himalayan sea salt than baby or ballet pink.

**ABOVE:** The onyx tiles on the kitchen’s backsplash inspired the room’s pink tones. **RIGHT:** Glass doors are lined with Weitzner’s Eden wallpaper to hide the laundry. Ikea cabinet bases were spruced up with custom fronts from American Door and Drawer and painted a pale rosy hue. Walls in PPG Pittsburgh Paints China Silk. **BELOW:** Ralph with her dogs, Bear (left) and Junebug. **OPPOSITE:** Antique Biedermeier chairs surround a vintage Milo Baughman burlwood table in the dining room, which doubles as Ralph’s home office.
In the master bedroom, the custom corona is in a Le Gracieux fabric lined with burlap. Ralph framed two panels of Gracie wallpaper and placed them on either side of the bed so that, she says, "I can take them with me when I move." The Italian tole chandelier is from David Skinner Antiques & Period Lighting.

OPPOSITE: Ralph uses a midcentury secretary as a vanity and catchall for everything from vintage kokeshi dolls to fabric swatches. For more details, see Resources.