THE CRUISING LIFE

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AN APPETIZER FIT FOR THE WORLD’S MOST LITTLE-KNOWN ISLAND. A POWERFUL MAN, A WATER MAMMALS. FOR YACHTSMEN, THIS IS NEVER KNOWN, FROM THE INSIDE OUT.

BY ROBERT STEPHENS

COURTESY JOHN D. SMOAK III/CHARLESTON CITY MARINA, ISTOCK (2); TIFFANYLABAY PHOTOGRAPHY, 1001SLIDE COURTESY RITA’S SEASIDE GRILLE

D Cone
THE WATERFRONT DISTRICT
of Charleston, South Carolina, is taking a Sunday afternoon nap. A paved trail that runs past City Marina is unusually empty. You can hear coffee-pots dripping inside the marina’s convenience store. The marina itself and all of its visible occupants (15 yachts, 300 smaller boats, five dock staff) are as quiet and as stationary as the marina’s enormous trademark: the 1,530-foot “MegaDock,” touted as the largest freestanding fuel dock in the Southeast. Raindrops hit the warm planks, cracking open the scent of an approaching southern storm and, perhaps, a chance to see Charleston afresh.

We aren’t nappers. Not me. Not my wife. Not our three young daughters. Cabin fever for us can be perilous. So I hustle down the dock to the marina office where Charlie, Wilder, Mason, Stephanie and assistant harbor master Trey Hayes have taken shelter from the downpour.

“We need help,” I announce as Mason hands me a towel. “My family has to get out.”

The staff tosses some suggestions toward the dartboard. Market Street? Too predictable. Fort Sumter? Too gray. The Battery? Too... done.

“What do boaters completely miss when they’re in Charleston?” I ask. “What’s on the fringe?”

Trey puts his finger on a wall map and traces it south. “Folly Beach, about 20 minutes away,” he says. “It has a unique vibe.”

We could use a vibe.

Trey pulls a few business cards off a display case.

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A MEGA WELCOME: CHARLESTON FOR YACHTSMEN

Eight years ago, a couple from the Northeast came to Charleston to winter on their sailboat. They still haven’t left. Seasonal yachtsmen often come for winters that stretch into spring. Among the reasons they stay: CHARLESTON HARBOR sits at almost the same latitude as Bermuda, but with fuel prices that won’t make your eyes explode. THE “MEGADOCK” at City Marina is the royal suite of the Southeast. It’s 20 feet wide, nearly quarter-mile long, offers a mean low water depth of 20 feet and sits well off the main shipping channel. MILE MARKER 469.5 is about halfway between Norfolk, Virginia, and Vero Beach, Florida. You could argue it’s a more convenient jump-off point to Europe than Fort Lauderdale. YACHT CAPTAINS find mechanics, parts — anyone and anything that’s needed — near the marina. SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY. Southern climate. Nonstop southern cuisine.
One for a shuttle van. One for a yellow cab. One for limo service. “We had a 180-foot Benetti here a little while back,” he says. “The owner had a Ferrari in the tender garage.”

We’ll be taking a van.

The ride from the marina takes us island hopping. Even on a dry day, more than 40 percent of Charleston County is composed of water, mostly rivers, tributaries and inlets. They form a playground for tenders and kayaks around a puzzle of islands connected by bridges the size of speed bumps and skyscrapers. On the other side of one bridge, we pass homes the colors of Popsicles and a sign that says we’ve indeed found Charleston’s fringe.

“Folly Beach: The Edge of America.”

What was good-naturedly known 40 years ago as a hippie hideout is now an offbeat yet upscale escape. Near the $2.5 million homes and directly across from the oceanfront is a tone setter: Rita’s Seaside Grille. Inside, under hanging surfboards, a long table is open, save for one chair that happens to be occupied by Rita’s owner, Bill Hall. When he finds out we’ve come from City Marina, he says, “Did you all fit in your Ferrari?”

Vans. Taxis. Sports cars. Hall has seen them all arrive here from the MegaDock. He’s met yachtsmen who plan their cruises to Charleston and their commutes to Rita’s for one reason. “The nachos.”

“Three days ago, we put a platter on Air Force One for the president,” Hall says.

Folly Beach does not take itself too seriously. Its celebrations include Folly Gras and the New Year’s Flip Flop Drop. People here put sugar on french fries and pimiento cheese in hamburgers. And at some point, a person in the kitchen at Rita’s decides to play with the nacho platters because ours arrives with seared tuna in place of beef alongside watermelon chunks instead of tomato. There’s some hesitation at first, and then 10 hands go on the attack. We can assume the manners would be no better on a megayacht or a presidential aircraft.

Outside, the rain has stopped. A jaw-dropping sunset is blooming on the confused horizon, over a maze of waterways that lead to more surprises.
DOCK. GAWK. INDULGE.
WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO EAT WHEN BOATING THROUGH CHARLESTON.

THE INN AT MIDDLETON PLACE
GOURMET DINNER IN A FARM SETTING THAT’S HOME TO AMERICA’S OLDEST LANDSCAPED GARDENS (1741).

ANGEL OAK TREE
LOCAL HISTORIANS SAY IT’S 1,500 YEARS OLD, WITH A CANOPY THAT COVERS 7,000 SQUARE FEET.

CHARLESTON CITY MARINA

SWEET-GRASS BASKETS
HANDWOVEN CRAFTS ARE HOLDOVERS FROM WEST AFRICAN CULTURE CALLED “GULAM,” ONE FAMILY HAS HAD A BASKET NEARLY 200 YEARS.

SULLIVAN’S ISLAND

ATLANTIC OCEAN

WADMALAW ISLAND

FOLLY BEACH

LUNCH

BREAKFAST

CHICKEN AND WAFFLES
Dixie Supply Bakery and Cafe
(2 miles from City Marina)
Al and Kris Holmes gathered recipes from local families and opened this nook near downtown Charleston. Easy to overlook, but good enough to warrant a Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives segment on Food Network.

HUSH PUPPIES
Fleet Landing (Port of Charleston)
The inside of this former Navy supply building is wide open, with a view of Fort Sumter. Fitting for the space, the chef’s hush puppies are as big as baseballs, and they’re filled with lobster sauce, shrimp, leeks and corn. They call it “maritime chic.”

DINNER

SHRIMP AND GRITS
The Inn at Middleton Place
(18 miles from City Marina)
Shrimp and grits are to Charleston what cheesesteak is to Philly — everyone has their take. At Middleton Place, they’re infused with Carolina blue crab (about as elegant as grits get) and served in a classic lowcountry setting.

SWEET-TEA VODKA
Firefly Distillery (Wadmalaw Island, 20 miles from the harbor)
They use leaves from the area’s only tea plantation and liquor from this distillery at Irvin House Vineyards. You don’t need to like vodka to enjoy the experience — or the scenic drive from the heart of Charleston.
TWELVE HOURS LATER

we’re on the move again. To an even looser fringe, Capt. Gates Roll is guiding us around Charleston’s puzzle pieces on his 27-foot Carolina Skiff. Between marsh fields. Around shoals. Away from the city to a place rarely visited. His posture is straight. His nose is up. If he had a tail, he’d be wagging it.

“This might be the cleanest air on the East Coast,” says Roll, a naturalist with Coastal Expeditions, an area outfitter. “Not many people get out this way.”

I’d been tipped off to “a wild island” by a girl changing a flat tire across the street from City Marina. “Bulls Island, I think it’s called,” she said. “I hear it’s different, but I don’t know anyone who’s been there.” When I asked six people around the dock, including harbor master David Isom, if they’d ever been to Bulls Island, they all shook their heads.

The island is about 25 nautical miles from Charleston Harbor, a nice day cruise for a quick boat. A small Coastal Expeditions ferry embarks from a dock outside of Charleston and reaches Bulls Island’s southwestern point. But Roll is taking us to the opposite tip of the island, 7 miles from the ferry landing. He’s a human chart plotter and knows the way to the island as easily as we know the way to the drinks in the cooler.

“Where I’m taking you is one of the nicest beaches I’ve ever seen,” he says. This from a captain who’s worked in Mallorca, the Virgin Islands and Antigua, which claims 365 beaches.

After pausing to watch a loggerhead turtle off to port and three dolphins play around the boat, we come to a stretch of sand the length of North Bimini Island. Not a grain of it has been touched by humans today — only by dozens of sand dollars and two horseshoe crabs the size of woks. The minutes slowly turn to hours. Our morning walk turns to an afternoon stroll. Toward the island’s spine are otters, black fox squirrels and birds we’ve never seen before. Most unusual of all is the sight of three figures in the distance. People. Even at a mile away, it feels like they’re violating our space.

“We should head back,” I say.

On our return to the mainland, Gates is back in beagle mode, pointing out wildlife and marveling at the water that, at various moments, he calls:

“The most productive ecosystem on the planet.”

“The most overlooked feature in Charleston.”

“The most important source of Charleston’s wealth in Colonial times.”

Wealth. Colonial times. Oh yeah, the past. It’s more comfortable to escape it, say by combing a lonely stretch of beach, than to uncover it. But the truth is, we can’t say we know Charleston, even on its exotic edges, if we ignore its history.
Perhaps no one watches
money flow into Charleston’s economy with the
front-row seat that David Isom has at Charleston
Harbor. “We pumped 55,000 gallons of fuel into
one yacht,” says Isom, who became harbor master
in early 2015. That one yacht was Larry Ellison’s
former ride, Rising Sun. All 454 feet of her making
use of the MegaDock. “This is one of the few marinas
anywhere that can handle that much boat.”
Captains use City Marina as a port when pro-
visioning for cruises to Europe or to refuel after
arriving from the Med. In fall and spring, a parade
of yachts moving up and down the Intracoastal
Waterway creates a rush here at mile marker 469.5.
They come to a waterfront that’s a mix of New
Orleans, Appalachia and Wall Street. But it’s just
the threshold of Charleston.
“You should go up the Ashley River,” says Michael
Tracy, dock supervisor at City Marina. “There’s an
old plantation, Middleton Place.”
“I’m not really into the plantations,” I say.
“This one isn’t what you think,” says Tracy.
About 25 miles upriver, tucked between the water
and a shaded two-lane road, we find horse pastures,
oak trees, grazing sheep and ivy-covered lodges.
Old times. The past. Do we dare go there?
Because we all know the Charleston that con-
ects yachts from the Med now was infamously
connecting ships from West Africa back then. Our
girls are talking to the goats at Middleton Place
when a volunteer walks up. She isn’t surprised

My eyes stop on another body of
water: a pond. Cooling off
in it are two water buffaloes.
when I confess my uneasiness about plantation wealth and the indentured backs it was originally built on. She’s heard it before.

“It’s easy to ignore the past,” she says. “But we need places like this as reminders of how far we’ve come — and where we might be headed as a country.”

When I look around, my eyes stop on another of Charleston’s bodies of water: a pond. Cooling off in it are two water buffaloes. Water buffaloes?

“That’s what helped put Charleston on the map,” she says. Turns out, the shallow waterways Roll is so passionate about and the deep waters that allow yachts to come and go were ideal for growing and exporting rice. While the boll weevil wiped out the cotton fields, the rice harvest flourished. And what’s better at working the rice fields than a water buffalo?

“Without them,” she says, “Charleston might not be what it is today.”

That evening, a 150-foot Christensen is taking a rest at the MegaDock. Yachtsmen are walking dogs and scheduling taxi rides. One woman from Florida finds out my family has been here for a few days and asks, “What do you recommend?”

I mention the usuals. Market Street. The Battery. Fort Sumter. “We’ve done all of those,” she says. “Have we missed anything?”

I ask if she has a few minutes. She might not believe what’s out there. 

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**THE PARTY STARTS HERE**

Among the dozen area marinas, Bristol Marina hosts parties under a gazebo. At City Marina (left), home to HMY Yachts, Rising Sun once hosted a party on her swim platform.

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**ISLAND GEMS**

The islands around Charleston have their own personalities. Kiawah (world-class golf), Isle of Palms (beachfront resorts), Sullivan’s (folksy shops) and Bulls (raw nature, left).