

CHARLESTON

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TOP TENDERS

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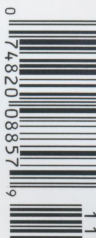
GONE WITH THE WIND

THE MAJESTIC MANGUSTA 165E HAS THE SPEED TO MATCH HER SIZE

◦54◦

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NOVEMBER 2015

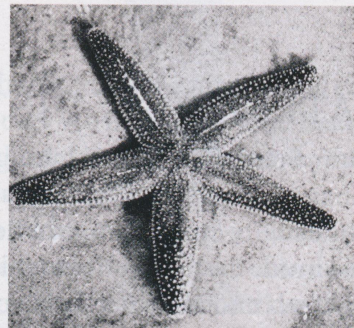






THE CRUISING LIFE

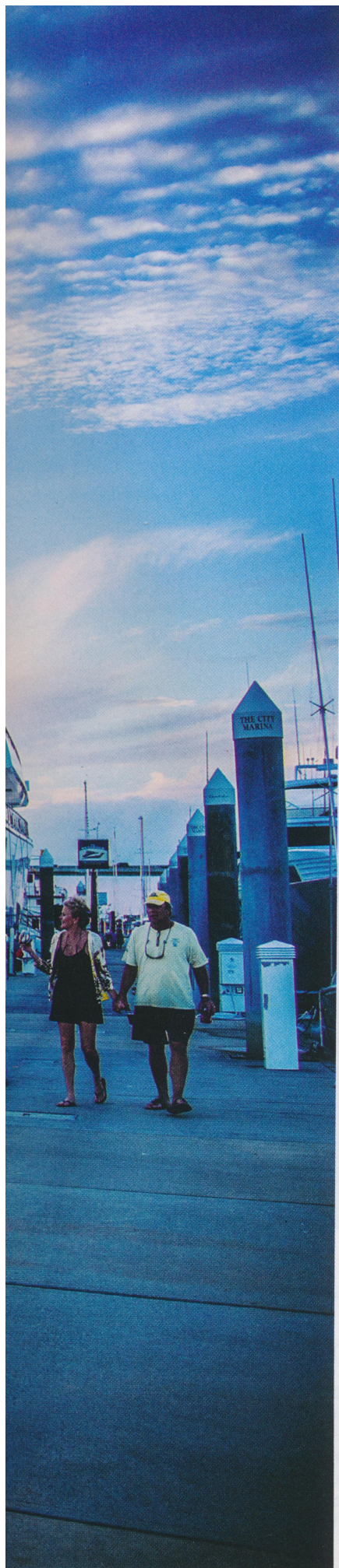
B E Y O N D T H E G I A N T D O C K



AN APPETIZER FIT
FOR THE WORLD'S MOST
POWERFUL MAN. A
LITTLE-KNOWN ISLAND
ESCAPE. STRANGE
WATER MAMMALS. FOR
YACHTSMEN, THIS IS
THE CHARLESTON YOU
NEVER KNEW, FROM THE
INSIDE OUT.

BY ROBERT STEPHENS

COURTESY JOHN D. SMOAK III/CHARLESTON CITY MARINA, ISTOCK (2); TIFFANY LARAY PHOTOGRAPHY, 100ISLAND COURTESY RITA'S SEASIDE GRILLE



COVERIES The 454-foot Lürssen *Rising Sun* found rare, comfortable dockage in Charleston. More unexpected finds lie outside the harbor.

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.



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 a

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 conve-

nient 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.

ISTOCK: MARK VANDYKE PHOTOGRAPHY



IF DOCKS COULD TALK

"We've seen Mini Coopers offloaded from yachts, parties on enormous swim platforms, and ... some requests I can't mention." — Harbor master David Isom

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. >

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

DOCK. GAWK. INDULGE.

WHERE TO GO AND
WHAT TO EAT WHEN BOATING
THROUGH CHARLESTON.

SWEET-GRASS BASKETS
HAND-WOVEN CRAFTS ARE
HOLDOVERS FROM WEST
AFRICAN CULTURE CALLED
"GULLAH." ONE FAMILY
HAS HAD A BASKET NEARLY
200 YEARS.

CHARLESTON
CITY MARINA

ANGEL OAK TREE
LOCAL HISTORIANS
SAY IT'S 1,500 YEARS
OLD, WITH A CANOPY
THAT COVERS 17,000
SQUARE FEET.

SULLIVAN'S
ISLAND

WADMALAW
ISLAND

FOLLY
BEACH

ATLANTIC
OCEAN

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
(15 miles from City Marina)
Shrimp and grits are to Charle-
ston 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.

NIGHTCAP



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.

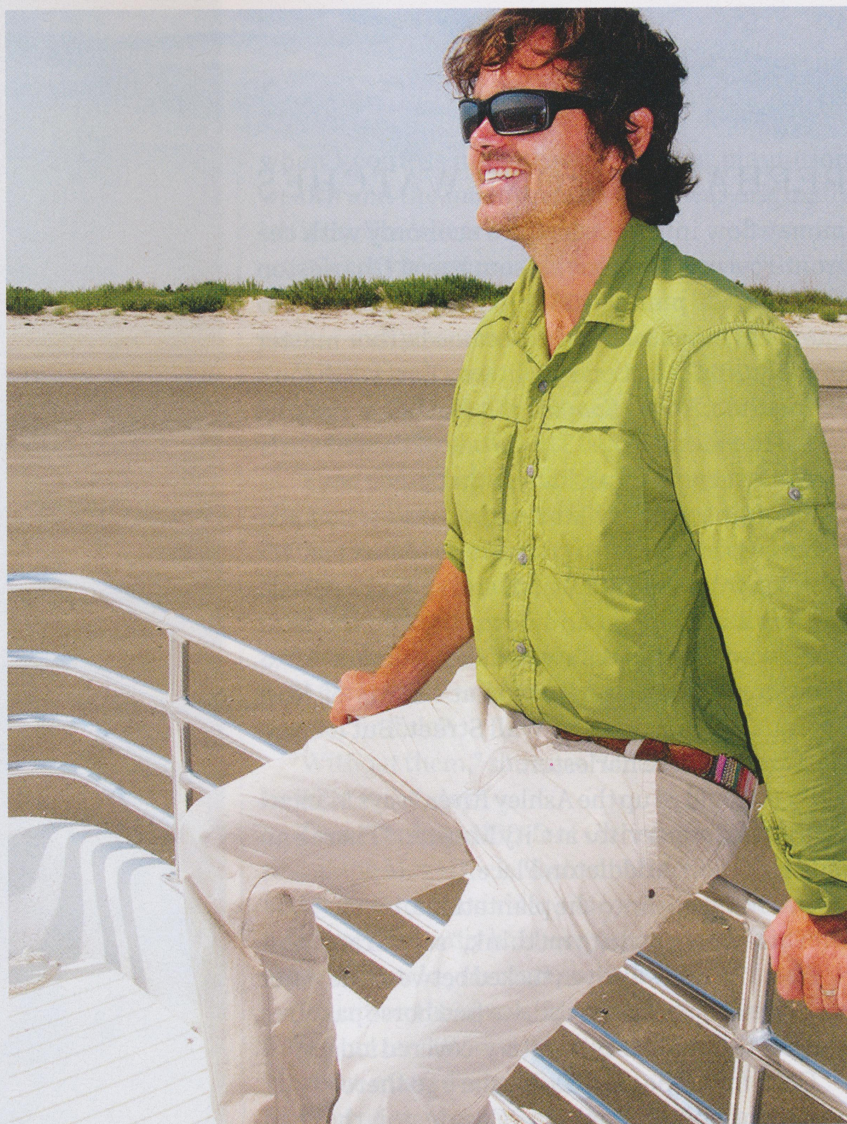
"This might be the cleanest air on the East Coast," says Roll, a naturalist with Coastal Expeditions, an area outfitter. "Not many people get out this way."

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 provisioning 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 connects 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. ♡



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.



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).