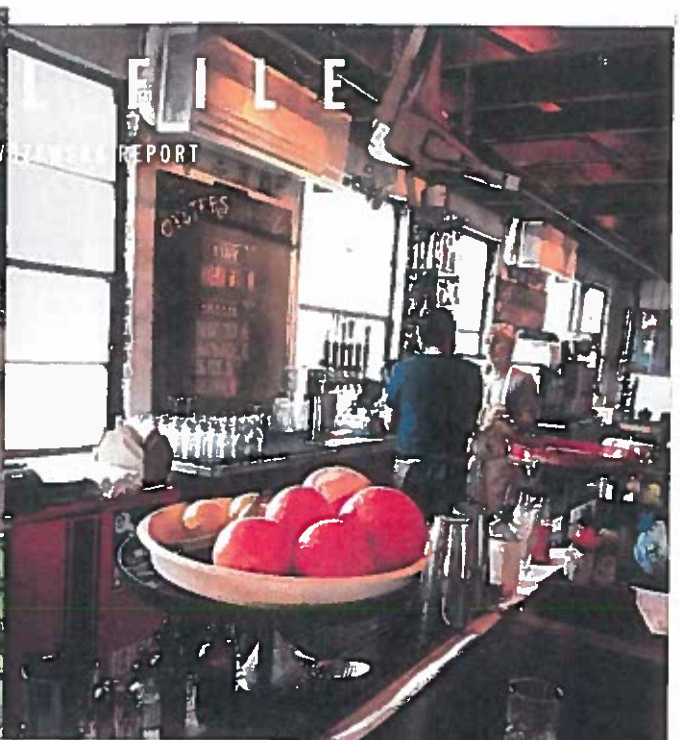
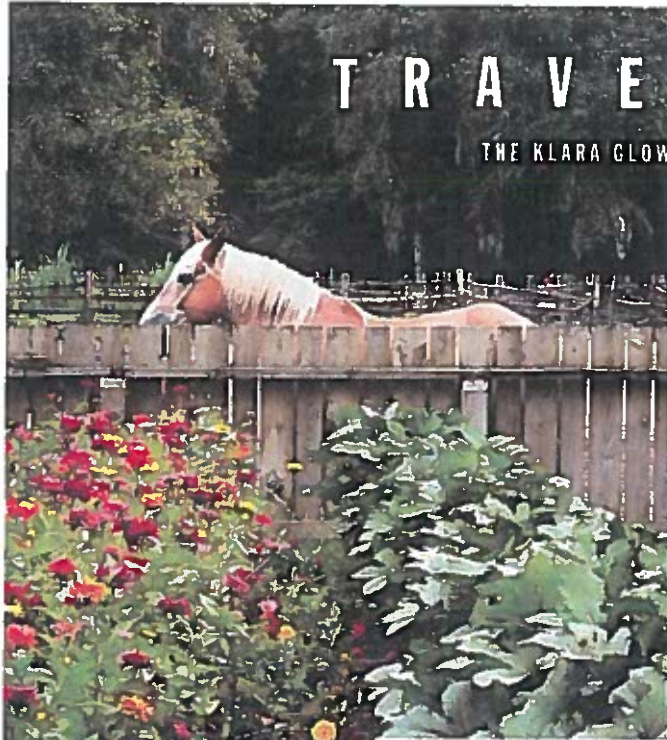


TRAVEL FILE

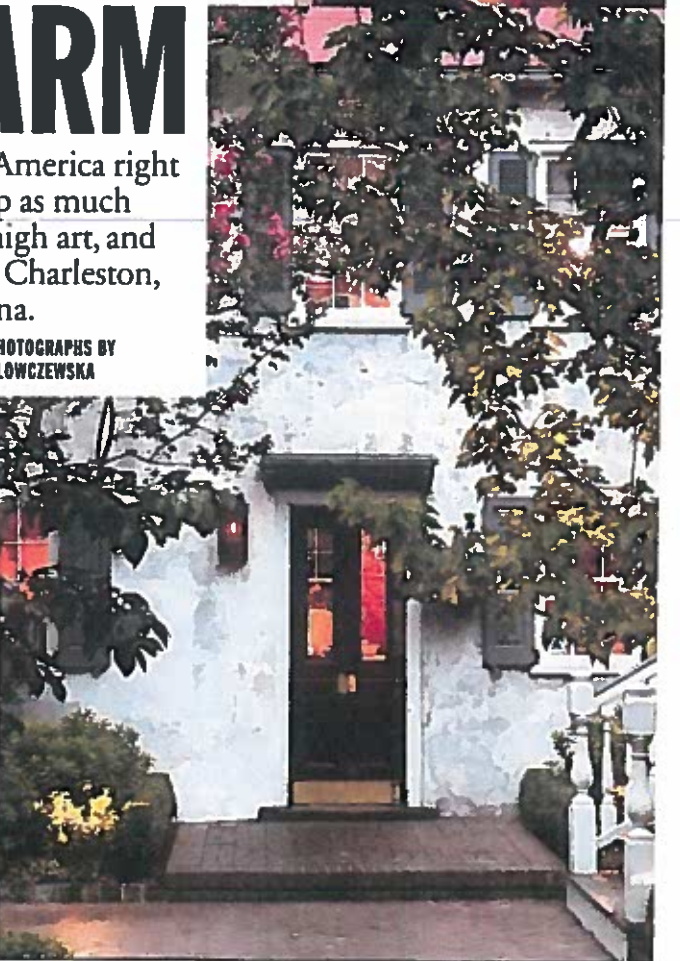
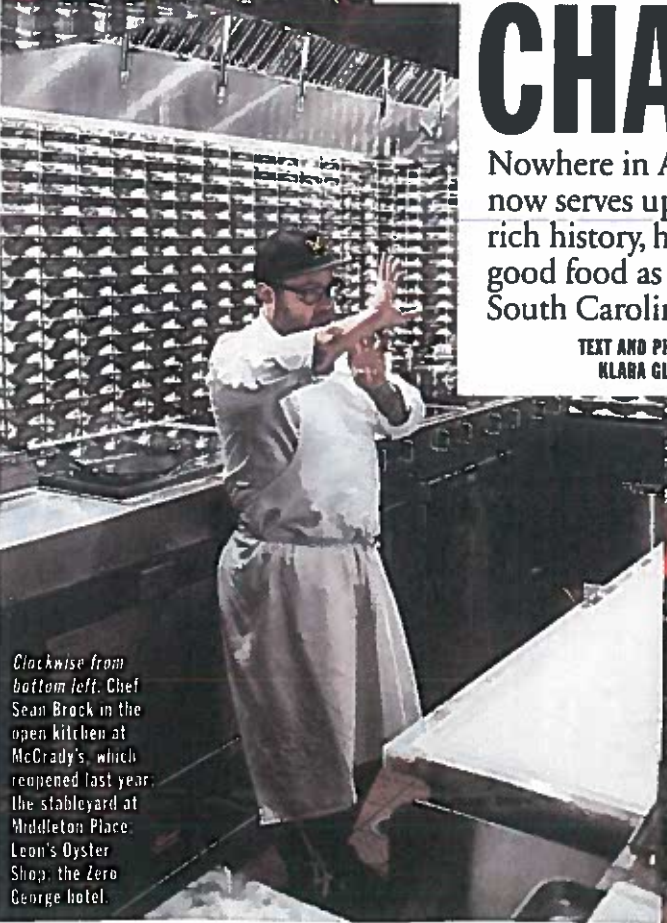
THE KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA REPORT



SOUTHERN CHARM

Nowhere in America right now serves up as much rich history, high art, and good food as Charleston, South Carolina.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA



Clockwise from bottom left: Chef Sean Brock in the open kitchen at McCrady's, which reopened last year; the stableyard at Middleton Place; Leon's Oyster Shop; the Zero George hotel.

TRAVEL FILE

Coming home at the end of my first day in Charleston to 86 Cannon (“The Poinsette House”), a recently opened five-room boutique hotel in a renovated building from 1862, I found dangling from the brass door-knob to my room, in its own little gauze bag, a piece of chocolate boxed and tied with a pink ribbon—a charming riff on the tired luxury hotel trope of the turndown pillow treat.

From top: The nightly amuse-bouche on a guestroom door at 86 Cannon; doorman Paul Simmons at the Spectator Hotel; part of Charleston's parade of homes.



There seemed something ineffably “Charleston now” about that offering—small, well presented, and good to eat.

I was here to experience what’s behind Charleston’s transformation into one of America’s most visited cities—to sample in six days a bit of this and that: hotels, museums, excursions, and restaurants. There was a method to the madness: My adventure felt figuratively right, in this most gastronomically creative of places, where renowned chef Sean Brock had just reimagined his McCrady’s as a 22-seat tasting-menu-only establishment.

“For more than a hundred years after the Civil War we were a dusty old jewel box,” said Tommy Dew, who runs historical tours in downtown Charleston. “A broken agrarian society.

And then”—Dew has a colorful way with language—“they ripped the lid off. And people are mesmerized by how interesting it is—the architecture, the food, the entire environment. We are the product of really rich white folks and of a really rich black culture. And because we lived in geographic and economic isolation for generations after the war along this coast, there’s a purity here that people like. Charleston is real.”

WALKING IN HISTORY

Nothing embodies that purity quite like downtown, the city’s historic core, and I proceeded—as one naturally does here—to go on walkabouts. In a roughly five-square-mile area on the flat, flood-prone peninsula formed by the confluence of the Ashley and Cooper

rivers where they flow into Charleston Harbor and the Atlantic (the confident and self-regarding pre-Civil War Charlestonians were wont to say “where they create the Atlantic”), you can find at least 100 buildings from before 1776 and 1,000 from before 1861: civic structures, churches, merchants’ mansions, and townhouses built by early America’s wealthiest rice and cotton planters to flaunt their riches. And unlike in other American cities mind-

ful of landmark preservation, nothing new mars the visual continuity.

Nowhere else have I seen so many plaques announcing National Register of Historic Places status. I was mesmerized by the tiers of columned side porches, called piazzas, and by the masterful ironwork of gates, balconies, window grills, and fences. (Some of the best examples are by an African-American blacksmith, Philip Simmons, who in the course of a 78-year career elevated a practical craft into an art form and whose work is now in the Smithsonian.) I peered into statue-studded half-hidden gardens, the trees lushly abloom. PRIVATE, announced one sign, PLEASE ENJOY FROM STREET—Southern manners applied even to a warning about trespassing.

American history informs every marker in the city, and rambling yields an education. The house at 117 Broad Street? That belonged to Edward Rutledge, one of three Charlestonians to sign the Declaration of Independence.

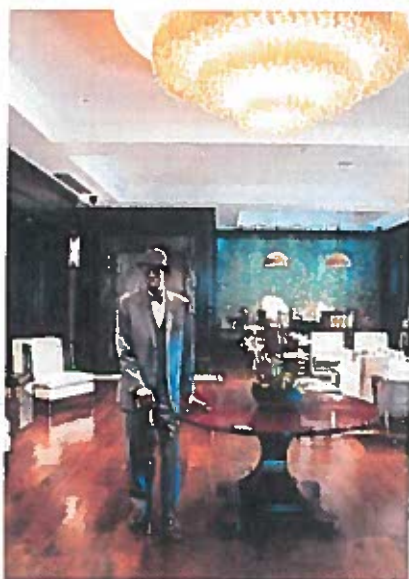
(Reflective of its prominent status in the 18th century, Charleston also had three signers of the Constitution.) The red brick building at 87 Church? George Washington stayed there during his 1791 tour of the Deep South. A plaque on his statue sums up the visit tellingly: Washington’s “enormous personal popularity served as a significant force in binding the former thirteen colonies into a single nation... Confronted with the competing philosophies of northern businessmen and southern planters, [he] had the unique ability to recognize and promote the best

TOURS TO BOOK

TOMMY DEW’S WALKING HISTORY
If you haven’t been to Charleston before, the informed and personable Dew provides an excellent overview (with a Southern perspective). \$25 PER PERSON FOR 2 HOURS, TOMMYDEW’S WALKING TOUR.COM

COASTAL EXPEDITIONS
Bespoke half, full, and multiday kayak tours along creeks, beaches, and estuaries with expert naturalist guides—the way to see the Lowcountry’s natural beauty. COASTAL EXPEDITIONS.COM

ALL ROADS NORTH
If you want to combine Charleston with a longer visit to the Lowcountry, this company will customize the ideal luxury road trip. Ask for Sam Highley. ALLROADSNORTH.COM



MUSEUMS

Charleston is itself a living museum, but these institutions deepen the experience immeasurably:

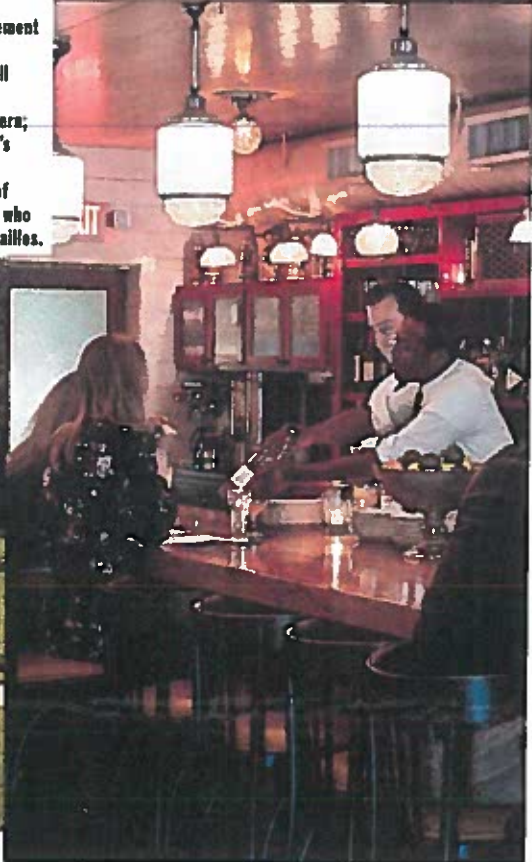
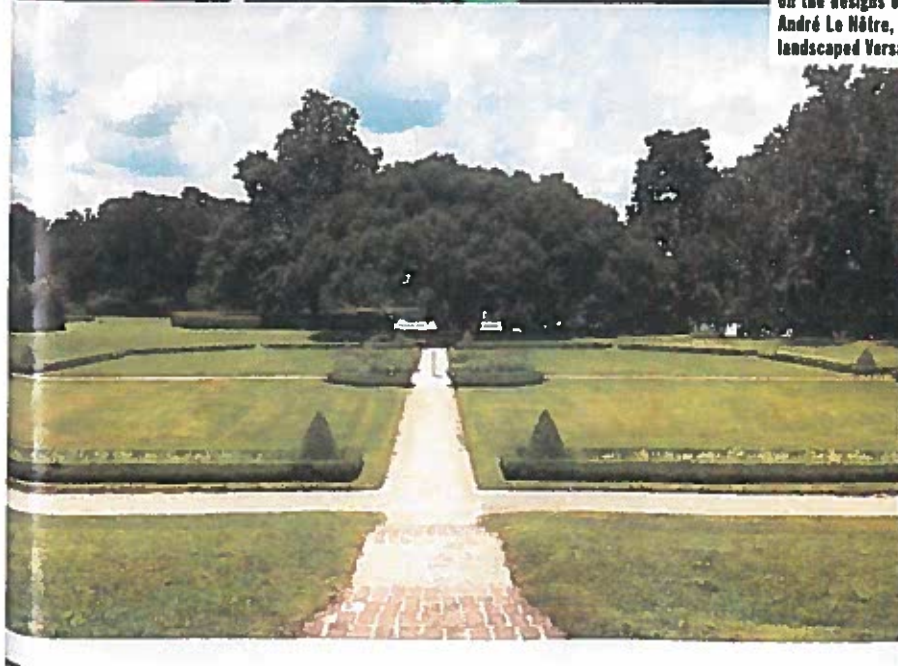
- AIKEN-RHETT HOUSE MUSEUM
- DRAYTON HALL PLANTATION
- GIBBES MUSEUM OF ART
- MIDDLETON PLACE PLANTATION
- NATHANIEL RUSSELL HOUSE MUSEUM



PETER FRANK EDWARDS/ACDUX (SIMMONS, LITTLE JACK’S TAVERN)



Clockwise from left: Coastal Expeditions' kayaks on Shem Creek; the statement staircase at the Nathaniel Russell House Museum; Little Jack's Tavern; Middleton Place's gardens, based on the designs of André Le Nôtre, who landscaped Versailles.



TRAVEL FILE

WHERE I ATE

CRU CAFE

Casual spot with porch seating so beloved by locals you should make a reservation.

FIG

One of the first places to establish Charleston's high-end farm-to-table dining. Book a month ahead.

HOMINY GRILL

The place for brunch. Classic, fresh Lowcountry dishes—I loved the shrimp and grits—in a historic “single house.”

LEON'S OYSTER SHOP

Superbly done Southern comfort food in a renovated garage. I liked it so much I went twice.

LITTLE JACK'S TAVERN

I had a slew of appetizers at the bar and enjoyed every bite and every minute. I hear the burgers are great.

McCRADY'S TAVERN

Chef Sean Brock's newest venture: perfect American pub food and a lively bar.

THE ORDINARY

This high-energy place in a former bank (the kitchen is in the vault), with rum and oyster bars, specializing in seafood.

PENINSULA GRILL

Classic Southern restaurant, with velvet walls, superb service, and the Ultimate Coconut Cake.

of each.” The prominent grave in St. Philip's churchyard belongs to John C. Calhoun, the pro-limited government, pro-slavery seventh vice president of the United States, whose beliefs would strongly influence the South's secession from the Union (which began with South Carolina). Rainbow Row, the longest cluster of intact pre-Revolutionary row houses in the United States, fronts East Bay, where slaves were auctioned; more people from Africa and the Caribbean arrived in America through Charleston Harbor than anywhere else. Fittingly, Rainbow Row inspired Catfish Row in George Gershwin's 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*, which was itself based on a 1925 novel by Charlestonian DuBose Heyward about the lives of freed blacks who converged on the city from the surrounding countryside in the decades after the Civil War.

As native son and historian Robert Rosen has noted, even at the city's most down and depleted, beyond “the supposed climax, defeat in the Civil War, [Charleston's] people are so complicated that the ‘blacks and whites all mix'd together’ produced a greatness... *Porgy and Bess*, the Charleston, the jazz of the Jenkins Orphanage Band, the preservation movement, and the Spoleto Festival USA.” And astounding cuisine, influenced in the last decade by the revival of ingredients, especially heirloom grains, used by the Gullah people, descendants of African slaves.

PROGRESSIVE MEALS

While good home-cooked meals were long easy to come by in the wet, fertile Lowcountry, serious restaurant dining is relatively recent. “There are a lot of reasons for it,” said chef Mike Lata, co-owner of both FIG, which put Charleston's high-end locavore cuisine on the map, and the Ordinary. “It all has to do with Charleston's *intimacy*. We have immediate access to local farmers, shrimpers, fishermen. Because it's not a convention city—it's too small for that—we have only savvy and sophisticated people coming here. Basically, the whole city has become a single high-end resort. And a great audience always spurs culinary creativity. And competition. Especially when you're all so



The bar at FIG has the same high locavore menu as the dining room. Left: The breakfast room at 86 Cannon serves baked goods, fruit, quiche, and advice for how to spend your day.

close to one another. I guess I'd say,” he laughed, “that we have a very high-energy situation.”

Indeed. The food scene has gotten so hot that according to a recent article in the *Charleston Post and Courier* there is now one-upmanship even among the city's restaurant bathroom designers. And my casual pretrip canvassing yielded a staggering 48 ecstatic recommendations for places to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner, plus sweetshops and takeouts.

I did my best to partake of as much as I could, sometimes opting for a progressive meal—appetizers, say, at the casual and convivial Little Jack's Tavern (how you make a plate of crudites exciting I don't know, but they did it through some mysterious combination of presentation, freshness, and dip) and main courses at Leon's Oyster Shop, which is in a former auto repair garage (char-grilled oysters, fried Brussels sprouts, scalloped potatoes, fried chicken: ultimate comfort food). Lata's FIG couldn't seat me in its white-tableclothed dining room until 10 p.m. (it hadn't occurred to me to book a month ahead), but the bar was jolly, and I still dream about the two appetizers I had: a tomato tarte tatin and a Carolina peach and lemon cucumber salad.

At the formal Peninsula Grill one night, I decided to go all out. I ordered: six oysters; the Lowcountry classic, she-crab soup; and lobster three ways. And because the place is famous for its 12-layer Ultimate Coconut Cake, I asked for a piece. “May I



Portrait of Reverend Caesar S. Ledbetter (1921), by Edwin Harleston, at the Gibbes Museum of Art. Many of the 10,000 works in the museum's collection relate to Charleston and the South.

TRAVEL FILE

WHERE I STAYED

86 CANNON

Fresh five-room gem in a fully restored 1862 "single house" in a chic emerging area. Innkeepers Marion and Lori Hawkins are genial hosts with helpful tips on their constantly evolving town.

THE RESTORATION

Central location, all suites, and a buzzy rooftop restaurant and bar called the Watch—the place to see the sun set over Charleston. The suite kitchens make it a good family choice, too.

ZERO GEORGE

Five historic residential buildings around a romantic courtyard. Casual elegance, loads of charm, and an award-winning kitchen that makes dinner a must.

please just have a fraction of a portion," I implored my waiter.

"No, ma'am," he responded, after first disappearing into the kitchen. "The chef feels that if you take away any layers, it's no longer the ultimate."

BEACHES AND BEYOND

Mornings were for excursions into the beauty of the Lowcountry: grand estates, barrier islands, estuaries and creeks. One day I Ubered it to two country estates along the Ashley River. Drayton Hall, founded in 1738 by John Drayton and considered an outstanding example of Palladian architecture in North America (if not its finest colonial home), not only survived intact both the Revolutionary and Civil wars, it was kept by ensuing generations of Draytons virtually in its original condition: no plumbing, electricity, or anachronistic furniture—true historic preservation. "What you are looking at is what people in the 1700s saw," the museum guide wanted to make clear. (Similar authenticity is found in town at the Aiken-Rhett House Museum.) But what struck me more powerfully than even the empty, untouched rooms and progressively ornate columns (Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian, the last reserved for the upstairs chamber where dancing took place) was the service staircase behind a wooden door—narrow, steep, spiraling, and utterly dark. "It is incredible how people managed," the guide pointed out. "There is no bannister. The enslaved women wore long skirts. They held candles to light their way, large trays, chamber pots. This was a very busy staircase."

What stopped me at nearby Middleton Place,

built in phases during the 1700s and 1800s and the birthplace of Arthur Middleton, another of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, was the formal gardens. America's oldest and largest, they were inspired by a design by André Le Nôtre, who created Louis XIV's gardens at Versailles.

After sampling the easy modern luxuries of Kiawah Island, 27 miles away (secluded private compounds, vast beaches, 30 miles of biking trails, golf courses, and, for those



who don't own a home here, the lovely Sanctuary Hotel), I rose one morning before dawn for a three-hour kayak tour, starting in nearby Mount Pleasant and paddling down Shem Creek estuary, which was still lined with shrimping boats, and out into Charleston Harbor. The manatee that my

guide, Geoff Caruso of Coastal Expeditions, had been tracking in the creek chose not to make an appearance, but once we had paddled into the harbor proper two dolphins did, busily herding fish for their breakfast all around us as ospreys dive-bombed for theirs and pelicans stood mostly motionless on their small island breeding ground. We paddled near the private docks of some fine antebellum homes, angled just so to catch the breeze. "The planters were the billionaires of their day, the one percent of the one percent," Caruso said. "And one of the great ironies is that the Africans taught them to plant the rice that made them rich."

He pointed toward the forts: the Revolutionary War-era Fort Moultrie and Fort Sumter, from which the first shots of the Civil War were fired and which guards the entrance to the harbor, and then toward the church-steepled silhouette of the so-called "Holy City" before us, growing progressively lighter with the rising sun. "You can see from out here everything people come to Charleston for."

Well, yes and no. "The beauty of Charleston," Robert Rosen wrote in 1982, "mesmerizes people and makes it difficult for them to visualize the morality play that is Charleston's history." Maybe that was so then, but I was struck by how the city stands for so much more than the spectacle of its landscape. Everywhere I went, Charleston seemed to be airing the good and the bad of its provenance—prosperity based on slavery—and the foundational American racial divide it engendered. In our age, riven with all manner of division, this old city didn't strike me as dusty at all but uncannily of the moment and consequential. «

WHERE I'LL STAY NEXT TIME

BELMONT

CHARLESTON PLACE

The larger luxury option, with a spa, boutiques, gym, and a great rooftop pool.

THE SANCTUARY AT KIAWAH ISLAND GOLF RESORT

Grand family resort on immense beach with all amenities and excellent service. (I only ate and swam this time.)

THE SPECTATOR HOTEL

For a style change: 1920s-inspired glamour, a butler for every room, and a book-lined cocktail lounge.

Clockwise from top: A Moscow Mule at the chic Belmont bar; the Sanctuary at Kiawah Island Golf Resort—both beachy and glam; hikes for guests (it's a Charleston thing) at the Spectator Hotel.

PETER FRANK EDWARDS/REXUS (THREE)

