Lowcountry Charm

CHARLESTON’S ILLUSTRIOUS HISTORY, DINING, AND SHOPPING MAKE THE SOUTHERN CITY AN IDEAL ESCAPE FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON.

BY SARAH CROSLAND
Charleston is hard to resist in any season. Summer is the seaside city's most popular time of year with afternoons at the beach and balmy evenings dining al fresco at one of its famed restaurants. But for those hoping to indulge in the historic town's culinary and cultural scenes—and avoid the crowds—there's no better time than the holiday season.

While downtown Charleston is brimming with inns and hotels, just across the Ashley River visitors will find one of the area's best-kept secrets. The Cottages on Charleston Harbor (www.thecottagesoncharlestonharbor.com) includes 10 luxe, waterfront cottages with panoramic porch views reaching from Sullivan's Island and Fort Sumter to the church steeple-dotted Charleston skyline. Each charming cottage features two bedrooms decorated in soothing hues, and a high-ceilinged, airy kitchen and living area with large windows and French doors opening onto the wide, screened-in porch. On cooler days, cozy up next to the cottage's fireplace as you soak in the view or bring a blanket to the porch's hammock where the only distractions are the swaying palm trees and lapping water.
And while the cottages offer plenty of on-site allure from private chef services to beach cruisers for exploring the nearby historic Patriots Point, their biggest draw may be their close proximity to the colorful streets of downtown Charleston. Just a quick drive over the picturesque Ravenel Bridge, Charleston’s world-renowned restaurants and shopping beckon holiday season visitors.

The biggest challenge when traveling to Charleston may be choosing where you have time to dine. The small city is chockablock full of so many famed chefs and restaurants that it’s impossible to sample them all. Plan on spending at least one evening in the trendy and revitalized upper King Street. The Ordinary (www.eattheordinary.com), which is housed in a 1920s bank building, serves up soaring shellfish towers in its boisterous dining room. Just down the street The Grocery (www.thegrocerycharleston.com) offers legendary Lowcountry fare with a modern twist in a cozy and convivial spot that was once a furniture warehouse. After dinner, stop in the nearby Cocktail Club (www.thecocktailclubcharleston.com), a second-story craft cocktail bar and rooftop terrace with a modern speakeasy feel. Order a round of potent drinks with playful names like Your Husband’s Mistress, a sweet-meets-smooth concoction of gin, f illet Rouge, lime, orange blossom water, and bitters. Craving a late night snack? Venture even further up King Street to Butcher & Bee (www.butcherandbee.com). The sandwich shop offers a post 11 p.m. menu on weekend nights, making it a favorite spot for indulging in craft beers (it’s Charleston’s only BYOB) with its signature burgers long after dark.

On the other end of King Street, you’ll find some of
the best shopping in the Southeast, making it a perfect pre-holiday destination. Start your day with brunch at Husk (www.huskrestaurant.com), the Southern-inspired and locally-sourced spot consistently named as one of the city’s best restaurants. Decadent dishes like black pepper biscuits with housemade sausage gravy or fried softshell crab with eggs, sausage, and potato hash, are the perfect fuel for a day of perusing the city’s shops. Just around the corner from Husk is Billy Reid boutique (www.billyreid.com), an elegant store offering clothing and accessories from the esteemed Southern designer. Other top shops you won’t want to miss include Indigo & Cotton (www.indigoandcotton.com), a menswear store packed with classic American-made garb; Mac + Murphy (www.macandmurphy.com), a charming stationery store with stunning paper goods; and Hampden Clothing (www.hampdenclothing.com), a style-savvy women's clothing boutique. Continue your shopping stroll around the neighborhood where shops feature familiar names from Pottery Barn and Apple to Louis Vuitton and Gucci.

And no trip to Charleston is complete

Plan on at least one meal at Husk, an award-winning restaurant serving up Southern fare with a modern twist.

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without pausing to take in some of the city's rich history. The holiday season offers its own celebratory version of the past with many local historic destinations festively decorated. Stop in the Edmontson-Alston House (www.edmontstonalston.com), ensconced in twinkling candlelight and vintage holiday décor, or visit the 270-year-old Drayton Hall (www.draytonhall.org) for African-American spiritual music choir concerts. And be sure to save some time for Charleston's signature tourist attraction, its historic carriage ride tours. Cozy up on an Olde Towne Carriage (www.oldetownecarriage.com) that's been converted to Santa's sleigh for a nostalgic ride down cobblestone streets and past the city's most famous landmarks. The tour's finish with hot cocoa and roasted marshmallows is the perfect end to a day spent celebrating the season in this Southern city.

Drayton Hall is one of the many local historic sites that celebrates the holiday season with festive decor and performances.