

founder of the Girl Scouts, and her father-in-law was a close friend of Robert E. Lee.

Beyond the ghost stories and rich antebellum heritage, the city is reinventing itself as an artists' hub. Exhibit A: the Savannah College of Art and Design, home to **ShopSCAD**, a whimsical store whose Anthro-esque displays and student work are art installations in their own right. Professionals sell their wares at myriad galleries all over town (my favorite: the irreverent **A.T. Hun Art Gallery**, which sells prints based on *The Big Lebowski*), while more, ahem, museum-grade artists' exhibits can be seen at the **Telfair Museums**, including the mansion-housed Telfair Academy and the more modern Jepson Center.

On the advice of a native, on my last night in Savannah I stopped by the rooftop bar of the sultry riverfront **Bohemian Hotel**. Standing on the balcony, warmed by the glowing fire pit, I watched the Savannah River sparkle below my feet. I'd scheduled a ghost tour for later in the night, but decided in that quiet moment to cancel. The ghosts may move after dark, but humans are far better off staying put, sipping a great cocktail.

CHARLESTON



Low Country style in a richly storied city — ANNIE MONJAR

It hit me, as I strolled through Charleston's gas-lit and cobblestoned French Quarter, that everything I loved about this unapologetically historic city was something I love about Philly as well: contained streets, colorful rowhomes, horse-drawn carriages bearing infatuated tourists, and the sense that for all its designer boutiques and craft cocktail bars, the city still hums with its own heritage.

Nevertheless, as I wandered beneath the breezy palm trees and past the pastel-hued antebellum mansions that line Battery Park along the Ashley River, I could feel the Philly frump sliding, like a heavy weight, off my shoulders. Charleston is, of course, ever so slightly more hospitable than Philadelphia, something I noticed the

moment a doorman said hello (is there *anything* more drool-worthy than a proper Southern drawl?) and helped me roll my suitcase into the lobby of the **Planters Inn**. And it was there that I fell down the well—the oft-mythologized elegance of 19th-century Low Country was irresistible. At this downtown Victorian-styled hotel, the rooms and suites brim with Southern opulence: embroidered drapes, a marble bath, a Charleston-style four-poster bed that only the promise of Southern food and shopping could have pulled me from.

Luckily, neither is far from the Planters' front door. Just across Market Street is the **Charleston City Market**, a corridor of 285 vendors selling jewelry, clothes, food, and the famous woven sweetgrass baskets you'll want to make room for in your



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Philadelphian, I toured a couple of the oldest residences in town. The **Aiken-Rhett House**, an 1800s urban plantation, has been masterfully preserved as a living relic of a bygone era. You can visit the old slave quarters, see Governor William Aiken's bathroom, and peek into the carriage house. The tour is both a sobering reminder of the South's dark slave history and a monument to the best of gracious living.

Heritage and natural beauty are perhaps most palpable about 20 minutes outside downtown, at the completely car-rental-worthy **Middleton Place** 3. The 65-acre plantation, which has remained in Middleton family hands since 1741, boasts the country's oldest landscaped garden, a fantastically grand checkerboard of paved walkways and Southern flora, including the enormous Middleton Oak, beautifully draped with Spanish moss. You half expect Alice to come barreling

through a hedge, Cheshire Cat in tow. She won't, of course, but if you're lucky, you might catch a glimpse of one of the resident peacocks.

The beauty of heading back to Planters Inn at the end of the day, as I discovered, is the promise of dinner at the **Peninsula Grill** 1. White tablecloths, ultra-attentive servers, pristine cuts of meat and a low-lit dining room made it easy to channel my inner Southern belle, though you might find yourself taking leave of your manners the moment you taste the seven-layer coconut cake.

But you must head to the hotel's courtyard for an after-dinner aperitif. Because out there, you'll experience one of Charleston's most memorable, distinctive and decidedly un-Philly traits: the deliriously warm magnolia-perfumed air. Take an extra-deep breath for the road.

ALSO CHECK OUT

EAT The intensely savory meat dishes at the **MACINTOSH** are some of the most belly-pleasing in town. The deckle (google it) is particularly rich. ... The seasonal-and-local **FIG** is all the chatter in Charleston's food scene. Be sure to try the cocktails here.

PLAY This spring marks the **66TH ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF HOUSES AND GARDENS** 2, during which Charleston's most notable private homes open for public tours. It's a chance for open-house vultures to gawk at museum-style mansions and manicured gardens of the most enviable variety.

SHOP For 20 years, King Street's **WORTHWHILE** 4 has stocked the fancy soaps, designer handbags and precious jewelry that make it possible to justify just a little extra spending.