CHARLESTON IS FAST ON ITS WAY TO BECOMING ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST exciTING SOUTHERN CITIES. BLESSED WITH A RICH FOOD SCENE, ROBUST HISTORY, AND A WELCOMING CLIMATE THAT BECKONS GUESTS YEAR-ROUND, THERE'S LITTLE DOUBT WHY THE HOLY CITY WAS RECENTLY VOTED ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S BEST CITY DESTINATIONS.

by MCLEAN ROBBINS
TO STAY
When it comes to choosing accommodations in Charleston, the old adage “there’s something for everyone” rings true.

The grande dame of hotels is none other than Belmond Charleston Place. Standing over 400 rooms, it’s the pick of choice for business meetings but also the perfect place for leisure guests, given its prime location occupying nearly a block at the intersection of King Street and Market streets. The acclaimed Charleston Grille boasts the city’s best wine selection, and the new sports bar, Meeting at Market, draws a mixed crowd of locals and guests.

Young hipsters will want nothing more than to stay at the newly renovated The Restoration in the heart of downtown’s King Street shopping district. The 54 room all-suite hotel lives by the motto “Recreate History,” and it’s an adequate description of how the property has taken great pains to blend the city’s rich heritage with a modern, artful twist. You’ll find local art on the exposed brick walls and in the rooms, the made-for-the-hotel “Charleston” tea blend in the delicious on-site Blo Coffee shop, and the intimate yet polished Amethyst Spa. Rooftop restaurant The Watch is equally popular with locals and guests for its superior downtown views and Southern-meets-sophisticated fare.

In direct contrast, the 21-room Wentworth Mansion is just a five-minute stroll away on foot, but seems apart in feel. Located in a well-groomed neighborhood, the late 19th century mansion spent decades as an insurance company before being converted back to a hotel in the late 1990s. The owners, who also manage three other properties in town, labored to bring the hotel back to its original glory, installing an original hat rack in the entryway and highlighting the Tiffany stained glass windows. Enjoy complimentary beverages and snacks throughout the day for an experience that feels like something out of Downton Abbey. Don’t miss the on-site Circa 1886 fine dining restaurant, which is located in the mansion’s former carriage house.

Other options promise specialty experiences, such as Zero George Street, with its on-

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site cooking school, the art deco-inspired The Spectator or the Relais & Chateaux Planters Inn, perfectly positioned right outside the city’s historic City Market.

TO EAT
So much of Southern hospitality centers around a good meal and Charleston’s restaurant scene is no exception. In recent years, the city has emerged as a food mecca to rival any major East Coast city. And it’s not just shrimp and grits and cornbread either, although most restaurants do offer those on the menu. Charleston’s chefs have embraced the farm-to-table movement, elevating local ingredients without resorting to frying or douching in butter.

Kick off your first night with drinks and apps at The Darling Oyster Bar, a new seafood-focused restaurant with an excellent cocktail program. The interior is remi-diner meets chic city apartment, and the mixing selection of fresh oysters will get you in the mood that not till you get to the night to come: we loved the fried clam strips as well. From there, pick your poison: some of the best steaks in town are found at Halls Chophouse (try the bone-in ribeye), fine dining from one of the Southern gardens, Sean Brock, at McCrady’s or The Macintosh from three-time James Beard Award semifinalist Jeremiah Bacon, all walking distance away from King Street. End your night at The Ordinary, a great pick on its own for dinner along with sister restaurants FIG, but also a perfect spot for a cocktail – check out the vault door on display behind the raw bar, as the location was originally a bank.

While you’re walking around town, grab a leisurely lunch at Slightly North of Broad (SONOB), a Charleston “s翀” perfect for couple and families alike. This is the place to sample shrimp and grits or that complimentary cornbread, and also the perfect spot to sample creative dishes like the cold mojito salad, a fun mix of Asian and Southern flavors. If your lunch runs right into happy hour, pop over to Gin Joint, which serves some of the best cocktails in town. If it’s brunch you’re after, try High Cotton for a traditional Southern spread, or go casual with gourmet sandwiches at Artisan Meat Shares or biscuits at Callie’s Hot Little Biscuit.

TO EXPERIENCE
One of our favorite parts about Charleston is that it is truly a walking city. Any of the hotels in the downtown area put you in perfect position to stroll the sites and get some great shopping in as well.

No visit is complete without a stop at The Charleston City Market, one of the oldest public markets in the country. Take home a sweetgrass basket from one of the 56 artisans who weave them onsite.

Start on King Street, where you’ll find everything from Louis Vuitton and Kate Spade to smaller fashion boutiques. Wonder carefully and you’ll spot some of our favorites, like the trendy Worthwhile, which stocks avant-garde lines like Rick Owens, The Elder Statesman and Isabel Marant Etoile, as well as Rampart, with lines like Marni and Zimmermann, plus a waiting lounge with a fully-stocked bar for friends, boyfriends and husbands who must wait around for the shoppers in the group.

Don’t miss Candlefish, which carries more than 30 brands of antique candles, including a “library” of over 100 in-house scents. The brand is the secret behind many white-labeled lines. Join the hands-on daily candle making workshops, where you’ll create your own scented candle. Over on East Bay Street, we adored the new Maria Bellart, where you’ll find a well-curated selection of jewelry, home goods and clothing. We also loved Ro Shim Beaux and Mitchell Hill for housewares and art.

Men will prefer M. Dumas & Sons, with its grand array of sport coats, golf shirts and more, as well as the custom goods at Ben Silver. Don’t miss George C. Brittain & Co for antiques—his the maker of the city’s famed Battery Bench—or Coglan’s Jewel Box, also on King, for its treasure trove of heirloom silver and vintage jewels. It’s the perfect place to get a coveted rice spoon, a Charleston tradition that dates back to the plantation age.

Spouting of the pre-Civil War era, visitors would be amiss to skip at least a few of Charleston’s historical sites. Fort Sumter is great for true history buffs (you can see it on a sunset sail aboard the Schonew Pride) but we loved the Old Exchange and Provost Dungeon, right in the center of town, where you can tour a true dungeon and see parts of the city’s original battery (stared by pirates like the infamous Blackbeard).

Charleston Strolls also offers a fantastic daily two-hour history tour. But it’s easy to explore on your own as well. Charleston has its fair share of grand historic homes, but we love the Edmondston-Alston House. It’s from these piazzas that General P.T. Beauregard watched the bombardment of Fort Sumter that fired started the Civil War. Inside, see an original print of the Ordinance of Secession and sit on a true “jiggling board,” a Low Country tradition that couples once sat on while courting.
Rumor has it, if they “jogged” together, they became engaged.

For a true plantation experience, grab a car or an Uber and head slightly out of town to Middleton Place, a plantation home owned by the same family that is home to America’s oldest landscaped gardens. While you’re in the area, pop over to Drayton Hall, on the same road, an icon of colonial American identity and widely considered the finest example of Georgian Palladian architecture in North America.

If you’re in town for long enough, plan a beach day. Sullivan’s Island is a great option for a sun-and-sand day, while Folly Beach is preferred for those who want to surf or admire the action.

**HOW (AND WHEN) TO TRAVEL**

While one might easily drive to Charleston as part of a multi-city Southern tour, we’d suggest the direct flights daily on United or Delta from the three area airports. From Charleston International, it’s about a 20-minute cab ride to most any downtown hotel. Unless you’re planning on a secondary jaunt to Kiawah or John’s Island, there’s no need to rent a car. Uber is reasonably priced and easily accessed, although pedicabs are also plentiful during nice weather. It’s easy to take a side trip to the many nearby plantations as most are only a half-hour’s drive.

There’s no true “low season” in Charleston, given the moderate year round weather, but it can get steamy in July and August (although the Low Country Jazz Fest is a great excuse to brave the heat). Fall can be a particularly appealing time to visit; as the leaves change color up North, Charleston’s temperatures stay way up in the 70s into the holiday season. You’ll also enjoy major events, like Charleston Restaurant Week (September 7-18) and the Southern Living “Taste of Charleston” (September 23-25). We also love spring, when you’ll see the magnolia trees in full bloom, as well as the signature Spoleto performing arts festival, taking place next May 26-June 11.