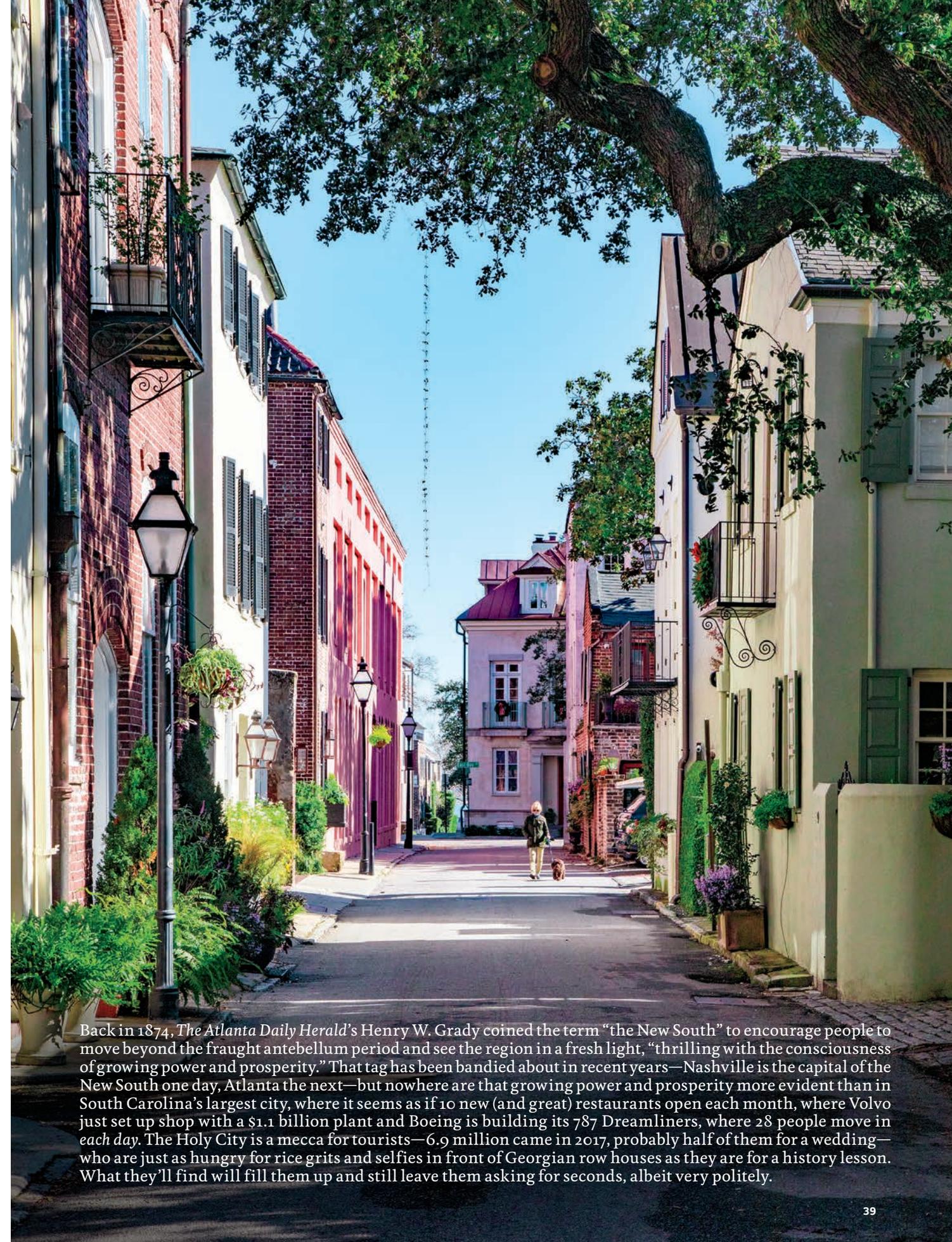


Three
Perfect Days

Charleston

South Carolina

By Ellen Carpenter • Photography by Peter Frank Edwards



Back in 1874, *The Atlanta Daily Herald's* Henry W. Grady coined the term “the New South” to encourage people to move beyond the fraught antebellum period and see the region in a fresh light, “thrilling with the consciousness of growing power and prosperity.” That tag has been bandied about in recent years—Nashville is the capital of the New South one day, Atlanta the next—but nowhere are that growing power and prosperity more evident than in South Carolina’s largest city, where it seems as if 10 new (and great) restaurants open each month, where Volvo just set up shop with a \$1.1 billion plant and Boeing is building its 787 Dreamliners, where 28 people move in *each day*. The Holy City is a mecca for tourists—6.9 million came in 2017, probably half of them for a wedding—who are just as hungry for rice grits and selfies in front of Georgian row houses as they are for a history lesson. What they’ll find will fill them up and still leave them asking for seconds, albeit very politely.

DAY

1

► Playing pirate, “firing” cannons, and plowing through pimento cheese

Opening spread, from left: the backside of the Dock Street Theatre; the Historic District’s colorful Elliott Street; this spread, from left: Eric Lavender of Charleston Pirate Tours; the meticulous garden at the Pineapple Gates House

Let’s go ahead and get the kid questions out of the way: Yes, I’m a real pirate. No, I’m not firing my gun. Yes, my parrot is real. No, we’re not gonna take any ships. No, pirates did not make enemies walk the plank—that was Peter Pan.”

Eric Lavender, swash-buckling chic in full pirate regalia—tricornered hat, knee-high suede boots, black breeches, regal gray captain’s coat with pewter buttons, pistol at one hip, saber at the other—is standing in front of the Powder Magazine, the oldest government building in

Charleston (built in 1713). He’s about to lead me, my husband, Chris, our 6-year-old son, Calder, and five other history-hungry out-of-towners on one of his daily **Charleston Pirate Tours**, and to spin yarns about “the who’s who of pirates that came through.”

Charleston’s history is intrinsically linked to piracy (did you know pirates introduced the rice that’s so integral to Lowcountry grits, bringing it from Madagascar?), which is why we want to start our trip with Captain Eric. What better way to get a first-grader excited about history than handing him a foam sword and bannanna and having a guy with a parrot on his shoulder tell him about beheadings and pillaging? As we amble through the Historic District, down Unity Alley, where George Washington kept his mules when he was in town (“If it’s good enough for Washington’s ass, it’s good

“What better way to get a first grader excited about history than having a guy with a parrot on his shoulder tell him about beheadings and pillaging?”

enough for us,” Eric jokes), and past the multicolored houses on Instagram-friendly Rainbow Row and the country’s oldest liquor store (“Charleston is a drinking city with a history problem”), Eric tells us about famous pirates of yore—Mrs. Chang, Stede Bonnet, Anne Bonny, and, of course, Blackbeard, who marauded the port of Charleston before





“We amble through the Historic District, past the multicolored houses on Instagram-friendly Rainbow Row and the country’s oldest liquor store.”



Previous spread: Rainbow Row, a series of pastel Georgian houses on East Bay Street dating back to about 1740; **this page:** the Charleston Grill, where a jazz trio plays every night

meeting his bitter end off of North Carolina's Outer Banks. "You know how he knows all that stuff?" Calder whispers, after Captain Eric lets each of us hold one of his weapons for a final group photo. "Because he's a real pirate." Success.

After two hours of walking, we're ready to eat. Luckily, **Husk** is just four blocks from the Old Exchange Building, where our tour ends. Just as piracy put Charleston on the map back in the late 1600s, Husk ushered in the city's foodie era when it opened in 2010. Founding chef Sean Brock recently departed for Nashville, but the restaurant—located in a beautiful, late-19th-century Queen Anne-style home—and executive chef Travis Grimes still celebrate Lowcountry cooking with highfalutin technique. We start with addictively sharp pimento cheese

toasts that are way better than pimento cheese has any business being. The fried chicken has the kind of crackly crust you only see on TV, and the Bibb lettuce salad is a lesson in simplicity. The only negative is that we're too full to eat dessert.

Chris and I figure we should keep the history lesson going, so we take a cab to the waterfront and catch the ferry to **Fort Sumter**, where the first shots of the Civil War were fired in 1861. I grew up spending my spring breaks touring Civil War battlefields and forts with my American historian mother, but I'd forgotten how fascinating they are for kids. As soon as we reach the fort, Calder is off: hiding in the shadows of the munitions room, looking for enemy ships through peepholes, loading the cannons with imaginary gunpowder. When he sticks his head inside the barrel of a columbiad cannon, I explain how that's not proper protocol—but only after I snap a photo.

Before heading back on the ferry, everyone convenes for the lowering of the flag. A park ranger, James Drass, invites 20 volunteers to come help. "Don't ever take your freedom

for granted," Drass says, as the group folds the flag, south to north, north to south, then in triangles. "I submit to you that America is an amazing country," he continues. "We are a diverse country. It's inherent we're going to have differences. But despite all of our differences, we have one common denominator: We are all Americans." The crowd is silent, and more than a few people wipe away tears, me included, and then everyone breaks into applause.

"The addictively sharp pimento cheese toasts are way better than pimento cheese has any business being."

The sun is already setting when we make it back to the mainland, but we decide to walk the 15 minutes back to the Historic District (it's easy to get around on foot downtown) and meander through

the **Charleston City Market** before dinner. It seems as if every tourist in town has the same idea. The market, a series of sheds that stretches four city blocks, opened in 1804—statesman Charles Cotesworthy Pinckney gave the land to the city, stipulating that it had to be used as a market "in perpetuity." I doubt they had a Christmas shop open year-round in 1804, but they do now, along with 300 other spots, including a toy store, a haberdashery, and a handful of places selling traditional sweetgrass baskets. We stop to watch an artisan weave one, her nimble fingers methodically alternating strands of dried native sweetgrass. I want to buy one, but Calder is waning and I realize we better get him fed before a meltdown ensues. Traveling with kids!

Fortunately, our hotel, the grand **Belmond Charleston Place**, is a block away, and dinner is just downstairs, at the **Charleston Grill**. We do a quick costume change—thank goodness for our spacious suite's two bathrooms—and make it to the restaurant only five minutes late for our reservation. Five minutes after that, I'm sipping a glass of Bone Dry rosé (Calder goes pink too, with a Shirley Temple) and we're enjoying the jazz trio's rendition of "Billie's Bounce."

I devour my crab cake, bathed in a lemony butter sauce, while Calder co-opts Chris's charred octopus. "Next time, you're getting your own appetizer," Chris tells him as he concedes the plate. We all trade bites of our mains—sea bass in a creamy curry sauce for me, scallops with salsa verde for Chris, kid's menu spaghetti for Calder—and then take turns choosing from the assortment of chocolates and gelées that our waiter brings us as a parting gift. We leave humming the strains of "The Very Thought of You," take the elevator upstairs, and promptly pass out.

AD

DAY

2

► Making BBQ, rescuing sea turtles, and rocking out

I promised myself biscuits for breakfast every morning in Charleston, and by golly I'm starting out right at **Hominy Grill**, a beloved 23-year-old spot in the residential Cannonborough-Elliottborough neighborhood, just north of downtown, that serves breakfast all day. I go savory with biscuits and gravy while Chris and Calder both go for pancakes, fluffy and stacked high. The coffee refills keep coming, and in no time we're ready to tackle the day.

We hop a cab back to the Historic District and climb into a different set of wheels:

From left: an 1857 Italianate home in the Historic District; Rodney Scott at his namesake BBQ spot



a carriage pulled by two brown and white horses, Sally and Deedee. Horse-drawn carriages seem to outnumber cars downtown—a trend **Palmetto Carriage Works** launched in 1972 when it became the first company to offer tours. And the horses, I've made sure, are well cared-for: They work only five hours a day and get to spend about five months a year relaxing on a farm on Johns Island. Our guide, Gay Spear, is brash and witty and an endless font of information. As we mosey along, past landmarks like the Circular Congregational Church on Meeting Street and dozens of perfectly preserved historic homes, she offers up funny one-liners ("If you dig here, you're gonna find one of two things: a cannonball or a body") and interesting design notes, like the origin of the pineapple as welcome sign. Turns out back in the 1700s women used to put pineapples out on the gate port to let people know their husbands were home from their sailing voyages—or "to let their lovers know not to come that night!"

We bid farewell to Sally and Deedee, and then I bid farewell to Calder and Chris—they have a date with the rooftop pool at the Belmond, while I'm due to meet Mr. **Rodney Scott**

BBQ himself for a lesson in whole hog cooking. Scott won the James Beard Award for Best Chef: Southeast in May, just a year after opening his restaurant in the North Central neighborhood. "Now I can't go anywhere without someone recognizing me," Scott says with an easy smile as he leads me from the bright restaurant to the pit out back. "People at the airport will be like, 'Are you that guy?'"

"When he opens the door to the pit, the smell of oak and hickory practically knocks me over."

When he opens the door to the pit, the smell of oak and hickory practically knocks me over—in the best way possible. He heads over to the fire and shovels a pile of wood coals into one of the five pits, something staffers do every 15 to 20 minutes. "It's more procedure than secret," he says, as one of his employees mops "Rodney Sauce" over the hogs.

I somehow refrain from ripping off a piece of meat to eat right then and there, and head





a bucket of fish ready to feed the blacktip, sand tiger, and nurse sharks. Calder asks why the sharks don't eat the other fish in the tank, and Caswell responds, "Would you rather take a free meal or cook your own?" "I'd rather have Mommy cook me a meal," Calder says. That's my boy.

Tonight, however, Mommy's leaving the cooking to the pros. From the aquarium, we hop a ride up King Street—a 300-year-old thoroughfare that's now restaurant row, basically—for dinner at **The Grocery**, a farm-to-table spot that's a fixture on Eater Charleston's "essential" list. We start with the charcuterie plate, which features duck-liver mousse topped with watermelon-rind mostarda, sopressata, coppa, and an

"The turtles are named for Harry Potter characters; Voldemort and Hagrid are dead ringers."

array of pickled vegetables, including okra, which Calder inhales. The manager notices his fondness for pickles and brings us another helping.

My glass of gamay pairs perfectly with my duck confit, cooked with shatteringly crisp skin. Chris is so into his snapper that he forgets to give me a bite, and Calder attacks his pizza as if he hasn't eaten all day. (Note for parents: There's a "verbal" kids menu.) We cap it off with a shared banana

back into the restaurant for a proper lunch: a big pile of pork, potato salad, and coleslaw with a sweet iced tea that is sweeter than any iced tea I've ever had (and I grew up in Kentucky). The vinegar tang of the Rodney Sauce cuts through the fat of the meat perfectly, and I'm in hog heaven.

Now it's time to feed something else: We've arranged for Calder to get a behind-the-scenes tour of the **South Carolina Aquarium**, where he is literally able to feed the sharks. But first we check out the Zucker Family Sea Turtle

This page, from top: the Great Ocean Tank at the South Carolina Aquarium; a patient at the Zucker Family Sea Turtle Recovery

Recovery, which the aquarium opened in 2017. Sea turtles are Calder's favorite animal, so he couldn't be more excited to play vet at the interactive stations where he can "diagnose" a sick turtle and also meet the rehabilitating patients currently swimming in individual tanks. Many of them are named for Harry Potter characters; Voldemort and Hagrid are dead ringers.

After a trip to the gift shop to buy a snap-bracelet sea turtle stuffie (yes, it's a thing), we meet our behind-the-scenes guide, Lea Caswell, who leads us to the top of the 42-foot Great Ocean Tank (the tallest in North America), where another aquarium worker has

SHIPSHAPE



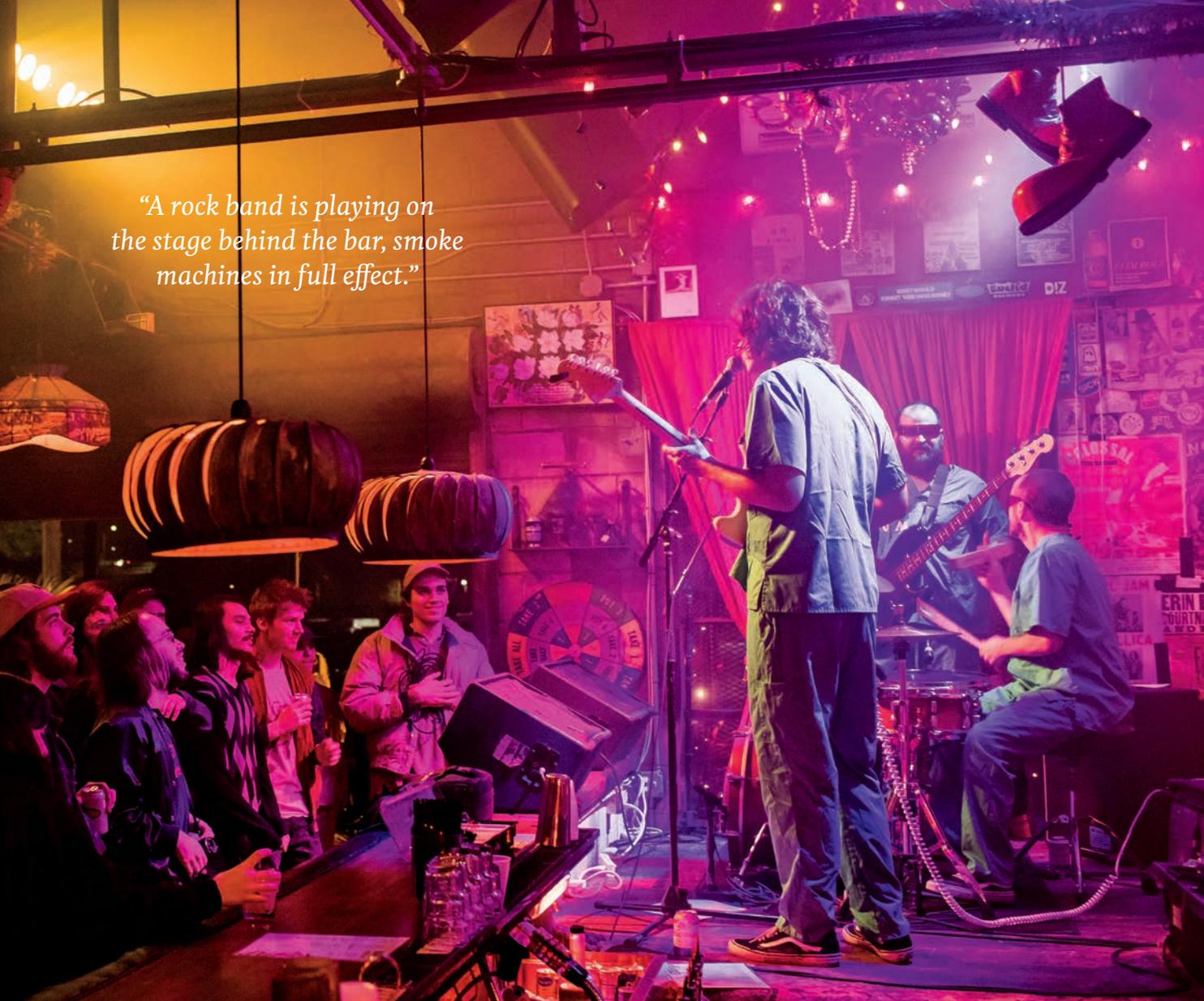
Charleston started out as a port town, so what more historically accurate way to see the city than by sailboat? The mighty *Schooner Pride* is a three-masted ship, modeled after an 18th-century beauty, that ferries guests on two-hour sunset cruises or afternoon dolphin-spotting trips. On our sunset cruise, Captain Jenny Smith asks Calder if he'll help raise the sail, and when he gamely pulls the ropes, his little 6-year-old muscles straining with each tug, everyone cheers. As we pass Fort Sumter and the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge, we chat with a few of our 40 fellow sailors—honeymooners from Florida, a couple from New Jersey having a romantic kids-free trip, and also Captain Jenny, who's been (wo)manning the *Schooner Pride* for eight years. "We tried doing a narrated tour," she says, "but by the time people get here, they've been talked to all week. We'd rather talk with them and let them see the city from a different perspective."

\$54 for adults, \$30 for ages 11 and under, schoonerpride.com

Courtesy of Explore Charleston (Schooner Pride)

AD

“A rock band is playing on the stage behind the bar, smoke machines in full effect.”



From top: a band performs behind the bar at The Royal American; the charcuterie spread at The Grocery

pudding topped with gorgeous peaks of toasted meringue.

Calder's ready to pass out, but I have a big night ahead of me. While the boys roll back to the Belmond, I head down King Street for a night out on the town with the Grammy-nominated rock group Band of Horses. Shaggy-haired lead singer Ben Bridwell grew up in South Carolina, and he and mustachioed drummer Creighton Barrett relocated

to Charleston in 2006 after a decade in Seattle. I meet them and James Hynes, the CEO of local recording studio and record label Rialto Row, at **The Rarebit**, which they tell me has “the best Moscow mules anywhere.”

The band is in the thick of recording a new album, their first time doing so in Charleston. Bridwell actually rented a plantation—on Airbnb!—for a personal writer's retreat. “A real-a** plantation!” he says, eyes wide. “For \$150 a night!” The music scene in Charleston, he says, has changed dramatically in the past few years—from “residual Dead hippie college stuff” to “indie rock,



Americana, melodic punk...” So, basically, it's cool now.

To show me just how cool, they take me to the center of the scene: **The Royal American**, a former ironworks on

the train tracks that's now a music club. A rock band is playing on a stage behind the bar, smoke machines in full effect, and the place is packed shoulder to shoulder with 20-somethings sipping beers. We grab a round and take a seat on the patio, where we compete with passing trains to be heard. It's approaching 11 now, bedtime for me—but the guys' night is just getting started. They're raring to head into Rialto Row to record. “We'll work until 3 or 4, go home and sleep a couple hours, and be up with our kids at 6,” says Barrett. “It's great.” Amazed at their stamina, I say g'night and leave them to it.

AD

DAY

3

► **Catching waves, slurping oysters, and looking through an artist's lens**



car for the day and cruise over the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge, with its two diamond-shaped cable towers, through Mount Pleasant, and on to the sand-lined streets of Sullivan's in just 25 minutes. On the agenda: roll up our pants and splash in the waves, hunt for seashells, and admire the gorgeous three-story cottages lining the wide beach. Calder keeps his eyes peeled for sea turtles to rescue and is amazed to learn

that this ocean is the same one we have in New York.

All this oceanside action has us hungry for some seafood, so we drive back into town for lunch at **Leon's Oyster Shop**, a fun spot on the upper reaches of King Street famous for oysters, yes, but also fried chicken. The space, a former auto body shop, is kitted out in fairy lights and maritime paintings. Chris and I fight over the last of the chargrilled oysters, which taste like ocean and fire bathed in butter, while Calder happily munches his fried shrimp. I move on to the fried chicken sandwich, moist and crunchy and served with a cooling cucumber and sesame seed salad, and Chris opts for the seafood fry-up. Calder declares his rainbow sprinkle-topped soft-serve better than Mister Softee in New York.



This page, from top: the Panic Button cocktail at The Living Room, in The Dewberry; a brick walkway at Waterfront Park; opposite page: Leon's Oyster Shop

Oh, biscuits, how I love you. This morning we feast at **Callie's Hot Little Biscuit** on King Street, where the line is already out the door by 8:30 a.m. We dig into a variety of fluffy buttermilk creations: plain, cheddar-chive, blackberry jam-topped. I pop the mini cinnamon ones like Cheetos. I want to get some to go, but I know we have a full day of eating ahead.

But first, a beach excursion to **Sullivan's Island**. We rent a





This page: Sullivan's Island; opposite page: the pecan-smoked fish spread at Parcel 32

We check into our new digs, **The Dewberry**, a hip Mid-Century Modern-style hotel that opened in 2016 in a former 1960s federal building, and while all we want to do is take a nap, we rally and cross Marion Square to **The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston**. I'm eager to see the current exhibit, *Southbound: Photographs of and About the New South*, which runs through March and features images taken by 56 21st-century artists exploring their perceptions of the American South. The variety is astounding. There are shots of Civil War reenactors, Black Lives Matter marches, empty storefronts, migrant workers,

and high school homecoming queens. Seeing all these snippets of life makes me think that there's not just one South—it's impossible to generalize about or judge such a wide swath of our country.

Calder's beat and not up for a restaurant meal; Chris gamely offers to take him back to the hotel for some takeout so I can keep my res at

Parcel 32, a new Lowcountry-Caribbean restaurant with an airy, outside-in design. I take a seat at the bar and get the pirate-inspired Anne Bonny rum cocktail (and somehow refrain from making an "arrrr" joke). Serendipitously, Band of Horses' "The Funeral" plays over the stereo. Even though I'm dining alone, I order as if I'm

with the fam: I start with a pecan-smoked fish spread served with Ritz crackers and pecan-meal hush puppies topped with pimento cheese and Benton's bacon powder. (I need a jar of that in my life.) Next are short ribs, fragrant with clove, allspice, and nutmeg atop a bed of creamy coconut-milk Carolina Gold rice grits.

WHERE TO STAY

The Dewberry

This former federal office building is now one of the most stylish hotels in town, with vintage Mid-Century Modern furniture as well as bespoke pieces (floral armoires and a brass recreation of an 1861 city map). Cypress wood lines the walls of the spa, where treatments utilize local rice and dewberry. Relax further with a drink at the new rooftop bar, the **Citrus Club**. From \$350, thedewberrycharleston.com

Belmond Charleston Place

A modern grande dame smack in the middle of the Historic District, the **Belmond** offers a luxurious stay for honeymooners and families alike. Splendor abounds, from the hand-blown glass chandelier in the lobby to the retractable-glass-roofed saltwater pool, but the vibe is easygoing and friendly. Book a Club-level room for added perks, such as a buffet breakfast and cocktail-hour libations and bites. From \$325, belmond.com

Chef Shaun Brian, wearing a white apron and a bicycle cap, swings by to say hello. He grew up on St. John—he moved to Charleston after losing his restaurant there to hurricanes Irma and Maria—so he comes by the island influence in his cooking naturally. "It makes a lot more sense than I ever thought it would," he says, giving me a thorough history of the spice trade and the Caribbean's influence on Charleston, going back to the 1600s. "At the end of the day, I still think of myself as an ambassador for my home islands, but I'm in a place where I have much more ability to make an impact."

I get a slice of sweet potato pie to go for Chris and walk back to The Dewberry. There's a wedding party going hard in the ballroom, but The Living Room, with its beautiful bronze bar, is calm and inviting, so I get a couple of drinks to take upstairs for us to enjoy with the pie. I tiptoe into our

room, past Calder asleep on the velvet couch, turtle stuffie tucked under his arm, and join Chris in the four-post bed. We pass the pie back and forth—it goes great with my Dewberry Daiquiri—and share photos from the trip, laughing at the videos Calder took without our knowledge on the carriage tour. One starts on a perfectly preserved Federal-style home and then goes slo-mo (Calder's favorite video function), weaving down the street and stopping at a dump truck outside a derelict home ready to be remade. The significance—the city's constant push and pull to preserve and reinvent itself—doesn't hit me until we turn off the lights and say good night.

Come for the pirate lore; stay for the biscuits: There's no place like Charleston, and United has plenty of daily flights to get you there. Visit united.com or check the United mobile app for schedules and details.



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