



EASY GETAWAY CHARLESTON

The historic Southern city embraces newcomers with Colonial charm and a quirky slice of modern life below the Mason-Dixon line.

by TED LOOS photographs by CHRISTOPHER SHANE

The very best welcome I received in Charleston, South Carolina, came not from a friendly resident—although there are plenty of those around—but from a ceramic plaque hung on the door of a local bed-and-breakfast labeled “Shalom Y’all.”

This salutation, courtesy of the all-kosher Broad Street Guest House (probably the city’s only such specialty lodging), summed up a lot of the qualities that I like about Charleston: funny, unexpected, and inviting in equal measure. And it demonstrated that whatever my Yankee preconceptions were about this stately seat of the Deep South, Charleston was ready to topple them.

This city mixes venerated tradition with a healthy amount of quirk and sass. It has a history of welcoming outsiders, a trait that hasn’t gotten much play even as its current reputation has solidified.

Sure, it may be home to some die-hard rebels, but it also has one of America’s oldest synagogues. **Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Synagogue** (90 Hasell St.; 843/723-1090), a colonnaded Greek Revival built in the 1850s by the congregation founded 100 years earlier, still serves as a temple as well as housing a museum with tours. Turns out Charleston was the Jewish hub of Colonial America.

Who knew? Charleston has, of course, been a favorite of travelers for years. Part of the credit goes, ironically, to a famous Yankee, General William Tecumseh Sherman. When he stormed through South Carolina at the end of the Civil War, he bypassed Charleston and laid waste to Columbia instead. That reprieve combined with the economic stagnation of the following 100 years perversely turned out to be helpful to modern-day tourism, as the city’s

charming old buildings weren’t destroyed or torn down for new construction. Even today fantastic quantities of 18th- and early-19th-century architecture survive.

The South of Broad area is justly famous for its pristine houses, with their antebellum details—exquisite pediments, balustrades, and iron door knockers—shaded by palmettos and oaks. The city’s center has no office towers to speak of, and old church steeples dominate the view from the rooftop bar of the Market Pavilion Hotel, a favorite place for locals to enjoy a drink and the sunset.

The **Edmonton-Alston House** (21 East Battery; 843/722-7171) provides a quick fix for newly arrived visitors ready to bone up on local history. The Alston family’s treasures, right down to the elaborate silver service, are on display in a neoclassical mansion with three huge porches (known as piazzas here), all facing discreetly to the side, not the street, following the local custom. Fort Sumter on James Island, the site of the battle that helped launch the Civil War, can be viewed from the hotel’s entrance. (For those wanting a full-on plantation experience, the house’s sister property Middleton Place is an 18th-century estate a mere 40-minute drive away. Both are now owned by an Alston descendant.)

Where to Stay

One of the appealing aspects of a trip to Charleston is the proximity of attractions: Almost everything in town that a visitor



FROM TOP: Cupcakes at Sugar Bakeshop; greetings from the Broad Street Guest House; cobblestoned Gillon Street in the historic South of Broad neighborhood. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** A tree-lined road on James Island; Queen Anne-style lodging at Two Meeting Street Inn on Battery Park; the dining room at the kosher Broad Street Guest House; a horse roaming the 18th-century Middleton Place plantation



may want to see is located on a tiny peninsula where the Ashley and Cooper rivers meet. "You can be here for five days and not get in your car," says Hank Holliday, the owner of several local restaurants and **Planters Inn** (from \$260/night; plantersinn.com), one of the city's most exclusive lodgings. Planters is a Relais & Châteaux member done up in light, creamy tones that set off the mahogany furniture. The inn boasts a terrific restaurant, the Peninsula Grill (check out the famous coconut cake). Planters' service is its strongest suit; one of the desk staffers even lent me his bicycle so that I could tour the town.

With 64 rooms, Planters is a full-on hotel, albeit with an intimate, boutique feel. Some visitors, however, might prefer instead to stay in a historic house, considering Charleston's ample supply. The striking **Wentworth Mansion** (from \$299/night; wentworthmansion.com) is, using the old phrase, quite a pile of bricks—red ones from the Victorian era, to be specific—and they're topped by a mansard roof straight out of an Edward Hopper painting. (The original owner had 13 children to house.) Inside, the design creates a warm and friendly atmosphere, not imposing, and period antiques mingle well with the original marble mantels.

Or take in a different architectural

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: Canned fish" wall hangings are among the eclectic offerings at the Nina Liu and Friends gallery in the French Quarter; the Victorian-styled Wentworth Mansion is an ode to America's Gilded Age; jazz plays at Charleston Grill; Hank's Seafood Restaurant, modeled after a 1940s fish house, offers Low Country dishes.

experience at **Two Meeting Street Inn** (from \$225/night; twomeetingstreet.com), a genteel Queen Anne-style lodging, complete with original Louis Comfort Tiffany windows. The nine rooms are shaded by huge oaks right on Battery Park, at the peninsula's tip. Owner Karen Spell Shaw is a font of information about the town, including the fact that the off-season months of August, January, and February provide even more Charleston charm. "Nothing ever really closes for the season, and a lot of people like the extra attention you get when it's quiet here," she says.

Shopping

If you set out from Two Meeting Street heading north and looking to buy, prepare to change gears frequently. The pleasure of shopping in Charleston is to zigzag between the echt-traditional and the surprisingly funky.

Walking just a few blocks uptown will take a visitor to the cobbled streets of the French Quarter and the eccentric art gallery **Nina Liu and Friends** (24 State St.; 843/722-2724). This is not the reassuring, buttoned-down Charleston of old guide-

books; Liu has an eye for ceramics and anything with great texture, as evidenced by Jeff Kopish's rusted metal "canned fish" wall hangings, made from discarded garbage can lids and encrusted with pottery shards. A guest can admire them from the surprising comfort of a couch constructed entirely of recycled cardboard.

Just to the west of Liu's quirky offerings is the men's shop **Ben Silver** (149 King St.; 843/577-4556), which has been anchoring the south end of King Street for nearly 30 years. One of the Silver sales associates calls the store's style "preppy and conservative, but with more color." True enough, because amid the blue blazers and custom-made blazer buttons, one can find an array of vividly striped regimental ties, the house specialty.

King Street is the undisputed commercial axis of Charleston, with the more conservative shopping to the south, closer to the historic district. **Mary Helen McCoy Fine Antiques** (120 King St.; 843/577-6445) stocks museum-quality 18th-century French antiques, and everything in the shop bears a deep, lustrous glow. The merchandise is pricey, but one can stroll

around and consider it a free museum visit.

On its northern side, however, King Street offers a more modern take on beauty. **Hampden Clothing** (314 King St.; 843/724-6373) stocks women's fashion by designers whose goods are not often seen in the Southeast—Alexander Wang and Adam Lippes, to name just two. This is cutting-edge stuff, and the vibe is mirrored at nearby **Worthwhile** (268 King St.; 843/723-4418), a shop that, like Charleston itself, resists being labeled. Women's clothing, mostly in black and gray, mixes with children's games, heavy art tomes, and stylish housewares.

Some of the city's newer shopkeepers are its biggest boosters. "Charleston has always been diverse," says Bill Bowick. He co-owns **Sugar Bakeshop** (59½ Cannon St.; 843/579-2891), home to Charleston's most memorable cupcakes (try the red velvet ones with cream cheese frosting) and other sweet treats. Bowick and his partner, David Bouffard, moved to town from Brooklyn six years ago, part of an

emigration from New York by open-minded types who wanted to see what other cities (including Portland, Oregon, and Austin, Texas, as well as Charleston) had to offer.

Bowick is right about the diversity, and his block is part of the proof. His next-door neighbor is Leigh Magar, a milliner who has attracted national attention for her new twist on an old-fashioned craft. **Magar Hatworks** (57 Cannon St.; 843/345-4483) welcomes visitors only by appointment, but it's worth calling ahead to schedule one. Magar is a master of jaunty silhouettes and fabrics, and it's hard to resist touching the feathers and felt on the finished hats lined up in her shop.

Eating Around

Perhaps the smartest move on the part of Charleston's chefs has been capitalizing on, rather than resisting, the city's culinary insularity. There's no need to go roaming the globe for fusion concepts when Low Country food rituals are so strong and

superb seafood swims in the rivers, bays, and oceans so close to the city. The classic dish of shrimp and grits appears on nearly every breakfast menu; indulge at least once.

Hank's Seafood Restaurant (10 Hayne St.; 843/723-3474), owned by Hank Holliday, has a straightforward focus on fresh seafood, culled from the surrounding waters as well as all over the East Coast. The restaurant draws groups of happy-looking locals with its great-looking and airy dining room, finished with charming sea-themed paintings and gleaming woodwork.

Competition for best dinner in town is stiff indeed. If one can dine in town only once, the plush **Charleston Grill** (224 King St.; 843/577-4522) is the place to go. In the evening, the copious wine list, including surprisingly affordable selections, and the live jazz set an appealing tone even before the food arrives. Chef Michelle Weaver's large menu is divided up into several sections, but the Southern delights reign supreme: The Carolina hen with onion gravy is so rich and flavorful, it doesn't seem like earthly poultry.

A similar style of food—call it haute Southern farm stand—is served in a more

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: A sailboat in Charleston's harbor; crispy Caw Caw Creek pork trotters from FIG; a four-poster bed in a high-ceilinged guest room at Planters Inn; Leigh Magar finishes one of her unique hats.



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CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: Haberdasher Ben Smoot aids shoppers at Ben Silver in true Southern prep style; McGrady's serves up local snapper seared a la plancha with regional herbs and vegetables; Worthwhile offers an unusual mix of fashion, literature, and housewares; Hampden Clothing brings designer cachet to King Street.

intimate setting at McCrady's (2 Unity Alley; 843/577-0025). The low lighting, atmospheric brick walls, and alleyway entrance contribute to the romantic ambience, ideal for the couple sharing the perfect meal from this top-flight kitchen: agnolotti with crab and ramps, followed by rib eye dry-aged on premises.

The award for resourcefulness should be bestowed on Mike Lata of FIG, or Food Is Good (232 Meeting St.; 843/805-5900), who has breathed new life into Charleston's culinary scene by keeping the focus on regional preparations while choosing often overlooked local ingredients. Lata's nuanced selection of menu items is just part of the reason he and his laid-back Southern brasserie won the James Beard Foundation's Best Chef: Southeast award last year.

Triggerfish have traditionally been con-

sidered low on the seafood totem pole, perhaps because they are so plentiful around Charleston, but Lata was a fan of the sweet taste and firm texture (reminiscent of crab). He decided to give them a starring role, by serving triggerfish dusted with commel or in a broth made from local clams, depending on the season. They earn their marquee billing with every bite. All the once-humble ingredients on the menu, even the creamy Silver Queen corn, are elevated with the same panache.

Ingenuity and an inclusive attitude make for a good recipe indeed. And there's only one way to greet that combination: Sit down for dinner in Charleston sometime soon and say, "Shalom, y'all." ■

For more photos of Charleston, see our slide show at ShermansTravel.com.