

Charming Charleston: the hot new city break

United States

South Carolina's historic centre has a blossoming food scene, great hotels and new direct flights from the UK. By Jonathan Thompson

If you can't find a shag here, you won't find one anywhere. South Carolinians are fiercely proud of their hip-swinging prowess, particularly in alluring Charleston, where you'll find shag clubs, shag competitions and even shag festivals.

This morning I'm attending a private "shag workshop" at a grand antebellum mansion in the pretty historic district, with a local teacher, Linda Walker.

"The Carolina shag is the swing dance of the South," says Linda, demonstrating the basics of the six-count, eight-step slot dance, before steering me across the palatial drawing room. "If you grew up here and you don't know how to shag, something's up. It's part of our local culture."



The waterfront at Charleston
EXPLORE CHARLESTON

That and plenty more besides. The city of Charleston is justifiably celebrated for a medley of reasons, from its dancing and live music to its garland of golden beaches and offshore islands. Not to mention its intriguing history, encompassing everything from the English Restoration (its first name was Charles Town after King Charles II) to the first shots of the American Civil War,

via tales of swashbuckling presidents and pirates. Add the largest historic district in the US, and a resurgent restaurant scene that is garnering national and international awards at a canter, and you have a destination that should feature on any traveller's bucket list.

It's a good time to visit too. Next month, British Airways launches the first direct flight from London to Charleston,

after a million-dollar airport upgrade in preparation for the city's 350th anniversary celebrations next year.

It doesn't stop there either. Ask any American familiar with South Carolina's largest city and they're likely to say the same thing: Charleston is one of the *friendliest* places in the country. Perhaps it's because of its location on a picture-perfect peninsula, with its colourful Georgian houses, flanked by flickering gas lamps and guarded by rows of busby-like palmetto trees. Perhaps it's the lively beach culture, reliable sunshine and seemingly endless ways of preparing delicious seafood.

"Charlestonians are weirdly nice," says the Michigan-born cabbie who picks me up at the airport. "They won't even beep their horns here." (I spend the four days of my visit trying to disprove his theory, but he's right.) The best way to get your bearings amid the cobblestone streets and winding alleys of the historic district is via a different set of wheels: a horse-drawn carriage.

Starting near the quaint city market (the site of a recent

Need to know

Jonathan Thompson travelled as a guest of Explore Charleston (explorecharleston.com). British Airways flies direct from Heathrow to Charleston twice weekly from £577pp return, starting on April 4 (0344 4930122, ba.com). The Belmond Charleston Place has doubles from \$345 (£264) a night (0845 0772222, belmond.com)

What to do

Bulldog Walking Tours, from \$29 (00 1 843 722 8687, bulldogtours.com). Carriage tours with Palmetto Carriage Works from \$28pp for a group tour or \$200 for a private carriage, (00 1 843 723 8145, palmettocarriage.com). Private shag lessons with Linda Walker cost \$85 an hour (00 1 843 509 0685, facebook.com/carolinashagwithlindawalker)

renovation), we trundle down the old streets. Bob the driver gives me an abridged version of Charleston’s story over the rhythmic clatter of the hoofs.



A street in the historic district of Charleston
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The protected historic district forms the fingerprint of the thumb-like peninsula — the bottom third, encompassing everything south of Calhoun Street. Even this is bisected horizontally by Broad Street: the well-heeled “slightly north of Broad” and the extremely well-

heeled “south of Broad”.

“We call them the Snobs and the Sobs,” says Bob in his singsong southern accent. “It’s probably the only city in the world where the Snobs aspire to be Sobs.”

Charleston’s heyday was the 18th century, when it was the

richest city in North America, eclipsing Boston and New York. With that wealth came a social scene that was the stuff of legend.

“Charleston is a drinking city with a history problem,” goes the old joke. Tavern-themed tales are legion, from the

“tippling houses” where pirates drank but never sat, to George Washington’s infamous whiskey bender in the long room above McCrady’s Tavern, which still serves delicious food. The first president of the United States ordered a cannon to be fired each time he took a shot, so the city could drink with him, and the gunner was busy for most of the night.

Popular with corsairs throughout the 18th century, including the notorious Captain Blackbeard and his contemporary the “gentleman pirate” Stede Bonnet, Charleston’s alleys were the scene of many a drunken duel during this period, giving rise to plenty of ghost stories. Not all, however, involve phantom privateers.

“One of the most famous ghosts is the one haunting the Battery Carriage House Inn,” says Bob as we rumble around the tip of the peninsula, passing the guest house in question. “He’s called ‘the gentleman ghost’ because he only haunts female guests staying alone. Some say he’s eternally looking for a dance partner.” Charleston’s most persistent



shagger, perhaps.

If there’s one thing this city has accumulated more than spectres, it’s spires. There are 75 churches on the peninsula, which is seven miles long and three miles wide, prompting Charleston’s nickname — the “holy city”. Back in my hotel room at the Belmond Charleston Place — a glittering grande dame of a property sitting spider-like at the heart of the historic district’s antebellum web — I notice the bells chiming every 15 minutes during the day, lending a pleasant Oxford-like cadence to life in this genteel southern haven.

Not everything in Charleston is old-fashioned, though. North

of Calhoun Street the more modern, upper half of the peninsula is thriving. Here, particularly on King Street, the bar and restaurant scene is flourishing. The big news for 2019 is the arrival of the first hotel to rival the luxury hegemony of the Belmond Charleston Place. The Hotel Bennett opened in January on King Street. It has an extraordinary two-tiered restaurant overlooking Marion Square (serving everything from traditional South Carolina shrimp and grits to duck à l’orange and poached lobster), as well as a champagne and oyster bar designed like a Fabergé egg, and an outstanding rooftop cocktail bar, which is already a sundowner favourite for locals.

The real star, however, is the gleaming Parisian-style patisserie at street level — all marble counters and buttery, melt-in-the-mouth confections, presided over by the improbably monikered Lyonnais chef Remy Funrock (disappointingly, he was sporting plain chef whites on the day of my visit).

A stroll up King Street illustrates that Charleston’s

foodie revolution is continuing apace. Félix, one of the newest additions, combines outstanding cocktails (try Félix 550: cognac, gin, grapefruit, lemon and cava) with innovative petits plats such as lobster-devilled eggs and a moreish mini raclette burger. Next door, the Ordinary (presumably named so reviewers describe it as “anything but”) specialises in oysters served in multifarious mouthwatering ways (the “hot crispy oyster slider” was the winner for my money). The owner, Mike Lata, has a success on his hands, amid a buoyant restaurant scene that rivals Nashville, Atlanta and anywhere else the South can put up.

At the denouement of *Gone with the Wind*, Rhett Butler turns to face Scarlett O’Hara and says the immortal words: “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn. I’m going back to Charleston, where there is still a little grace and civility left in the world.” The good news is that there’s still an abundance of both to be discovered here in this cluttered, colourful, charismatic city — and plenty more besides. ■