

36 Hours

CHARLESTON, S.C.

Soak up the city's charm on two wheels, savor some shrimp and grits, then take in the view from a rooftop bar.

By JEANNIE RALSTON

Charleston is known mostly for its complex, magnolia-tinged history, for hospitality as grand as the stucco homes that line the fabled Battery, for its surrounding beaches and increasingly for its food scene. But Charleston also has an important tie to a Christmas icon. In the 1820s, Joel Roberts Poinsett, a native son and the first United States minister to Mexico, brought a red winter-flowering plant back to his home state and eventually *Euphorbia pulcherrima* became the ubiquitous botanical symbol of the season. You'll see plenty of poinsettias around Charleston during the holidays, and winter, in general, is a great time to visit. Crowds are fewer, and with the not-too-hot, not-too-cold temperatures, you can still spend plenty of time outdoors — either downtown or just across the river in the lovely Lowcountry town of Mount Pleasant.

Friday

1 4 P.M. > SHOPPING CENTRAL

Since the early 1800s, the Charleston City Market has been a center of commerce, and with its renovation a few years ago, it's never looked so good. The main section of the market, the Great Hall, was enclosed and got skylights and a more expansive, elegant layout. The Historic Charleston Foundation offers all things Charleston, including ornaments shaped like favorite downtown buildings (\$20). Check out the Charleston Hat Man and the Charleston Shoe Company, which sells look-good, feel-good shoes billed as perfect for cobblestones or cocktails (starting at \$100 a pair). For a recharge, sip a macchiato from the high-end grocery/cafe, Caviar & Bananas.

2 6 P.M. > UP ON THE ROOF

Because Charleston is on a peninsula with views in almost every direction, it's no wonder that rooftop bars are the rage. The perfect perch is the bar at the Market Pavilion Hotel, near City Market, which offers a panorama view of the harbor. Plexiglass around the perimeter and heaters keep it warm on evenings that pass for

chilly. The bar menu is dominated by "M" drinks: imaginative takes on mojitos (\$14 to \$16), martinis (\$13 to \$16) and margaritas (\$8.50).

3 7:30 P.M. > SON OF HUSK

Charleston, a city of 126,000, is home to a concentration of world-class dining normally seen in cities five times the size. For the past few years, the king-daddy of Charleston restaurants has been Husk, and several worthy spots are following in the footsteps of Husk's executive chef, Sean Brock. For instance, Two Boroughs Larder (the name refers to the restaurant's location, in the emerging area known as the Cannonborough and Elliotborough neighborhood) offers an ever-changing menu in a stripped-down interior with pantry items such as retro tea towels and locally blended cocktail mixers for sale. Recent standout dishes included an heirloom tomato salad, duck confit (with black olives and green garbanzos) and a heritage pork neck dish made with charred onions and chanterelles (\$75 for two).

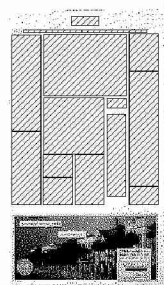
4 9:30 P.M. > FILL YOUR TANK

As long as you're in the neighborhood, stop in at Fuel Cantina, a renovated Esso station. The décor is blue-collar cool, with old gas pumps and signs as accents. The roll-up garage doors are glass; the sconces are made from pump handles. Though burgers, fish tacos and sandwiches are served here, it's best for a beer (16 types on tap, including its own brand) or an "antifreeze" shooter, a blistering green combo of vodka, pineapple juice and melon liqueur. If you still have energy, try your skill at a game of bocce on the back patio.

Saturday

5 9 A.M. > WHEELS ON THE GROUND

The quickest way to soak up all the city's marvels is on two wheels. Rent beach cruisers from the Bicycle Shoppe, where you can also pick up route suggestions. The best place to see the spectrum of architectural styles here, including the classic "single house" with porches running along one side, is south of Broad Street. Don't miss Legare Street with its famous



wrought-iron gates or wee, brick-paved Stolls Alley. Rainbow Row — a stretch of 18th-century townhouses in sherbet hues — is a few pedal pushes away. The narrow, shady streets open up to the Battery on the southern tip of the peninsula. Catch your breath (then lose it again taking in the view of the harbor) at White Point Garden.

6 NOON > WHO'S GOT SOUL?

For years, intrepid eaters in search of authentic local fare have headed to an unassuming cafe in an industrial area called Martha Lou's Kitchen. Though the 83-year-old Martha Lou Gadsden is still whipping up fried chicken and stewed cabbage, there's another queen of Lowcountry cooking who offers food with a lighter twist. Alluette Jones specializes in what she calls "holistic soul food" at Alluette's Café. That means no pork (almost heresy in Southern kitchens) and a focus on vegetables from nearby organic farms. The dishes, from spicy fish stew to creamy lima bean soup, are as flavorful as traditional fare. Also try the Bill Murray black bean burger, named for the local resident who reportedly orders it regularly. (Lunch, \$40 for two.)

7 2 P.M. > UNDER THE BRIDGE

The two-mile-long Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge can be seen from almost anywhere in Charleston, but one of the most impressive views is from below it. The neighboring town of Mount Pleasant, across the Cooper River from downtown Charleston, has opened a handsome park on a pier beneath the bridge. After a stroll, stop at the Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Pavilion. Many places sell traditional sweetgrass baskets, originally used for plantation work, such as winnowing rice, but here a handsome museum display puts them in historical context. Watch local women weaving and buy a basket (\$65 and up).

8 3 P.M. > TARA! TARA! TARA!

Boone Hall Plantation in Mount Pleasant is still a working plantation that earned extra cachet last fall when Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds were married on the Cotton Dock, which sits in the marshland. The main house embodies serene grandeur while the rows of slave quarters, now housing an exhibition on black culture, offer a sobering counterpoint. But probably the best reason to come here is the entryway: three-quarters of a mile of 270-year-old live oaks oozing with Spanish moss. Admission, \$20.

9 5 P.M. PLUFF MUD AT SUNSET

Shem Creek in Mount Pleasant has long

been a harbor for shrimpers; well into December, you're likely to see trawlers chugging in to anchor, often trailed by porpoises. Sunset is a good time for a turn along the boardwalk, where locals fish, seabirds squawk and, if it's low tide, crabs scurry through the pluff mud below. Follow up with a drink at the Cabana Bar at Water's Edge, where you can watch the day's light fade over the boat masts.

10 7:30 P.M. > MISNOMER CAFE

Who names a restaurant the Ordinary? Maybe someone who wants reviewers to use the phrase, "It's anything but." Inside this 1927 bank building in the Upper King neighborhood, you'll find Charleston's most vibrant new restaurant. The high-ceilinged interior with arched windows feels like a temple to seafood. By the old bank vault is the raw bar, piled high with clams, oysters, crab. The pickled shrimp is a masterpiece, and the swordfish schnitzel, is, uh, extraordinary. Dinner, \$100 for two.

11 10 P.M. > THE EYE OF THE TIGER

End the evening at a place with another odd name: the Blind Tiger. The appellation refers to a euphemism for drinking establishments used during Prohibition. The front of this legendary bar has a musty, dive feel — with black-and-white checkerboard linoleum floors and taxidermy on the wall. In the back is an enchanting garden where seating areas are tucked behind crumbling brick walls or under branches.

Sunday

12 10 A.M. > MORNING GLORY

There are reportedly more than 400 churches in Charleston. The most interesting sacred place in town, however, is the Magnolia Cemetery, which dates to the 1850s and is strewn across 92 acres on the Cooper River. Here the headstones may be shaped like pyramids or adorned with angels, and mausoleums are architectural wonders with columns and florid accents. One serene pond has a fetching white footbridge across it, and all apparently have a hidden danger. "S.C. Law Prohibits Feeding Alligators," a sign says at the entrance. The cemetery is famous for its Civil War burial sites — including those belonging to three crews of the Confederate H. L. Hunley, the first submarine to sink an enemy ship, in 1864 in Charleston Harbor. (You can see the Hunley, discovered 18 years ago, on weekends in North Charleston.)

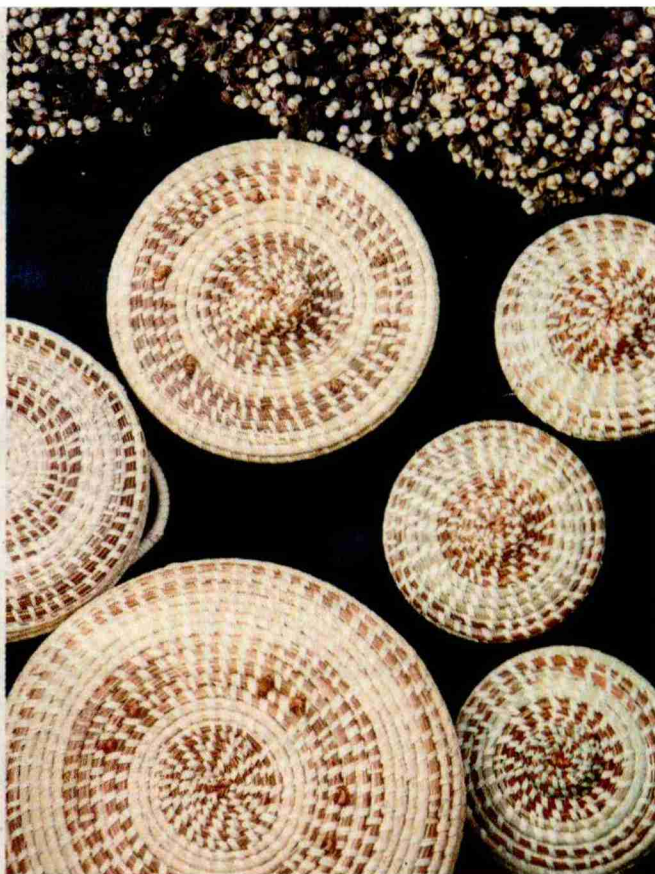
13 NOON > AMAZING GRITS

At Hall's Chophouse, two Sunday rituals

come together: brunch and worship. Near the piano at the front door, a singer croons "Amazing Grace" and other gospel standards (during the holidays, you'll hear carols steeped with soul). Upstairs, the hungry sit on leather banquettes and dig into crab cake eggs Benedict, shrimp and grits. Several Hall family members circulate to schmooze. Think of this robust dose of Southern hospitality as the weekend's exclamation point (\$55 for two).

IF YOU GO

- 1 Charleston City Market**, 188 Meeting Street; thecharlestoncitymarket.com
- 2 Market Pavilion Hotel**, 225 East Bay Street; marketpavilion.com.
- 3 Two Boroughs Larder**, 186 Coming Street; twoboroughslarder.com.
- 4 Fuel Cantina**, 211 Rutledge Avenue; fuelcharleston.com.
- 5 The Bicycle Shoppe**, 280 Meeting Street; thebicycleshoppecharleston.com.
- 6 Alluette's Café**, 80 A Reid Street; alluettes.com.
- 7 Mount Pleasant Memorial Waterfront Park**, 71 Harry M. Hallman Boulevard, Mount Pleasant; mountpleasantrecreation.com.
- 8 Boone Hall Plantation**, 1235 Long Point Road, Mount Pleasant; boonehallplantation.com
- 9 Shem Creek**, Mount Pleasant. **Cabana Bar**, 1407 Shrimp Boat Lane, Mount Pleasant; waters-edge-restaurant.com.
- 10 The Ordinary**, 544 King Street; eattheordinary.com
- 11 The Blind Tiger**, 36 Broad Street; blindtigercharleston.com.
- 12 Magnolia Cemetery**, 70 Cunnington Avenue; 843-722-8638. **The Hunley**, 1250 Supply Street; hunley.org.
- 13 Hall's Chophouse**, 434 King Street; hallschophouse.com.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HUNTER McRAE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, Carlene Habersham's sweetgrass baskets at the Charleston City Market. Left, fishing in Shem Creek in Mount Pleasant and biking down East Bay Street.

