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OPINION

# Smith: Charleston beckons its visitors to return

By LORAN SMITH published Wednesday, June 25, 2014

CHARLESTON, S.C. | This city, which once made South Carolina the economic jewel of the colonial empire, has recurring emotional influences. A brief respite here leaves you pining for a return. No coastal city, other than Savannah, can stimulate encores like Charleston. You come here and you leave reluctantly. Charleston brings about that warm afterglow that honeymooners appreciate. If you don't like Charleston, Charleston will forgive you — because it knows you don't know any better.

There's history here. Boiled peanuts, a Custom House, and abundant trees. There are rows of palm trees, interrupted by hardened oaks with a character that reminds you of life's resiliency and fickleness — mostly the former. There are magnolias, too, to confirm that Charleston belongs to a time when life was abundant and genteel for the gentry but not so good for the other half.

The shots fired at Fort Sumter were essentially the undoing of that orderly process and would eventually bode well for the latter.

The ensuing conflict disrupted the status quo, and suffering would switch hosts. Slavery was no longer the norm, but its demise spawned segregation, which evolved into social separation with which society wrestles today. The Old South survives today, but the adage of live and let live seems to make Charleston's constituents compatible. The haves and the have-nots mingle amicably in the saloons, watering holes and gathering places about Charleston. Perhaps that is why Charleston offers such an inviting and embracing lifestyle.

Charleston is a city that has been praised by travel magazines for its hospitality, good manners and friendliness, although in another day there was plenty to fret about with the French and the Spanish contesting England's presence. Residents had to also contend with raids by pirates. The greatest contempt for the settlers came from the Native Americans, whose fertile lands were taken to eventually spawn cotton plantations, which created unlimited wealth for the Southern planters.

In the beginning, the city was named Charles Towne, in honor of King Charles II of England. The city was founded in 1670 and became one of the biggest cities in the colonies with the passing of time. In 1783, it became Charleston.

Although Charleston becomes stifling hot in the summer, it still smiles through gentle breezes and the comforting shade provided by the giant oaks, which remind you that Charleston has had the courage and tenacity to survive and prosper, long before it became a tourist mecca. Many are smitten by the architecture. There is a good variety, from Georgian to Victorian to Greek Revival and more, with gardens aplenty to refresh your spirits and to soothe the mind's eye. You don't want to come here and not arrange for a walking tour.

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The city connects with historians, landscape architects, chefs and any with a creative bent. Since this is the low country, the moss-draped trees seduce you, and the best shrimp and grits sustain you. What is there not to like about Charleston? Only one thing — making your exit. I am charmed by what Charleston showcases and what its Chamber of Commerce touts — good food, good times, laid-back living, and history.

When I visit a city, I try to familiarize myself with those aspects of it that uplift and excite. However, those who are experiencing hard times and who may be down on their luck are just as much a part of the character of any American city, and Charleston is no exception. A disheveled man with an upraised palm waits outside the upscale restaurant where a Charleston Mule, a mint-flavored libation in a chilled tin cup, costs 10 bucks, or more. Every city has that contrast.

Charleston's living is so laid back, most visitors get their day started when fishermen are calling it a day.

They have brought their catch to market, enabling you a few hours later to enjoy a signature meal that will reside high in your rankings with the passing of time.

A recent sojourn to Charleston reminded me of just how much charm and history converge to create such a unique experience — leaving you with the feeling that you wish you could stay longer. Upon leaving, I could hear Charleston whispering, "Y'all come back, you heah."

Loran Smith is a contributing columnist to the Athens Banner-Herald.



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