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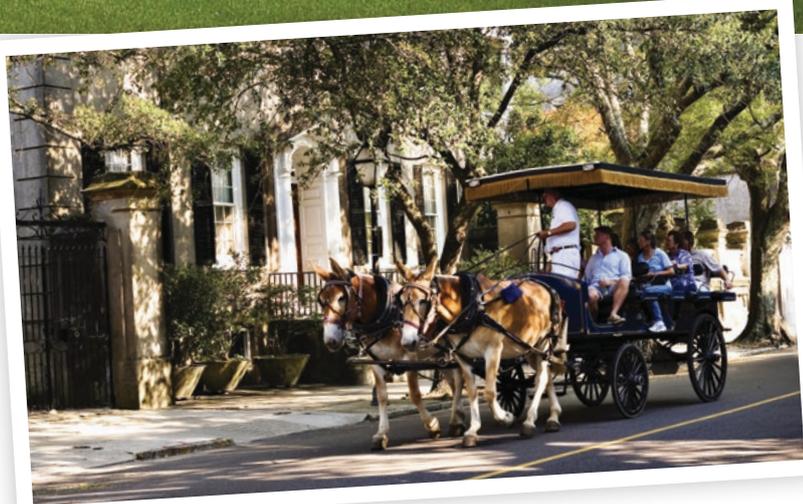
CHARLESTON

SOUTH CAROLINA'S SOUTHERN BELLE

IF CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, WERE TO BE CAST AS A CHARACTER in *Gone With The Wind*, she would definitely be Scarlett O'Hara ... beautiful, strong willed, entrepreneurial and a real survivor, writes **Mary Moore Mason**, herself born and bred in the South.

Left 'too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash' by the ravages of the American Civil War – which began on April 12, 1861 when hot-headed local Confederates fired on Union-held Fort Sumter on an island in its harbour – Charleston was forced to retain its wealth of beautiful antebellum buildings rather than replacing them, as did many other cities, with the elaborate Victorian-era structures of the late-19th century. And after being hit by a major earthquake in 1886, which damaged nearly 2,000 buildings, she structurally strengthened them against such a future occurrence, again making the best of a bad thing. (Visions of a penniless Scarlett resplendent in a gown made of her velvet curtains springs to mind.)

In so-doing, Charleston, along with her Southern soul sisters, Savannah and New Orleans, became one of the three major Graces of Southern architectural heritage ... a place that everyone fascinated by the Old South should visit.



TOP Drayton Hall, just to the north of Charleston, is America's oldest unrestored plantation

ABOVE RIGHT An ideal way to tour the city is by horse-drawn carriage

Set on a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper rivers – both flowing into a large harbour and then the Atlantic – the small, compact city of about 130,000 residents can easily be explored by foot, pedicab, and harbour boat tours, some stopping at Fort Sumter. My personal preference is via a horse-drawn carriage propelled by a driver who is full of local lore. Along the city's quiet streets, shaded by huge, Spanish-moss-veiled oak trees and sweetly-scented magnolias, are the grand town houses of the cotton and rice barons whose fortune came from plantations outside town. Other structures include the



parade of pastel-coloured cottages, known as Rainbow Row, which reputedly featured in *Porgy*, local author Dubose Heyward's saga of local African-American life, which was the inspiration for George Gershwin's bitter-sweet opera *Porgy and Bess*. Even today, local African-American women sell their traditional and valued sweetgrass baskets on street corners and in colourful Old City Market, fronted by the Confederate Museum.

The Charleston Museum claims to be the oldest in America and the Gibbes Museum of Art to contain one of the finest collections of American art in the South-East. The Old Slave Mart Museum explores the harrowing story of the slave trade that enriched many of the area plantations prior to the Civil War. But for many, the best insight into the historic lifestyle of Charleston is found within the elegant homes that are open to the public. They range from the pre-Revolutionary War period cottage of local cabinetmaker Thomas Elfe and the Heyward-Washington House – one-time residence of a signer of *The Declaration of Independence* – to the Aiken-Rhett House (circa 1818), the city's most-intact

ABOVE Chalmers Street is known for its cobblestones and colourfully-painted homes

BELOW Shopping for art at Old City Market



antebellum urban villa, the Edmonston-Alston House, with its beautiful views of the harbour from three piazzas, and the Nathaniel Russell House, completed in 1808 and renowned for its magnificent, free-flying staircase.

Among the city's oldest building are the early 18th-century Powder House and the Old Exchange and Provost Dungeon, where American patriots were held prisoners during the American War of Independence. The city is also home to the College of Charleston, founded in 1770 and the oldest municipal college in America, and the impressive Citadel military college, sometimes referred to as 'The West Point of the South'. The city's low-rise skyline is also dramatised by the spires of numerous historic churches. Among them are the oldest Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches in the Carolinas, the oldest Baptist church in the South, the South's mother Lutheran church, the fourth-oldest synagogue in the USA, a late-18th-century church built for both enslaved and freed African Americans, and early-19th-century churches built by Scottish and French Huguenot immigrants,

Children are catered to by the South Carolina Aquarium, the Children's Museum of the Lowcountry, and Charles Towne Landing, a family attraction on the site of the first (1670) English settlement in South Carolina. Located about five minutes' drive from downtown on Old Towne Road, it includes an animal forest, the replica of a 17th-century sailing ship and living-history displays.

LOCAL ATTRACTIONS FOR THEATRE AND ART LOVERS

Theatre lovers should check out the Dock Street Theatre, built in Georgian style on the site of one of America's first (1736) theatres and the hub of the annual summer Spoleto Festival USA, which features theatre, opera, dance and music at theatres, churches and outdoor venues throughout the city. And shoppers will find it hard to tear themselves away from King Street, which is lined with elegant shops and galleries that sell jewellery, household ornaments, clothing, antiques and artwork, including paintings, some of them by South Carolina artists.

If you head north, you can enjoy the lovely Riverfront Park and the Old Charleston Navy Base, home to the Confederates' *HL Hunley*, the first submarine to sink an enemy warship. Raised from local waters in 2000, it can be visited on Saturdays. Continue by bridge across the Cooper River and you have several choices: the Patriot Point Naval & Maritime Museum – where you can clamber aboard the World War II *USS Yorktown* aircraft carrier – the charming town of Mount Pleasant,

Boone Hall Plantation (the main house is not original but has been built in antebellum style but the original slave cabins still exist), and the beaches of Sullivan's Island, also home to American Revolution war-era Fort Moultrie, and the Isle of Palms, also home to the Wild Dunes resort.

However, the main excursion point for many visitors is across the Ashley River and along the River Road to yet more plantations. Magnolia Plantation & Gardens (www.magnoliaplantation.com) boasts America's oldest gardens (circa 1680) and a pre-Revolutionary War home, and the claim to fame for Middleton Place (www.middletonplace.org) is not only its house museum, set in a handsome 1755 structure, but its 65 acres of gardens, the oldest landscaped ones in America and including an unusual, butterfly-shaped lake. Drayton Hall (www.draytonhall.org), America's oldest unrestored plantation, has a particularly poignant history. It is said that it only escaped demolition by rampaging Union troops because the mistress of the house (another Scarlett) had notices put up around the plantation's perimeters claiming (falsely) that everyone within its boundaries was suffering from the plague.

And, as I am mentioning Scarlett again, Charlestonians seem to have taken to heart her fervent vow when suffering near-starvation during the Civil War – "As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again!" There appear to be more excellent

BELOW A focal point of Middleton Place's 65 acres of gardens is its butterfly-shaped lake



restaurants per capita here than in the majority of US cities. Many focus on such South Carolina Lowcountry specialties as She Crab soup, shrimp and grits, crab cakes, corn bread, tomato pie, oyster pie and okra soup, but don't miss out on delicious deserts such as mud (chocolate) and pecan pies and memorable cocktails. And if you want to see where it all comes from, visit the Saturday Farmer's Market in pretty Marion Square.

TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE: Although there are no direct flights to Charleston, there are connections via Delta Air Lines (www.delta.com, 0871 221 1222) over such cities as Atlanta and New

York, American Airlines (www.aa.com, 0844 369 9899) over Charlotte, and United (www.united.com, 020 8276 6900) over Washington, DC, and Newark.

GETTING AROUND: You don't really need a car as it's easy to reach most places by foot, local transport, and – farther afield – by general and special-interest tours.

WHEN TO GO: Charleston has a pleasant climate year-round although it can be very hot and humid in the summer. An ideal time to visit is during the March/April Festival of Houses and Gardens (www.historiccharleston.org/events/annual-festival-of-houses-and-gardens.aspx), the Spoleto USA Festival (May 27-June 12 this year; www.spoletousa.org) and the Fall Tours of Homes and Gardens (October 6-30, www.thefalltours.org).

STAYING OVERNIGHT: The city has a wealth of historic and often charming hotels, inns and bed and breakfasts. Among them are two Meeting Street hotels: Belmond Charleston Place (www.belmond.com/charleston-place/luxury-hotel), centrally located and including a pool and spa, and the atmospheric Mills House Wyndham Grand (www.millshouse.com), originally opened in 1853 and totally restored in 2014, and Wentworth Street's opulent Wentworth Mansion (www.wentworthmansion.com), voted *Travel & Leisure's* Number 1 Small, City Hotel last year.

For a unique experience, consider the John Rutledge House Inn (www.johnrutledgehouseinn.com), built in 1763 and the only home of a signer of the *American Declaration of Independence* accommodating overnight guests; if more of a cutting-edge, artsy venue is your preference, then check out The Vendue Inn (www.thevendue.com), housed in several converted 18th-century warehouses on Vendue Range in the heart of the Historic French Quarter Art District and full of original art works.

DINING OUT: Here's just a sampling: East Bay Street's Slightly North of Broad (www.snobcharleston.com), which calls itself 'an eclectic Lowcountry bistro' and features such specialties as butternut squash bisque, Carolina quail and shrimp and grits; McCrady's (www.mccradysrestaurant.com), a Unity Alley extension of the 1778 tavern that held a gala dinner for first US President George Washington. It shares its James Beard award-winning chef with Husk on Queen Street (www.huskrestaurant.com) – both are known for their food sourced from Southern farms, handcrafted cocktails and impressive wine lists. Circa 1886 (www.circa1886.com), an AAA four-Diamond establishment set on the grounds of the Wentworth Mansion, offers such treats as Carolina flounder, curried heart of palm, pecan-pie bread pudding and banana-split ice cream sandwiches, and the Charleston Grill (www.charlestongrill.com), located on lively King Street, combines Southern, French and contemporary cuisine with nightly live jazz.

FURTHER INFORMATION: www.explorecharleston.com