THE BEAUTY OF GREAT LAKES BEACONS / A GRUMPY GUY IN A CHEERY CITY / ALIEN LANDINGS ARE BIG BUSINESS

AMERICAN WAY

MARCH 2016

BY LAND AND SEA

OUR 14TH ANNUAL ROAD WARRIOR CONTEST WINNERS EXPLORE BEAUTIFUL BELIZE

LEFT TO RIGHT: EMILY WILLIAMS KNIGHT, ERIC NUNZIATO, BECKY AHLGREN BEDICS, LUIS AYALA AND ANDREW BOLT

MARCH

2016 | VOLUME 49 | NUMBER 3

Pineapple Fountain in Charleston, South Carolina's Waterfront Park

PHOTO COURTESY CHARLESTON CVB

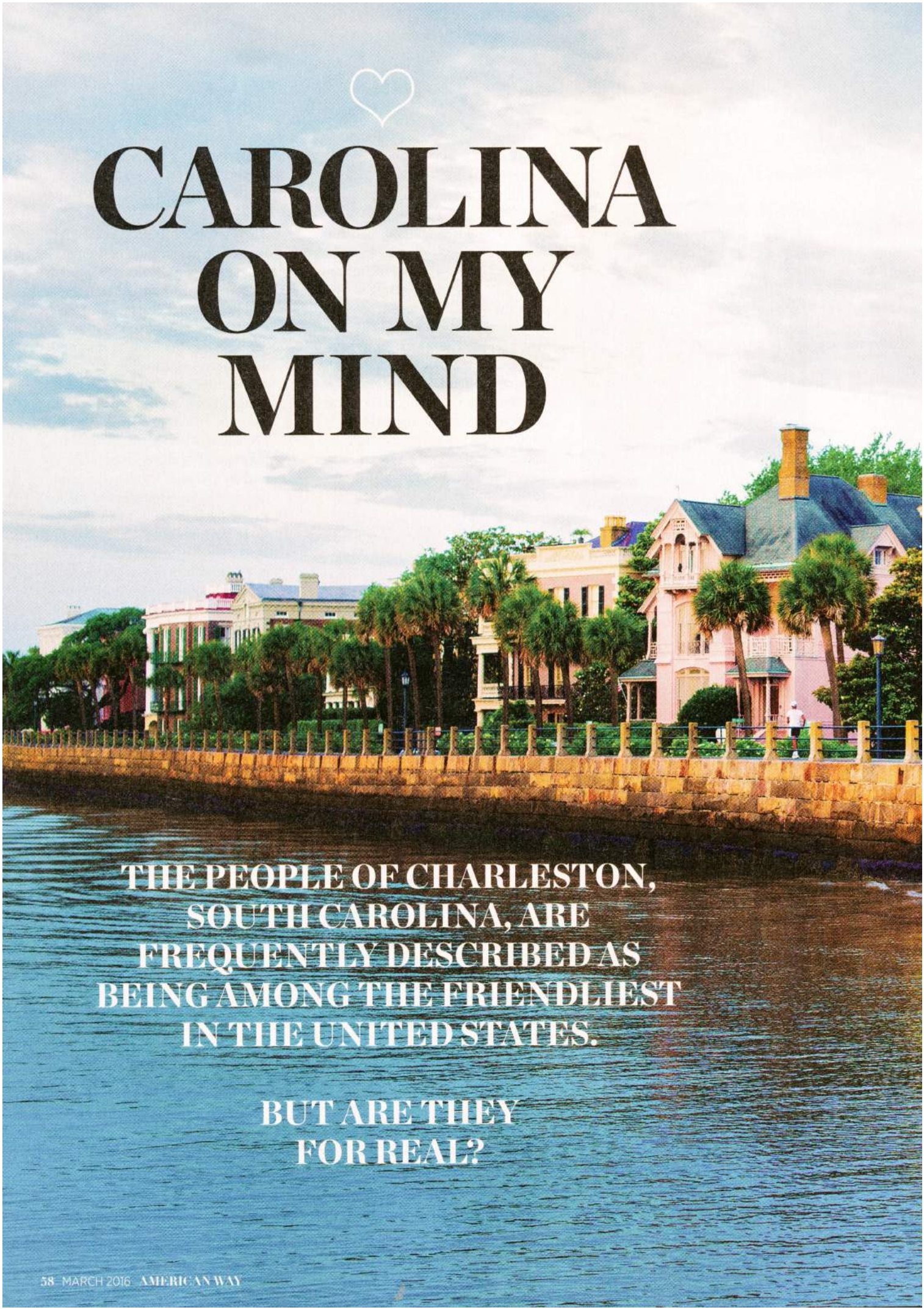
FEATURES

42 | ROAD WARRIOR
BY JACQUELYNE FROEBER
Our 14th Annual Road Warrior Contest heads to Belize for some life-changing adventure.

52 | BEACONS OF BEAUTY
BY JULIE HALPERT
Among the lesser-trumpeted charms of the five Great Lakes are nearly 130 lighthouses that dot the shorelines. All of them are worth a look, but these are our favorites, steeped in history and quiet beauty.

58 | CAROLINA ON MY MIND
BY JOSEPH GUINTO
The people of Charleston, South Carolina, are frequently described as being among the friendliest in the United States. But are they for real?

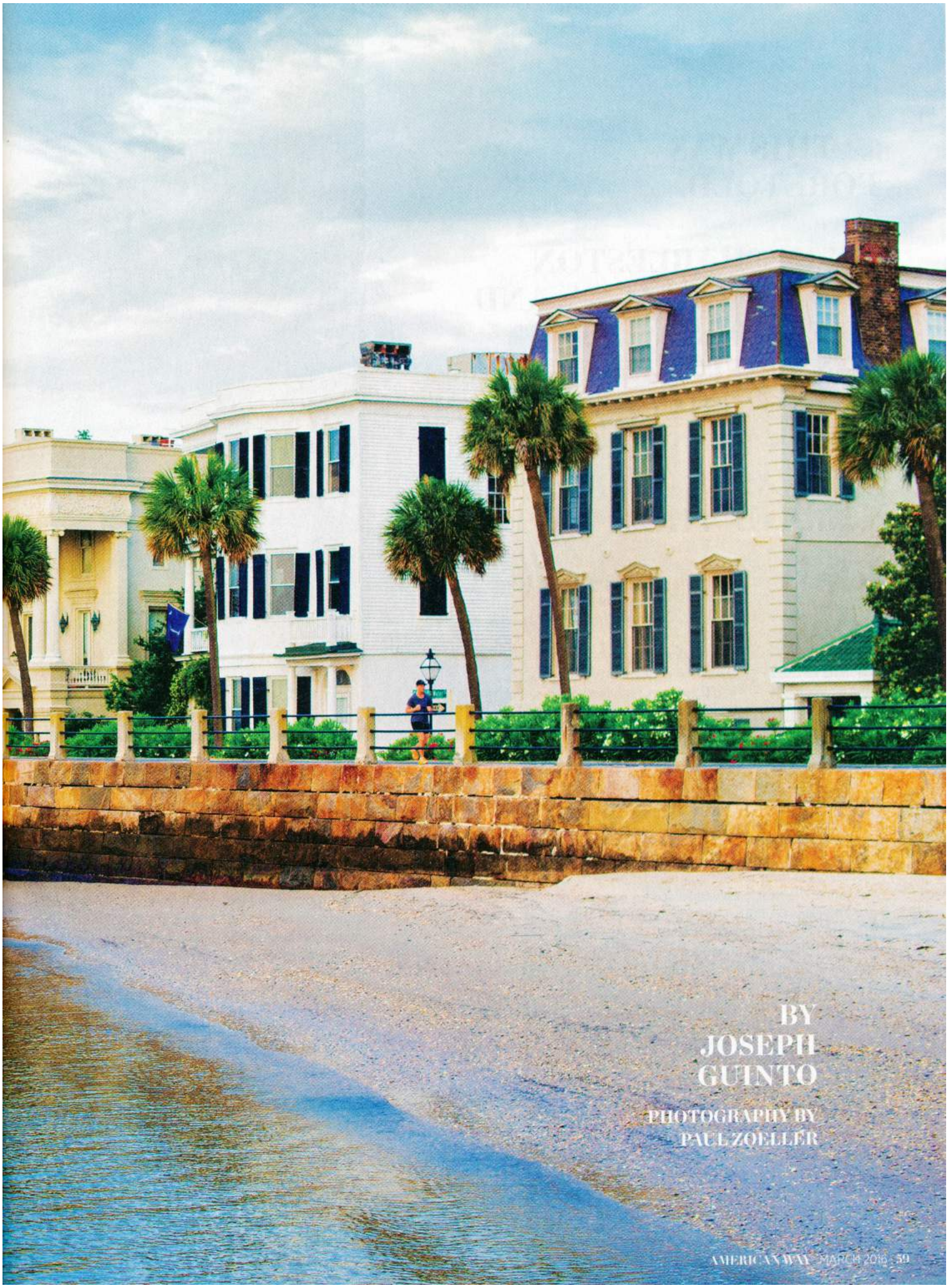
ON THE COVER
2015 ROAD WARRIOR WINNERS SHOT EXCLUSIVELY FOR *AMERICAN WAY* BY SCOTT WINTROW



CAROLINA ON MY MIND

THE PEOPLE OF CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, ARE FREQUENTLY DESCRIBED AS BEING AMONG THE FRIENDLIEST IN THE UNITED STATES.

BUT ARE THEY FOR REAL?



BY JOSEPH GUINTO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL ZOELLER

♡ THIS WAS FORETOLD.

I'M IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, AND THE PROPHECIES OF JON WEITZ ARE COMING TO PASS. "HELLO!" PEOPLE SAY AS THEY PASS ME BY. "HOW ARE YOU DOING?" SOME OF THEM WAVE.

As I walk along Upper King Street, it starts to rain, so I seek shelter under construction scaffolding. A man named Nick stops alongside me. He talks to me about the weather and the damage the rain will do to my suede shoes. This, too, did Weitz foresee.

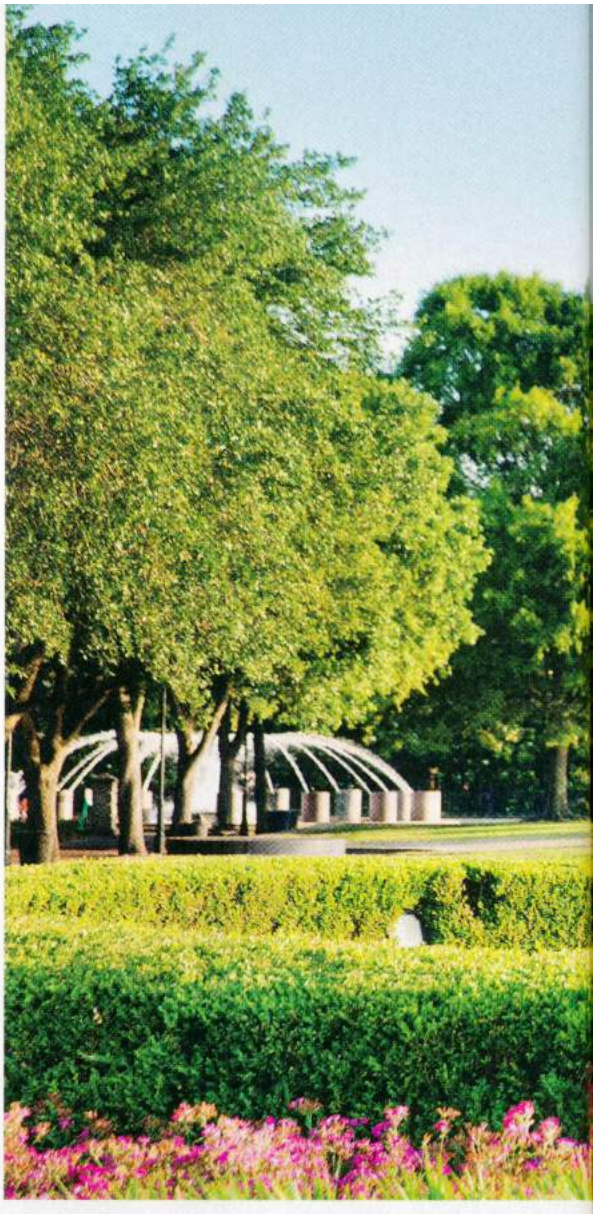
Weitz is the owner and president of Avocet Hospitality, which operates The Vendue, a tiny boutique hotel on the southern tip of the Charleston peninsula. "People will surely say hello to you and make eye contact with you," Weitz had told me earlier. "I would even bet you're going to make a personal connection with someone along the way."

As it turns out, this wasn't really a stretch. Charleston is frequently named among the friendliest cities in the United States. Last year, it topped *Travel + Leisure*'s list of the best cities in North America, in part because of its unique brand of Southern hospitality.

This sort of thing is a mystery to me. I've spent most of my life in the Northeast where, according to *Condé Nast Traveler*, six of the 10 "unfriendliest" U.S. cities are located. In fact, I arrived in Charleston wondering if its famed hospitality might not be an angle. Something designed to part tourists from their money via a strategic "Hi, y'all."

Or maybe I'm just a product of my environment: a jerk.

In order to get to the bottom of this very important question, I decided to try my hand at fitting in. My first move was to go out and buy *The Southerner's Handbook: A Guide to Living the Good Life*, "a comprehensive tutorial for modern-day life in the South" from the editors of the locally based *Garden & Gun* magazine. Follow the rules in the book, sartorial and otherwise, and I figured I'd be accepted anywhere — real Tom Wolfe stuff. Yet, as I roamed the city's historic center, where art-deco commercial buildings bump up against



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Pretty sites and local music are accessible on foot. Try a skillet of cornbread with Tennessee bacon from Husk Restaurant.

breathtaking antebellum and Georgian houses, it soon became clear that the locals could see through my seersucker camouflage and affable nods: "Enjoy your stay!"

Upward of 5 million people visit here every year — a remarkable number for a city of just 130,000 (New Orleans, which has four times the population, only gets twice as many visitors). Hospitality, then, does more than put smiles on faces. It puts food on the tables. Some 10 percent, or $3.3 billion, of Charleston's annual economic output has been linked to tourism.

No one knows more about putting food on the table than Jeremiah Bacon, the three-time James Beard Award semifinalist who is the executive chef of The Macintosh, my rain-delayed next stop in town.

When I walk in, Bacon is on the phone, talking about me. He hangs up and asks, "Are you going on Tommy Dew's walking tour tomorrow?" I am, on the recommendation of Weitz, who is friends with Dew, who is a neighbor of Bacon. "This place is like a spider web," Bacon says. "Everyone's stuck to everyone else."

Bacon, who is also executive chef at the Oak Steakhouse downtown, grew up on nearby John's Island and worked in a variety of local hospitality jobs before moving to Hyde Park, New York, to attend the Culinary Institute of America. After he graduated, he moved to

New York City, where he worked under Thomas Keller at Per Se and Eric Ripert at Le Bernardin.

As we take a seat at a long high-top table in the window of The Macintosh, I drop some of my Yankee cynicism on Bacon. I ask him if Southern hospitality isn't just a means to an end, another term for good service. "I don't think that's what it is," he replies, smiling. "Service is folding a napkin for someone when they go to the bathroom. But hospitality is how we make you feel." Rats. Good answer.

Bacon goes on to say that in Charleston, unlike in some of the other places he's worked, hospitality extends not only to the customer but to competitors as well. The competition here has intensified in recent years, as restaurants try to keep pace with an expanding population — around 11,000 people have moved to Charleston each year for the past three years, thanks in part to an expanding Boeing factory and an influx of tech start-ups, keen to tap into the talent at Charleston's many colleges.

"When we opened The Macintosh four years ago, there was only one other restaurant near us," Bacon says, pointing out to King Street, which runs like a spine down the center of the peninsula. "Now this Upper King neighborhood extends four more blocks north, and there are several restaurants about to open here. But even though the industry is getting bigger, this is still a community."

Charleston native Weitz, a former attorney who got into the hospitality game full time almost two decades ago, says that this sense of community extends into every area of local life. "If you see someone out watering the grass or something, they're going to say, 'How are you doing?' There's going to be some engagement," he says. "It's a simple thing, but to me, that's the foundation of Southern hospitality. People here actually care about the stranger who is passing by."

"That's the foundation of Southern hospitality. People here actually care about the stranger who is passing by."

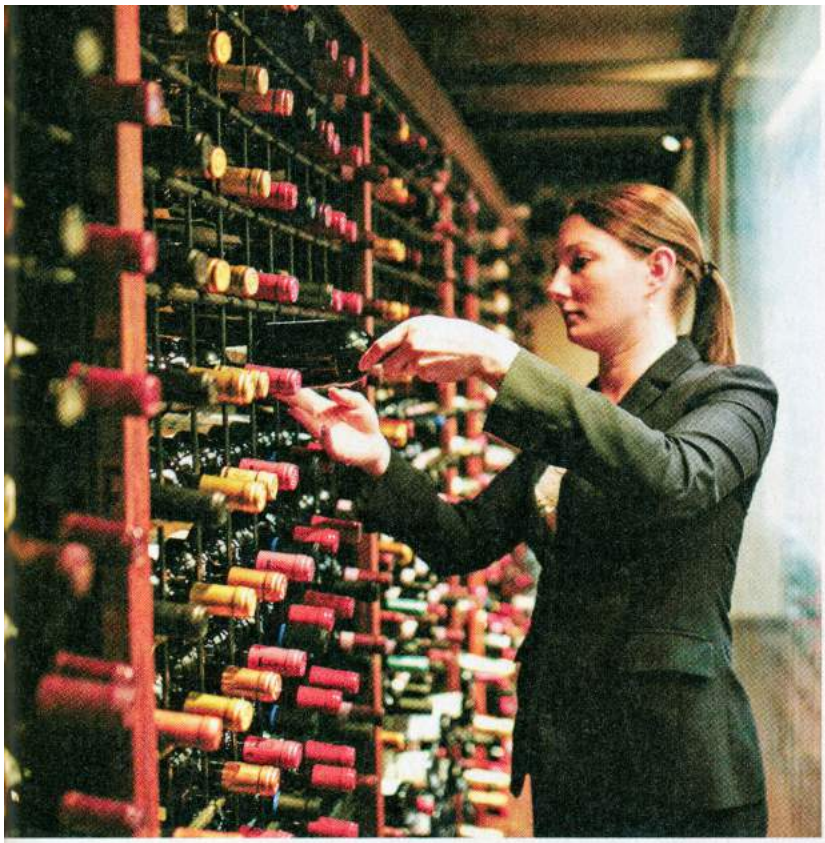
It has been said that Charleston is a "drinking town with a history problem." To test this, I head out one night to the Gin Joint, a craft-cocktail watering hole on East Bay Street, to talk to someone who knows a bit about both: Robert Moss, a former food critic for the *Charleston City Paper* who has a book coming out in April titled *Southern Spirits: Four Hundred Years of Drinking in the American South, with Recipes*.

As Moss and I sip $10 bartender specials — pick two words from a list, like bitter and strong and they make you something to your liking — he tells me he shares at least a little of my skepticism about Southern hospitality. "That can seem like a bit of a dated notion in a city that's changing like Charleston is," he says. "Then again, there are some people here who would really like to hit the pause button on all that change."

The change Moss is talking about is extensive and unstoppable. New restaurants, like those around The Macintosh; new bars, such as the Gin Joint; new hotels in old buildings like The Vendue; and plenty of new subdivisions located outside of the peninsula to house the newcomers who can't afford the $7 million antebellum mansions. How, precisely, does the spider's web bear all that weight?

The next morning, I meet Tommy Dew, a Virginia native who moved here in 1985, well before the revival. We wander the lovely streets of the lower peninsula for a while, discussing the city's sometimes-troubled history as a Revolutionary War battleground and as a Civil War battleground. It's 90 degrees and humid, so we pause in the shadow of the Charleston City Market, which was built in the early 19th century in the Greek Revival style. Here, Dew shares his thoughts on local manners.

"The reason hospitality truly flourishes here is because everyone still knows everyone else, to some degree," he explains. "You have many families in



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE: Incorporate exercise into your city tour. The wine cellar at McCrady's has a large selection. Friendly residents are always willing to visit.

Charleston who have known each other for generations. There is accountability in that situation. When you know everybody, you can't get away with anything."

A little later, while I'm on my own, I find myself south of Broad Street, walking through the oldest neighborhoods in this very old city. On Meeting Street, I see a man emerging from the side porch of a white colonnaded home. "Hey!" he shouts at me. "How're you doing?"

For a moment, I think he's mistaken me for someone else, a neighbor maybe, or a co-worker, but then I begin to understand: He's just being friendly.

JOSEPH GUINTO is a Washington, D.C.-based freelancer and a frequent contributor to *American Way*.

PHOTOS: CLOCKISE FROM TOP LEFT PAUL ZOELLER; COURTESY MCCRADY'S; PAUL ZOELLER (2)

IF YOU GO

EAT

The Macintosh
Try farm-to-table Low Country food with modern touches served by friendly people in a relaxed setting. *Themacintoshcharleston.com*

Oak Steakhouse
Enjoy dry-aged steaks, jumbo shrimp and the best bacon mac-and-cheese on Earth, all in a bank building dating back to 1848. *Oaksteakhouserestaurant.com*

Husk Restaurant
Chef Sean Brock serves up an homage to the highs of Low Country cuisine in an Antebellum home complete with colonnade and a veranda. *Huskrestaurant.com*

McCrady's
This elegant eatery, also from Sean Brock, is considered to be one of the best restaurants in the country — with good reason. *Mccradysrestaurant.com*

STAY

The Restoration
This former condo development has been turned into a spacious boutique hotel. *Restorationonking.com*

The Vendue
An assemblage of old buildings, some of which date back to the 1700s, has been beautifully reimagined as a high-end "art hotel." *Thevendue.com*

DRINK

The Victor Social Club
Soaring ceilings, leather couches and live Cuban-inspired music make for perhaps the most sophisticated drinking spot in town. *Holycityhospitality.com/victor-social-club*

The Gin Joint
The ice used in this tiny place has been cut — with a chainsaw — from a giant block of frozen water. *Theginjoint.com*

The Cocktail Club
A hip speakeasy that's packed from unfinished wall to unfinished wall with Charleston's pretty people. The excellent bottle-rested cocktails here serve two. *Thecocktailclubcharleston.com*

The Belmont
This art-deco-themed craft-cocktail bar with capable barmen is housed in an actual art-deco-era building. *Thebelmontcharleston.com*

SEE

Rainbow Row
These 13 colorful historic houses are the longest cluster of Georgian-era row houses in the United States.

King Street, South of Broad
Get a map or an app and drop in on one of the many historical mansion museums in this pristine neighborhood.

Battery Park
Gaze out at Fort Sumter, wander through the park's palmetto trees or walk by the row of Southern-style mansions overlooking Charleston Harbor.