



A Closer Look at Charleston

*A city with charm even
a hurricane can't destroy*

(Editor's Note: Freelance writer Scott Pruden's story on Charleston, S.C. arrived at our office one day before Hurricane Hugo struck the southern Atlantic Coast. The next day billions of dollars in damage was inflicted and 22 structures in the historic portion of Charleston were leveled. The following piece is an impression of this charming southern port city prior to Hugo's devastating effects. Already massive efforts are underway to restore the city to its previous luster. And as the South has proven through history, it's quite adept at rebuilding).

By Scott Pruden

There's an old joke around South Carolina's Lowcountry, about Charleston being the junction where the Ashley and Cooper rivers merge to form the Atlantic Ocean.

And if you delve back into the regional history, back to when cotton was still a serious cash crop and the Battery cannon worked, you'll find that the joke probably sprouted from local reaction to the holier-than-thou attitude of the rich, European-obsessed Charlestonians. Perhaps that's why it's called the Holy City.

Whether these geographical theories are accurate is still being debated, but since America won its first war and the South lost its first (and only) war, Charleston has distinguished itself as the perfect merging of not only two rivers, but both old and new Southern lifestyles.

The old is carried on in the traditions of Southern gentility and upbringing, including the hospitality for which the region

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has become famous. The new is embodied in the artistic vitality and omnipresence of its youth. Be they dreadlocked skate punks, shimmering debutantes and their escorts, or College of Charleston dudes and dudettes (who affectionately refer to the city as "Chuckie Town"), Charleston boasts a community of young people that will not allow it to stagnate.

For those who have never had the opportunity to live in South Carolina, rest assured that it's not all interstate fireworks stands and Myrtle Beach (touted as "The Home of Vanna White," a dubious distinction at best). There the legacy that will be left behind is old french-fry grease and dim neon reflecting on the ocean.

About an hour off I-95 on I-26, Charleston sits pristinely on the Atlantic, the houses on the Battery and Rainbow Row gazing out into the harbor from a vantage point that has witnessed more history than anyone could imagine. That is a legacy to be proud of.

It is also a legacy I have grown up with. At various stages during my life, I could either be spotted at the Battery as a rambunctious 10-year-old rug rat, playing on the cannon and imagining I was firing on the hazy outline of Fort Sumter, or as a young man nuzzling a cute blonde on one of the trademark benches, so dumbstruck with love that my heart ached whenever we were apart.

Charleston hasn't always been so pleasant, though. Slaves were once led along the cobblestone streets that lead to the Market where they were to be bought and sold. Nowadays, any number of vendors of fruit or trinkets inhabit the long structure. Instead of being auctioned on the block, old black women weave long sea grass into intricate bowls and baskets that are at once inexpensive tourist gifts and priceless bits of folk art.

When I still went to Charleston with my parents, my mom was sure to herd us into as many cemeteries as she could find. It was not morbid fascination, it was intrigue with the old and historical. It wasn't enough to see the home where the personality had lived; we also had to see where he or she was laid to immortal rest. If we were lucky, a few wise words had been inscribed upon the headstone, and my dad would read them aloud in his clear baritone. You may not appreciate the old graveyards as much as Mom, but they're great for giving you a feel for how old the city really is.

The streets themselves hold enough history for several volumes. Horse-drawn carriages clatter along the thin avenues just as they once did, except now they mostly carry tourists. Shops still line the streets, but where there were once printers, cobblers and haberdasheries, antiques or trendy clothes are now sold.

Some shops border on the Greenwich Village-esque, featuring the unusual and intriguing things you rarely see sold in less hip areas. The palmetto bug, the local name for the Volkswagen-sized Lowcountry cockroach, is emblazoned on



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Cold Beer & Cocktails

T-shirts and aprons, gifts for your favorite bug lover. South Carolina anti-heroes Jim and Tammy Bakker are an ongoing obsession in one King Street store, which sells mugs, T-shirts and dolls based on the holy hucksters.

Along the harbor are Charleston's most popular places. Rainbow Row is nothing more than a street of row houses facing the harbor. Their facades, painted in pastel pinks and yellows, are what make this spot special; Charleston's spirit personified in one group of buildings. The architecture, the spot on the harbor and the colors capture the essence of the city like no other place.

The Battery, the infamous locale from where Citadel cadets fired on Ft. Sumter to begin the Civil War, no longer poses a threat. The cannons are plugged, and the area now resembles a park more than a place of strategic defense. Rather than scout the horizon for British or Union ships, people gaze out at the colored spinnakers of sailboats, or watch for Polaris subs pulling into the Atlantic from the navy base.

I've always been fascinated by the Sea Islands, which lie off of Charleston to the east, south and southwest. An interesting culture has evolved here among the cypress and Spanish moss, one composed of direct descendents of slaves who have been so isolated on the islands that they've developed their own dialect called "gulla." I've always had an ear for it since I had a James Island native as a P.E. coach in junior high. Most folks who have never heard gulla spoken don't have a clue as to what's being said.

The wealthy white folks responsible for the booming resorts that are rapidly taking over the islands also have their own isolated culture; it's called golf. Unfortunately for visiting golfers, all the resorts are pretty private. But if it's a beach you're looking for, Folly Island, Sullivan's Island and the Isle of Palms offer the nicest public access beaches in the area, with no medical waste or oil sludge to be seen. Folly is also legendary in South Carolina for its killer surf, while Sullivan's was the setting for Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold Bug*, a tale of the futility of greed (it should be mandatory reading for the developers).

Up the road toward my ancestral home of Summerville lie even more Charlestonian treasures in the form of the plantation gardens. Even the road there is awe inspiring. Highway 61, also known as Ashley River Road, is canopied by ancient oaks reaching up from both sides of the road and meeting high above. I always thought of it as driving through a high cave, its ceiling perforated and dripping with Spanish moss stalagmites.

As a young lad, I was a climber. So when I was introduced by my parents to the giant fallen oak at the entrance to Magnolia Gardens, I was in heaven. Children swarmed over this wooden jungle gym—provided compliments of Mother Nature in one of her nastier moods—despite the protests of their cautious parents.

As I grew older, I learned to appreciate the beauty and intricacy of design in the gardens, as well as the natural playthings. Memories of Middleton Place's butterfly lakes, the manicured lawn terracing down gracefully to the edge of the mirror smooth water, are still vivid in my mind. The result of imaginative planning and hundreds of hours of forced labor, back before Longwood was a glimmer in the DuPont vault, the plantation gardens are a testament to the genius and strength of the Southern man and woman, black and white.

Now that you've gotten a seven-course meal of the past and present, you can return downtown and get that definitive taste of the future. Hit the bars, and the College of Charleston scholars will be glad to give you a taste of what tomorrow holds for old Chuckie Town. From the bar you'll hear something like: "Dude, man. There's a five kegger over at the SAE house. We're there." Meanwhile, the coeds in the booth are discussing more important matters. "Steve goes to Carolina? When do you ever see each other? Does he have a car?"

Thankfully, some things never change.

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