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2. [Destinations](#)

The flourishing Carolinas: Charleston and the Outer Banks

With its graceful mansions and genteel sophistication, Charleston is once again thriving. Stanley Stewart considers its new appeal – and complicated history – before venturing north to explore an older, more elemental American South



Picturesque historic buildings characterise Charleston's French Quarter

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Stanley Stewart travelled as a guest of British Airways (0844-493 0787; ba.com), whose new route from Heathrow to Charleston runs twice a week, and of Original Travel (020-7978 7333; originaltravel.co.uk), which offers itineraries to Charleston, Savannah and the Outer Banks from £2,945 per person, including return BA flights, accommodation in Charleston and Savannah, car hire and access to Original Travel's local concierge, along with select excursions

May 25 2019 / [Stanley Stewart](#)



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Some people think of [Charleston](#) as the great American snob. They see the city as the grande dame of the South, stuck in some time warp between the civil war and votes for women, looking down on the rest of the continent. But they are wrong. Charleston may be one of the oldest cities in America, but there is nothing staid or serious about her. She has always had a reputation as a party girl. Charleston is like the great aunt who loves to ask about the details of your sex life, and has several cases of bourbon squirreled away in the garden house in case those damn teenagers bring back Prohibition.

And of late, Charleston has found a second wind. She has become one of the fastest growing [cities in America](#), and every year she gets younger. An influx of young creative metropolitans in search of a saner and more civilised life than that offered in northern conurbations, with their long commutes and longer winters, means that Charleston is brimming with entrepreneurial millennial energy. In a city that selectively offers a European ambience with affordable rents, there are startups and design studios, niche IT companies and big-brand arrivals, all of which has created a vibrant cultural life and one of the most exciting [food scenes](#) in the country. Gian Carlo Menotti chose Charleston for the American version of the Spoleto [music festival](#) when he started it in the 1970s, while down in the French Quarter, every street corner is given over to a contemporary or classic art space.



The Palladian plantation house of Drayton Hall, located on the outskirts of Charleston

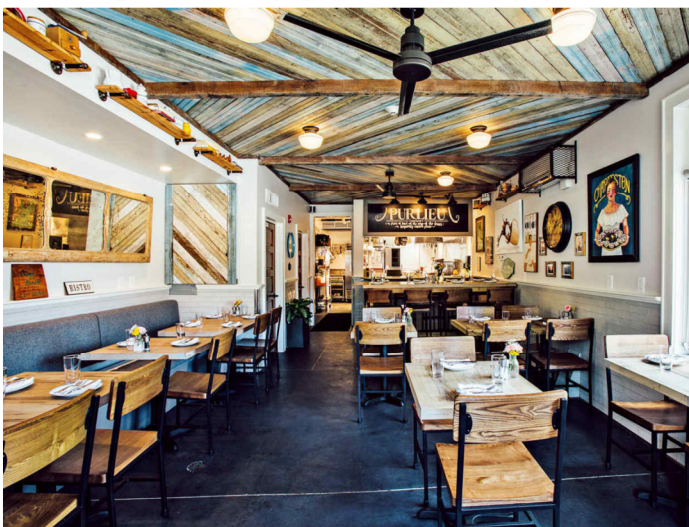
The sense that things have come full circle in a place that was one of America's most thriving cities 300 years ago is underscored by the fact that British Airways has just launched a direct flight from Heathrow, reviving a connection that dates back to the early 18th century when Charleston, founded by English settlers, was dubbed "Little London". From the airport I drove first to Savannah, Charleston's sibling and mirror image, sharing its historic pedigree, its [architectural](#) splendour and its 21st-century revival. It was a rainy night in Georgia and on the midnight radio, preachers raved about damnation. Somewhere in the night, a train whistled, that mournful North American sound, evoking distance and journeys and loneliness.

I had come to see James Oglethorpe. It was his architectural foresight that has made Savannah one of the most beautiful cities in the Americas. Built on a grid, streets are interrupted every couple of blocks by no fewer than 22 elegant leafy squares. It is like Bloomsbury with standalone mansions. Its best [hotel](#) – the Perry Lane – may be modern, but its architectural glamour pays tribute to the city's aesthetic history.

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I found Oglethorpe in Chippewa Square, where the US's oldest continually operating theatre sits across from the bench where Forrest Gump sat comparing life to a box of chocolates. His statue rises among billowing azaleas and magisterial oaks draped with Spanish moss. Gump would have liked him; he was full of America's good intentions. Oglethorpe befriended the local tribes and was committed to social justice. When he founded Savannah in 1733 with 114 colonists, they banned rum, lawyers and slavery. Leaving aside their aversion to a drink, it was a promising start.

Sadly, the promise didn't last. When the bodies piled up at the old duelling ground, conveniently located by the colonial cemetery, they began to think lawyers might be a better way to go for disputes. As for slavery, it took the new settlement only 16 years to overturn the injunction against buying and selling human beings. By the mid 18th century, street auctions of Africans were common in Savannah and Charleston. It was through their enslavement that both cities would grow to greatness, and their white owners would become fabulously wealthy.



John Zucker presides at Purlicu restaurant in the city's Westside area | Image: Andrew Cebulka

For America's first two centuries, most things of importance that happened, happened in Charleston. Already over 150 years old when Queen Victoria came to the throne, it was where gentlemen in grand houses plotted revolution over cigars and brandy, where the ideas that informed the Declaration of Independence were discussed, and where the first shots of the civil war were heard. The city has seen off hurricanes, earthquakes, pirates, fires, conflicts with indigenous tribes, revolution, war – and a tricky brush with a lot of kitschy design ideas in the 1980s.

She oozes old-world charm. She is fragrant with magnolias and gardenia, she boasts those wonderful accents of the sort described in Gone with the Wind as a "soft slurring voice... liquid of vowels, kind to consonants", while dinner in the Charleston Grill in the Belmont Charleston Place, with the great recipes of the South Carolina Lowcountry, draws you into a refined ambience that would have been familiar to Scarlett O'Hara. In the splendid Planters Inn I sipped iced tea in the drawing room overlooking the old market building, while upown at Zero George – a hotel that has been created from neighbouring colonial houses – food was so central that the busy, inventive kitchens were almost part of reception.



The courtyard dining room at Planters Inn hotel

In fact, food is key to Charleston today; this is where European, African and Native American influences meet and mingle. The city is full of award-winning [chefs](#) like Mike Lata at FIG and The Ordinary, the latter a lively oyster bar and seafood hall in a former bank. Notable among a younger generation of chefs is John Zucker at Purfies in the Westside neighbourhood; he spent time at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, and it shows. My own favourites were the city's atmospheric little wine bars: Bin 152, Chez Nous and the brand-new Malagón, where Spanish influences shine.

Moored along leafy, often-cobbled streets, Charleston's procession of grand historic houses is an architectural tour of early Americana – Italianate and Victorian, gothic revival and art deco, colonial and federal – all framed by deep verandas, gardens of camellias and old roses and the sense that life should always be lived with elegance. There is the Brantford-Horry House, whose drawing room has been described as "one of the most distinguished 18th-century rooms in America". There is the Edgar Wells House, built around 1730, in whose timbers you can still trace the trajectory of a British cannonball. There is the Nathaniel Russell House, with its cantilevered "tree-flying" staircase that seems to float up through three floors.



Manton, on the Outer Banks' Roanoke Island, was home to the 16th-century "Lost Colony"

The Old Slave Mart is a stark reminder of how these grand mansions came to be, of how this Southern world was able to flourish. Beyond the city, the great plantation house of Drayton Hall, a Palladian masterpiece, could be a monument to slavery. John Drayton is said to have owned thousands of slaves, busy generating fortunes for him on his many plantations.

Drayton Hall has been preserved but not restored. Free of swagged curtains and costumed guides, the house has an atmospheric melancholy about it. As you wander its empty rooms with their shuttered windows and splendid floorboards and fireplaces the size of wardrobes, there is the sense of ghosts. One is in the dining room. On a side wall is an exposed bit of brickwork. If you lean in and look closely, with light coming in through the windows, you can see three fingerprints in one of the bricks. They are small, almost certainly a child's, those of the slave who made it almost 300 years ago. After the civil war, the Drayton family faced such penury that they considered knocking the old house down in order to sell the bricks.



The veranda of Charleston's Zero George hotel, created from neighbouring colonial houses

When that war broke out – the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter in the bay in front of Charleston – many slaves fled north to Roanoke Island on the Outer Banks in North Carolina, which had been taken by Union soldiers. I followed their route up the coast and found myself in the old seaboard town of Beaufort – all picket fences and sweet small-town charm – whose white clapboard houses were built by sea captains. Blackbeard's ship ran aground here in 1718. During his stay in Hammock House, he is said to have hanged his wife from a tree in the garden.

The next morning in the pre-dawn I took a narrow road north to Cedar Island. Mist curled round the houses. In the gloom, gas stations stood like lighted oases. High up, muffled by clouds, a lighthouse beam swept the dark sky. I boarded the ferry to Ocracoke, on the Outer Banks.



The Charleston Grill offers refined versions of Lowcountry fare

The Outer Banks shadow the North Carolina coast in a long arc for more than 160km, clad in low dunes of sand and sea grasses separated from the mainland by sounds and bays and connected to one another by ferries and bridges. They are remote and windswept. The houses, built of wood shingles, stand on stilts to keep them above rogue tides, and in the general store in Ocracoke, I heard the remnants of strange 19th-century West Country accents known as Hoi Toider (their pronunciation of High Tide). North from Ocracoke, the road ran as straight as a drawn line between the Atlantic and the inner seas.

In the dunes I passed wild ponies that are said to have swum ashore from Spanish shipwrecks in the 16th century. The sky had grown immense. Gulls wheeled and tumbled in ocean winds. Caught between sea and sound, the Outer Banks felt vulnerable and tentative, as if they were still emerging from the waters of the Flood, as if the New World was newly born.

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At Manteo on Roanoke Island – not far from Kitty Hawk, where the Wright brothers tried their hands at flying – I came to Fort Raleigh, the first English settlement in America. It has become known as the Lost Colony. A hundred settlers arrived here in 1587 to make a new life. Three years later, the settlement had vanished. No bodies were ever found, no diaries or letters discovered. It was as if the New World was not quite ready for them and had simply swallowed them whole. It remains one of the great mysteries of the early colonial period.

But there was another colony here, some 275 years later. Over 3,000 African slaves, escaping the South during the years of the civil war, came to Manteo, when this part of the coast had been taken by the Union army. They built houses, they sowed crops. They had a school, a hospital and a sawmill in a new black township of free people.

But when the war ended, their petitions to remain were refused and the colony was dissolved. It seems North Carolina wasn't quite ready for freed slaves. Their landed property was seized. For these former slaves, the road to freedom would prove much longer and more difficult than the simple march to the northern states.

Nothing remains of Fort Raleigh and the Lost Colony, beyond some earthen embankments. And nothing much remains of that later black settlement. But you can still find what the African Americans created down South in the graceful, seductive, contradictory, sometimes troubled and now thriving cities of Savannah and Charleston. You can still find their fingerprints in the bricks.

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