

Los Angeles Times

49 inches; 1780 words

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 03, 2002, TRAVEL, PART L, PAGE 11
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FAX page #1



John Neubaur Lonely Planet Images

THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY: *A horse-drawn carriage takes tourist past the mansions on South Battery Street in Charleston's historic district*

Into Charleston's storied past

Taking a literary walk in the city's historic district is like reading an atmospheric Southern novel, except that you get to see the scenes, not just imagine them.

By Emilie C. Harting

Charleston, S.C. — This is the writers' city, isn't it? You know, that novel 'Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil,' " whispered the woman standing next to me. She had just stepped off the bus at Charleston Place, the departure and arrival point for many tours of this evocative Old South port.

"That's Savannah," I said, correcting her. "We're in Charleston. But this is also a writers' city."

"Walking around the historic district is like reading a Southern novel," I told the woman. "Scenes from stories and writers' lives keep popping out at you."

My husband, Rob, and I were about to take a literary walk I'd mapped out with the help of history books on the city. We would make a loop roughly south on Church Street, amble around the waterfront to the Battery, then proceed back up Meeting Street to the center of town. (It's generally the same route you take on other city tours.)

We were on a January vacation to the Low Country, as this coastal area of southeast South Carolina is called. Because I search out writers' homes wherever I travel, I wanted to explore the literary side of this bewitching city.

Charleston sits on a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper rivers. Once you enter the historic district at the tip, there is little need for a car.

The historic sites, restaurants and Low Country music places are within a 10-by-10-block area. Tour buses are not allowed in the district, but there is ample public transportation, carriage rides are popular and there are taxis if your feet get tired.

Home of 'Porgy and Bess'

The tourist disappeared before I could tell her about the Southern Literary Tradition, a bookshop open by appointment only in the historic Nicholas Trott house.

The moment we entered the house on Cumberland Street, it was clear that Charleston and the surrounding area had a rich literary history. Photographs of writers from the 11 Southern states gazed out at us from the shelves: a beguiling Carson McCullers; a cigarette-puffing Lillian Hellman; a natty Truman Capote; and a demure Gail Godwin.

At the end of a tour through rooms filled with books dating back three centuries, owner Trudy Evans served us tea. She explained that writers and artists have always gravitated toward Charleston, with its theater, music, art and a reputation as one of the most refined cities in the South.

Contemporary writers Bret Lott ("Jewel," "The Hunt Club") and Josephine Humphreys live in the immediate area, Evans said, and Pat Conroy is a South Carolinian. All three speak often about the importance of the city to them, and their writings describe the savannas and sweeping beaches.

For example, "The Hunt Club," full of intrigue, is set in a men's hunting club that actually exists in eerie dark swamps nearby. The movie version of "Rich in Love," the well-received novel by Humphreys, was filmed here. And Sinclair Lewis, Henry James and Hellman often came for weeks at a time.

Because Charleston was not damaged during the Civil War, layers of architecture date back more than three centuries. Houses on many streets were built with their sides facing

the street, so as you pass by you can peek through wrought-iron gates to elaborate frontyard gardens that bloom all year but are most radiant in spring.

On Church Street we stood across from the Dock Street Theater, a brown stone building with light blue wrought-iron trim. As a Northerner I was intrigued that Charleston, without Puritans to squelch the arts, has had continuous theater since the early 1700s. The original Dock Street Theater was built in 1735 and stood a few blocks away. But even more surprising was that opera was performed in Charleston in 1685.

Farther down Church Street we came to the gray, West Indian- style buildings that were the inspiration for Dubose Heyward's novel "Porgy," which became the George Gershwin musical "Porgy and Bess."

Sammy Smalls, a Charleston character who is thought to be the inspiration for the Porgy character, may have lived in these buildings. Until World War II, much of the historic district -- now upscale and beautifully restored -- was run-down; those gray structures would have been tenements with noisy courtyards like the one in the musical.

The block got the name Cabbage Row because residents had vegetables for sale on their windowsills; in the novel and musical, Heyward called it Catfish Row.

We toured the imposing Heyward-Washington House next door -- this was a district where white aristocrats and poor blacks lived side by side after the Civil War -- partly because it is one of the most noteworthy historic houses in Charleston, with early 18th century furniture and original outbuildings, including a separate kitchen house with slave quarters.

Thomas Heyward, the original owner and great-great-grandfather of Dubose Heyward, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of the many wealthy plantation owners who lived in Charleston.

But what caught my imagination was the upstairs drawing room, said to be the inspiration for a scene where the black residents of Catfish Row take shelter during a hurricane in "Porgy." (Dubose Heyward himself never lived in the mansion.)

The turbulent scene came back to me as I stood in the elegantly decorated room, with its fine antiques and polished pine floors. The house has another literary association: The Grimke sisters, abolitionist writers who wrote a book encouraging Southerners to free their slaves, lived here as youngsters.

An Edgar Allan Poe connection

At the Battery, the southern tip of the city surrounded on three sides by water, we were struck by the strong presence of the Villa Marguerita, a white Italian Renaissance Revival mansion with large pillars. It was a favorite hotel of writers in the 1920s and '30s -- it had an indoor swimming pool and was a convenient spot to sojourn on the way to and from

Florida. Hellman stayed here, as did Gertrude Stein and Lewis, who finished "Main Street" in an upstairs room.

Around the corner, at 52 Meeting St., we found the tiny white one-story building that had been the office of Edmund Ravenel, a world-famous conchologist (that is, seashell specialist) said to be the model for William Legrand in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Gold Bug." Poe and Ravenel became friends when Poe was stationed at Ft. Moultrie, and Ravenel had an offshore hut on Sullivan's Island where he studied sea life.

In the tale, Legrand is an elderly man who discovers a new specimen, the "gold bug," and leads a boy on a terrifying hunt for treasure.

The Ravenel office is minuscule next to the adjacent Calhoun Mansion, a rambling redbrick house thought to have been an early inspiration for Margaret Mitchell's "Gone With the Wind," set in Atlanta. Some sources say Mitchell visited the house as a girl when she came to Charleston to see her grandmother.

The furnishings in the Calhoun Mansion are not the same as they were when the young Mitchell would have visited the mansion in the early 1900s. But I couldn't help feeling that she might have been influenced by the sweeping dark-wood staircase that goes up four flights to a 75-foot domed ceiling with stained-glass windows by Louis Tiffany.

Start of a live poets' society

South Carolina Hall, a classic Colonial mansion, has four large pillars that come to the edge of the curb on Meeting Street. (The guide on an architectural tour earlier in our weeklong stay explained that, no, the road hadn't been widened; pillars were often flush with the street so that carriages could drop off passengers in an area protected from the weather.)

The Poetry Society of South Carolina, co-founded by Heyward as the first regional poetry circle in America, had its meetings here for many years. Jean Toomer, the African American author of the novel "Cane," was voted in as a member in absentia, and Carl Sandburg and Amy Lowell read here in the early 1920s.

Farther along on our walk, we stood across from 38 Chalmers St., a redbrick Colonial, so that we could see the front door.

During the Literary Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s, when there was a blossoming of the arts, it was a regular meeting place for writers, and it has been compared to Stein's salon in Paris. McCullers, Stein, Lewis and James were said to have attended, besides locals Elizabeth Verner and Josephine Pinckney, a neighbor who was one of the first to write about African American life in the outlying Low Country.

One evening near the end of our stay we took "Anna's Ghost Tour," one of many tours listed in a Charleston tourism bureau booklet, and found that Anna Taylor Blythe occasionally does literary walks.

Blythe is a fifth-generation Charlestonian with a depth of knowledge about local history and legend who has written a book based on stories she heard as a child.

We took her literary walk early on the morning of our departure and were her only clients (it was raining). Blythe pointed out the houses of many local authors, told colorful anecdotes and gave dramatic readings from prose and poetry about Charleston.

When we passed 38 Chalmers St., now a private residence, she gave a racier rendition of the literary soirees than I had found in books. ("This one was having an affair with that one, and then that one was having an affair with her sister. And liquor flowed even though it was Prohibition.")

As we walked toward the river on a street where Civil War diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut often stayed, Blythe read us a number of passages on slavery from Chesnut's book, on which Ken Burns relied heavily for his TV documentary on the war.

When we came to the multicolored former merchant houses on East Bay Street, a strip of connected waterfront buildings often referred to as Rainbow Row, she pointed out Nos. 99-101, which were used for the film production of "Porgy and Bess."

Near the end of the tour, Blythe led us into the Dock Street Theater and explained how it had been built up from the courtyard of the old Planters Hotel.

"We had theater going here while your Peter Stuyvesant was still trying to settle Manhattan," she told her Yankee clients with a chuckle.

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WHERE TO STAY:

The inns and restaurants listed below are in the heart of the historic district, where sights, restaurants and nightclubs are all within easy reach.

Charleston Place, 205 Meeting St., (800) 611-5545 or (843) 722- 4900, fax (843) 722-0728, www.charlestonplace.com, on the northern edge of the historic district, is the city's poshest hotel, with an upscale restaurant featuring Low Country cuisine.

Mills House Hotel, 115 Meeting St., (800) 874-9600 or (843) 577- 2400, fax (843) 722-0623, www.millshouse.com, a Victorian-style hotel, caters to families.

Planters Inn, 112 N. Market St., (800) 845-7082 or (843) 722- 2345, fax (843) 577-2125, www.plantersinn.com, has period rooms and a restaurant (see Peninsula Grill, below).

Days Inn, 155 Meeting St., (800) DAYSINN or (843) 722-8411, fax (843) 723-5361, has a pleasant adjoining restaurant, free parking and a small pool.

WHERE TO EAT:

Bocci's, 158 Church St., (843) 720-2121, has delicious Northern Italian food.

Mistral, 99 Market St., (843) 722-5708, is a casual, unpretentious place that serves superbly cooked Southern French (bouillabaisse) and Low Country (pasta with sausage and leeks) dishes.

Diana's, 155 Meeting St., (843) 534-0043, is good for hearty breakfasts.

Peninsula Grill, inside the Planters Hotel, (843) 723-0700, has excellent Continental cuisine with a Low Country twist (wild mushroom grits with oyster stew).

LITERARY CENTERS:

The Southern Literary Tradition Bookshop & Gunpowder Tea Room and Garden, 83 Cumberland St., (843) 722-8430, offers tours at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday in winter, otherwise daily (tea follows tour).

WALKING TOURS:

The city offers thematic walks on architecture, slavery, homes and gardens, the Civil War, pirates and ghosts (especially popular at night). Some samples: the Ghosts of Charleston, (800) 854-1670, and Anna's House & Garden and Ghost Walk Tours, (843) 577-5931. Charleston Strolls' "Walk With History," (843) 766-2080, gives you an excellent overview of the area.

TO LEARN MORE:

Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, (800) 774-0006 or (843) 853-8000, www.charlestoncvb.com.

South Carolina Parks, Recreation and Tourism, 1205 Pendleton St., Columbia, SC 29201; (888) SC-SMILE (727-6453) or (803) 734-0138, fax (803) 734-0138, www.discoversouthcarolina.com.

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Emilie C. Harting, a writer and English teacher in Philadelphia, has written two literary guides.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY: A horse-drawn carriage takes tourists

past the mansions on South Battery Street in Charleston's historic district.;
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SC; CREDIT: Los Angeles Times

Credit: Special to The Times

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