



BELMOND
CHARLESTON PLACE
CHARLESTON



PRESS KIT

Belmond Charleston Place introduced by Fiona Sims

OVERVIEW

Belmond Charleston Place has something other hotels can only dream of – it is right in the centre of town, surrounded by shops, restaurants, galleries and historic homes, and yet it feels like a resort, with its pool, spa and destination restaurants.

The great and the good of Charleston and beyond flock here, whether to power lunch in its Palmetto Café - the only AAA four-Diamond breakfast and lunch restaurant in South Carolina, to sip Mint Juleps in the elegant Thoroughbred Bar after a day at the office, or to enjoy a contemporary Southern supper serenaded by jazz musicians at Charleston Grill, a 2016 James Beard Nominee for Best Service. And visitors? Well, they're just happy to join in and soak it all up.

Located right in the heart of Charleston's historic district, Belmond Charleston Place offers 434 luxurious guest rooms, including 43 suites, two presidential suites and an exclusive Club Level on the top two floors, with its own private lounge and concierge, attracting the likes of Oprah Winfrey and Barbra Streisand.

And here's the clever bit – in this famously architecturally picky town you would never know that this is an eight-storey building, as the top four floors are set back from the street.

For décor, think grand 17th-century residence, from the Italian marble in the lobby with its signature Georgian Open Arm staircase, to the opulent fabrics used throughout, from tapestries and lace, to chintz and damask. The ornate fountain at the entrance sets the tone, a reference to Charleston's many architectural nods to ancient Greek and Rome, and to its passion for horses.

Belmond Charleston Place also boasts a chic retail centre on the ground floor with an exclusive collection of world-famous brands, including Louis Vuitton and Gucci, Kate Spade New York and Godiva, an essential component of any Charleston retail therapy. "In fact, you don't have to step out of the hotel at all if you don't want to – it's all right here," suggests the hotel's much-admired, long-serving general manager Paul Stracey.

You've got to love a city spa, and it doesn't get much better than The Spa at Belmond Charleston Place. Chosen by readers of USA Today as one of the top 10 Spas in the nation, it is situated on the fourth floor and offers 10 treatment rooms with signature treatments such as the 'Magnolia Moments' Body Treatment and the 'Seaweed Detoxifying Wrap'. It should come as no surprise to learn that it notches up some 6000 massages a year.

The Spa also features a sleek 50ft horizon-edge salt-water pool with a retractable roof, plus a sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi et al. But in case you want the real thing – Charleston's many

stunning beaches are only a few minutes' drive away, and the hotel can supply beach towels, and even a gourmet picnic for the occasion.

The hotel's raison d'être though is undoubtedly the food, from Charleston Grill's nationally acclaimed executive chef Michelle Weaver's elegant spin on Southern cuisine, to Palmetto Café's head chef Steven Manall's local produce-led comfort food enjoyed in the lush garden courtyard setting, all served up with that famous Southern hospitality.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Belmond Charleston Place might not boast a long history in a town full of impressive historical buildings, built as it was in 1986, but it more than makes up for that with its unique place in Charleston society and its contribution to the renaissance of a city in need of some urgent TLC. And they have a former Charleston mayor, Joe Riley, to thank for that.

Joe is credited as being one of the main instigators in the hotel's creation. Visitors today wouldn't recognize Charleston back in the late seventies and early eighties, when his idea to open the hotel developed.

Like many other once-thriving downtown retail districts in America, Charleston had lost out to suburban shopping malls and Joe was determined to put the city centre back on the map, starting with a luxury hotel. He succeeded – and some.

As well as encouraging the construction of the hotel, and the renovation of the Art Deco cinema included on the hotel plot, now a Historic Landmark, and a favourite spot for weddings and meetings, surrounding businesses revived or were newly established. Visitors began to flock here – and they kept on coming.

Charleston is regularly named the No.1 US tourist destination in the country by readers of Condé Nast Traveler magazine, and in 2016 Travel + Leisure voted it top destination to visit in the world.

It's easy to see why. With its row upon row of perfectly preserved, pastel-painted weatherboard houses and antebellum mansions that line the neat grid of crepe myrtle-lined avenues, and its vibrant weekly food market crowded with passionate stall holders, this is a city you want to live in, or at the very least hang out in for a few days.

It should come as no surprise to learn that Charleston has the oldest preservation society in the country, who chastise those who dare to choose the wrong shade of paint, and where most windows sport their original hand-blown glass. Even the high street retailers and the multi-storey car park have to sit discreetly behind original, or sympathetic facades.

Visitors come to marvel, too, at the quaint cobbled streets - the cobbles brought as ballast from Britain in the 1700s to weigh down the ships on their outward journey, which they filled with South Carolina rice and cotton for the return trip home.

The English settled here too, on land granted by King Charles II and Charles Town, as it was once known, became a flourishing seaport. By the early 1800s it was one of the most fashionable cities in the New World, second in importance only to New York.

Vast clippers laden with exotic cargo from China, Europe and the West Indies regularly dropped anchor here, swapping foreign wares for indigo, cotton and prized Carolina rice – many aspects of which are referenced throughout the interiors and cuisine at Belmond Charleston Place, offering guests a powerful sense of place.

FEATURES

Romantic picnics

With its atmospheric antebellum mansions and horse-drawn carriage rides, sultry jazz clubs and centuries-old, headily-scented gardens, it should come as no surprise to learn that Charleston is ranked as one of the top romantic destinations in America.

So with that in mind Belmond Charleston Place has created an offer of gourmet picnics for guests, complete with a curated list of recommended places to lay their gingham blankets. The prime spots have been suggested by more than 100 Southern Belles - these society ladies have been picnicking here with their beaux for generations.

A Belmond Charleston Place picnic is not just any picnic – it comes in beautiful wicker baskets (complete with that blanket), plus 100% Egyptian cotton napkins, plates, silverware, stemware and the gourmet picnic of your choice.

Menu options include boiled shrimp with cocktail sauce, blackened chicken salad, Southern country fried chicken, Clemson blue cheese coleslaw, wild strawberry cheesecake and petit fours. To drink? A selection of chilled wines and beers.

Alternatively, guests could ask Charleston Grill head sommelier Rick Rubel to choose the perfect match. “How about a dry, still rosé that has enough acidity to cool our summer heat?” he suggests, singling out two wines made from Pinot Noir. “There’s one from Paul Thomas in Sancerre, France, which makes my mouth water, or how about a wine from Copain in California called ‘Tous Ensemble’? It pairs with almost anything,” he enthuses.

Among the chosen locations are the Butterfly Lake at Middleton Plantation boasting the oldest landscaped gardens in America, the white sand of Front Beach at Station 26 on Sullivan’s Island – the beachfront community, located 15 minutes from the historic district, has been a playground for wealthy Charlestonians since the early 1800s, and the beautiful gated garden of Washington Park, where couples have been serenaded by the bells of St. Michael’s for more than a hundred years. Or why not spread out your blanket under the ancient outstretched limbs of Angel Oak? The grand 1400-year-old tree, a scenic 20-minute drive from the hotel, makes a picnic spot to remember.

Discover Charleston through its cuisine

Ask Charleston Grill executive chef Michelle Weaver to define Southern cooking and she’ll reply: “Use what’s in season. Make sure it’s fresh. Don’t overcomplicate it. Sprinkle it with love and call everyone to the table.”

Belmond Charleston Place offers food tours for gourmets, from a spin around Charleston’s weekly Farmers’ Market to meet its best producers, to trips to local farms, the country’s only tea plantation, and an assortment of other destinations that attract food aficionados, from shrimp-fishing, to oyster roasts on the beach.

Chefs here will tell you that Lowcountry cuisine is about making the best of what is available - lots of slow-cooking and being clever with cheaper cuts. And everything they use is locally produced - farm to table is a well-established concept here.

Inspiring vegetable cooking rules. Okra and tomato gumbo is a favourite, as is squash casserole and fried green tomatoes – all classic Lowcountry dishes. Add to that fried oysters, she-crab soup (more delicate than he-crab) and buttermilk pie, and it is clear that Charleston orbits around food.

And it’s not all about comfort food either. Chefs in Charleston have raised their game in recent years and have been rewarded handsomely for their efforts, topping the listings on Best Restaurant lists nationally, and scooping multiple James Beard awards for Best Chef in the Southeast.

Charleston’s weekly Farmers’ Market is the best place to start any food tour, held every Saturday morning from April to December on the city’s vast, grassy Marion Square.

Another initiative from former mayor Joe Riley, the market was founded with the aim of bringing the community together, as well as showcasing the region’s bountiful produce, from Carolina Gold rice, which helped to make Charleston’s fortune, to more unusual ingredients such as scuppernongs – an indigenous, sweet, thick-skinned grape that is happy in the region’s humidity. And okra, of course, destined for the countless variations of okra soup, or gumbo, as locals prefer to call it.

For a non-stop series of gourmet delights, guests can join locals each spring as they clink countless glasses and raise their forks at the annual Charleston Wine & Food Festival (charlestonwineandfood.com).

Plantations Uncovered

A visit to a plantation is a must whilst staying in Charleston, and it rightly tops the list of most popular things to do, providing a unique educational experience and a fascinating glimpse into America’s past.

Plantations were a staple of the economy, culture and lifestyle of the pre-Civil war South, and Belmond Charleston Place offers a unique private tour with a local historian who grew up in the Gullah community.

From the plump okra sold in Charleston's weekly Farmers' Market, to the impressive mansions that line the streets funded by a fortune built on cotton and rice, there's no escaping Charleston's slaveholding past. Once met with silence, slavery and its heritage is now chronicled openly, and the rich influence of the Gullah people, as they are traditionally known, lives on through patterns of speech, customs, manners and cuisine.

Gullah is a Creole language with its own grammar, expressions and vocabulary. It's estimated that about 200,000 African Americans, descendants of slaves, who live in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and neighbouring Georgia, still speak Gullah.

Guests can pass through a Spanish moss-draped avenue of oaks once planted to impress local society visiting the Boone Hall plantation just outside town and listen to African tales from a Gullah storyteller as they are transported back 250 years. At Magnolia Plantation, founded in 1676, visitors can hop on a boat tour that skims across flooded rice fields, providing glimpses of alligators, turtles and egrets.

The tour includes a visit to Middleton Place, where they can inhale centuries-old camellias and marvel at its carefully manicured gardens, after listening to historic costumed interpreters bring to life the skills required to run a Lowcountry plantation. The tour also stops at Angel Oak and the Old Slave Market, giving guests a unique insight into African Americans' impact on Charleston's past and present.

PEOPLE

Paul Stracey, General Manager

You might not expect to find a Briton heading up a Charleston landmark but Paul Stracey is a fixture in this southeast gem. General manager at Belmond Charleston Place since 1997, he cites the fabulous weather as one of the reasons he has stayed. "But above all else I live here because of the people – they are really friendly," he enthuses.

Paul started out life in hospitality in the kitchen, training as a chef at London's Westminster College, and then spending a fair few years in tough professional kitchens around the UK. "I won't name any names but I got to see management at its worst – management by fear. I thought, wouldn't it be amazing to run somewhere that's fun for people to work, where they could be happy," he remembers.

He quit his job in the kitchen to complete a management-training program at The Lodge at Vail in Colorado, where he met his American wife, with whom he has two sons. And he stayed on to work full time, absorbing as much as he could about the hotel business. He moved to San Diego to help run the 600-room Holiday Inn; the road eventually led to a position as resident manager at Charleston Place, and then two years later as general manager, when everything fell into place. "The best bit about this job is the people I work with, it's another family. We have fun. We treat each other well," he says.

Paul must be doing something right, because his staff tends to stick around. "Take my restaurant manager Mickey Bakst - he's been with me for 10 years. He's one of those guys who shake hands with everyone in the room and he always brings me great new ideas and projects to work on. And then there's our executive chef Michelle Weaver who has such a great way about her. When it comes to finding key staff it's not difficult – I like to promote from within," he explains.

His favourite part of the day is when he's 'doing something creative'. "I love new concepts, coming up with new menus – I'm always in the kitchen," says Paul, who is particularly proud of the stylish new sports pub they have opened at Belmond Charleston Place called Meeting at Market, which boasts its own entrance (the name is a play on the address), British and local ales, and fish and chips.

So when he can tear himself away from the hotel, what does he like to do on his day off? "I'll head to the beach. People come to Charleston for the heritage and culture, the restaurant scene and the shopping, but they forget that we have beaches as good as any in Miami. I'll often end the day with a burger and a beer at locals' favourite, Poe's Tavern."

Charleston Grill Executive Chef - Michelle Weaver

Her staff calls her 'Mama'. But then Charleston Grill executive chef Michelle Weaver turns up the comfort dial for both regulars and visitors, who can't get enough of her now legendary crab cakes. So what's the secret? "Mostly crab - held together by a lot of love," she replies, with a grin.

This Alabama-born, nationally acclaimed chef grew up cooking with her mother but it only dawned on her that she should be doing it professionally when she reached her mid-20s.

After formal training at the New England Culinary Institute, she honed her skills under chefs Daniel Bonnot in New Orleans and Bob Waggoner at the Wild Boar Restaurant in Nashville, before finding her way to the Charleston Grill 19 years ago, where she has been executive chef since 2009.

Her menu at Charleston Grill is split into four sections - Southern, Pure, Lush and Cosmopolitan, which brings together her favourites from the Lowcountry and ingredients that inspire from around the world, such as her Thai fish served with Lowcountry cherry tomatoes and green beans, and her French-inspired foie gras paired with her mother's recipe for Southern-fried apple hand pie.

Which bit of kitchen kit couldn't she do without? "My skillet. It's well maintained and seasoned. We didn't know there were any other pans when we were growing up," she says.

Any insider tips? "We have a wonderful farmers' market here in Charleston and it's great to go for breakfast - choose whichever stall smells the best to you, they're all good," says Michelle, whose idea of a perfect day off is fishing at sunset, feasting on a baguette stuffed with local charcuterie.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT

In addition to the hotel's on-going support of several community events and local charities, the hotel's Spa and fine dining restaurant, Charleston Grill, have started their own community initiatives.

The Spa at Belmond Charleston Place is a major supporter of the "I Will Reflect" Melanoma Prevention Initiative. Among other events it has hosted a fashion show and sells hundreds of the "I Will Reflect" glowing bracelets with all proceeds going to the Medical University of South Carolina Research Foundation.

Mickey Bakst, the charismatic manager of the Charleston Grill, founded two major initiatives - Feed the Need in 2009, a charity that mobilizes restaurants to provide meals to local soup kitchens, and Teach the Need in 2011, a programme that pairs professional mentors with at-risk high school students to learn front-of-house employment skills.

While most people would have their hands full running a world-class restaurant in a city that Condé Nast Traveler has named best city in the U.S. for five years running, Mickey still finds time for even more "extreme community giving." His other charitable and non-profit work has included spearheading the fundraising efforts in Charleston for Hurricane Katrina relief (2005), Dine for the Nine, a 2009 fundraiser for the Charleston firefighters who lost their lives in the line of duty and the 2015 Emanuel AME Church Fundraiser - a silent auction that raised over \$600k for families impacted by the tragedy.