

Girlfriend Getaway: Charleston
By Suzanne Wright

Thoughtful girlfriend that she is, Erin has procured several comedy CDs for us to listen to during our drive to Charleston and I have packed road food: potato chips and chocolate bars. Although we both love to guffaw at David Sedaris' dysfunctional family stories, we end up talking to each other for most of the ride. We've been great friends for a decade, but it had been a while since we have traveled together.

Talk about aging well—we gals should be so lucky! Charleston, founded in 1670, has its soul intact as well as its lovely façades. Its enduring appeal includes its support artists, preserves its history, values its Southern heritage, promotes strolling and encourages renewal, something big-city singles crave.

We alternated our stay between Charleston Place and The Market Pavilion Hotel, which we came to call the “the puffy bed” circuit. Both offer “girlfriend getaway” packages with luxury accommodations, special meals, spa services and shopping sprees. As we unpacked, Erin and I discussed ground rules: copious amounts of great food, no clock watching, no “shoulds” or “oughts,” no serious literature (*US Weekly* is ideal). Wisely, Erin had packed a lot of stretchy black clothing, another key to a great girlfriend escape.

Our Club Level room at Charleston Place had an understated butter color scheme with botanical sunflower prints. Although it's a large hotel (440 rooms), the service is so well-oiled and personable you feel as though you are one of a handful of guests. Located on Meeting Street in the heart of town, it's a sophisticated city retreat that envelopes you from the start. We spent oodles of time in the lounge, with its tempting, ever-changing array of breakfast, afternoon tea, evening hors d'oeuvres and cordials, judging time only by the changing nibbles, from scones to chocolate-covered strawberries. We also greatly enjoyed hanging out in our plush terry robes at the solarium, with its retractable roof, fitness center and spa. Erin, herself a massage therapist, praised the hour-long Signature Massage administered by Theresa. Meanwhile, Antoinette gave me the Prestige Facial, her fingers like butterfly wings. Said the receptionist, “She's like human Valium.”

Shopping has a stimulating, rather than sedating effect on me. So, while Erin retired to the room, I hit King Street, the main shopping thoroughfare, to contribute to Charleston's coffers. How many cities in America boast a milliner? Charleston has seven. Amidst the clothing and antique shops, my favorite boutique was Stella Nova, packed from floor to ceiling with niche fragrances and coveted make-up lines and staffed with sweet, knowledgeable young women. I went overboard, buying four lipsticks.

We had dinner at the Peninsula Grill, just across the street and home of a revered, towering coconut cake that is shipped all over the world. The restaurant is intimate, with taupe velvet walls, sisal flooring and a clubby ambiance. After champagne and oysters mignonette, we had voluptuous wreckfish (a type of grouper) served with succotash, spinach and lobster with cream sauce and rack of lamb crusted with benne wafers (Charleston is famous for the sesame seed cookies) and zipped with coconut mint pesto.

The coconut cake was as exquisite as I remembered, with its multiple layers, crème anglaise and toasted coconut.

Just four years old, the 66-room Market Pavilion Hotel has already snared its share of loyal clientele. Located across from the Customs House, it was—amazingly—built from the ground up; you’d never guess it, so well does it blend with the city’s more historic properties. A member of the Leading Hotels of the World, it is a family-run, European-style luxury boutique hotel. The attention to detail is impressive in both the public spaces and the rooms, which feature fresh flowers, imported silk and damask upholstery, crown moldings, plump beds and Hermes toiletries. When asked, the responsive staff kindly sent up an extra set in a glossy purple box fluffed with tissue paper so we didn’t have to fight over the shampoo and lotion. We were greeted by name almost immediately and took up residence at the Concierge Level sipping cocktails on queenly settees. The rooftop Pavilion Bar is arguably the hippest hangout in Charleston, with panoramic views of the city and harbor.

Charleston has a surfeit of stellar restaurants. We opted for dinner at FIG (an acronym for Food Is Good), a contemporary new restaurant featuring simply prepared, regionally influenced American cuisine. It was a good omen when we were seated next to a celebrated chef dining on his night off. Erin started off with the endearingly Southern deviled eggs (fifty cents a piece); then we moved onto the silky chicken liver pate with onion jam; luscious pan-roasted veal sweetbreads with spinach, chanterelles, sweet onion and bacon; bright zucchini salad with pecorino, almonds and mint; triggerfish with crunchy fennel and briny olives; tangy roasted cauliflower with mustard; and creamy Carolina Gold rice pudding with cherries and black walnuts.

Although we were sated, I wanted Erin to experience McGrady’s, a cozy, brick-walled restaurant located off an alley. An able-limbed young man from Charleston Rickshaw Company peddled us over and we sipped a nightcap in the atmospheric restaurant which dates from 1778. We ended the evening by walking out on the pier in the cool night air. Just before midnight, a friendly cop escorted us back to the hotel after we admired the new Arthur Ravenel Bridge that spans the Cooper River.

All too soon our long weekend ended as we packed up to head home. Ken Vedreiski had invited us to stop by his restaurant, Sienna, on Daniel Island, for a final meal at his restaurant on our way back to Atlanta. Formerly chef at the Woodlands Resort & Inn, he prepared a multi-course tasting menu that showcased pristine ingredients. There was crudo four ways, including a preparation with earthy 50-year old balsamic, another with sprightly oranges and radishes; grouper with heirloom tomatoes, oil and vinegar, like a burst of sunshine; veal with puckery sweet and sour mushrooms; plump homemade cavatelli; and a chocolate torte with pistachio gelato and summer berries. It sure trumped the potato chips we munched on during our ride over from Atlanta.

If You Go

For general information on Charleston, visit www.charlestoncvb.com. For reservations and packages at Charleston Place, log onto www.charlestonplace.com; for The Market Pavilion Hotel, visit www.marketpavilion.com. Restaurants mentioned: Peninsula Grill: www.peninsulagrill.com; FIG: www.eatatfig.com; McCrady's: www.mccradysrestaurant.com; Sienna: www.siennadining.com.