Southern High

Charleston has it all: the fine houses, the food, the fun. It also has endless ways to get fit and feel fantastic.

By Klara Glowczewska

Local Motion

The quiet, tiny streets of the South of Broad area are made for bikes—most hotels have them—and for running.

In partnership with Explore Charleston
The Historic District
Belmond Charleston Place
At 434 rooms, it lacks the intimacy of the historic inns, but it has a genius Club Floor (all-day buffet-style dining), a shopping arcade, and a saltwater pool with sun deck, spa, gym, and city views. Ideal for families.

The Dewberry
Uniquely for Charleston, this is a reimagining of an antebellum beauty but of one from the 1960s. Its Living Room, with a bar and multiple seating areas, is the city’s buzzy new hangout. The event space/garden is striking.

Harbourview Inn
Location, location. While there’s no restaurant or spa at this small hotel, the setting, right on Waterfront Park, is gorgeous and energizing. Bike, run, stroll, book a private trainer. Happy hour happens on the roof. There will be seagulls.
SHIP SHAPE
Clockwise from top right: Runners on the Battery promenade, along Charleston Harbor; Osprey Point, on Kiawah Island; the dome of the Gibbes Museum of Art.
By the time I reach the peninsula’s southern tip, White Point Garden, which overlooks Charleston Harbor and Fort Sumter (a speck in the distance where the first shots of the Civil War were fired), I’m breathless. Not from exertion but from nerdy historical excitement fueled, I’m sure, by endorphins. So much of the history of this country happened right here.

As I head back to the Belmond, I can see the town revving up for the night. Much of the innovation around food and nightlife here is driven by entrepreneurs in north Charleston’s newly booming tech corridor (“Silicon Harbor”). But not for me, not tonight. Weights await in the hotel gym, and laps in the rooftop saltwater pool. I hear Aretha Franklin’s “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman” blasting from a restaurant on the corner of Hasell and Meeting. So far, Charleston, you do!

“Listen to the church bells,” says Tamara Nuenighoff, the yoga instructor at the Dewberry, where I move to next. We’re wrapping up a private yoga class on the roof deck. (The Dewberry has the highest usable rooftop in Charleston, and it’s accessible only to guests who have signed up for yoga. Exercise here has its privileges.) “The bells take you from the ordinary to the extraordinary,” she says.

This is true. Not that anything here has been ordinary. Not the Dewberry itself, a 1960s landmark that was originally a government building commissioned by JFK and was later transformed into a chic temple of Midcentury style with period antiques and artworks by the likes of Clifford Bailey and Douglas Balentine, 20th-century Southern painters whose works I’ll also see later in the Gibbes Museum of Art.

Also excellent was the private Pilates class the hotel booked for me at the sleek Longevity Fitness studio. “People who have moved here from New York, Chicago, and L.A. appreciate the aesthetic,” says owner Jennie Brooks (who trained with Nora St. John, the guru of Pilates “balanced body” instruction). I’m sure they appreciate the workouts, too, because I certainly appreciated the deep tissue massage I had afterward in the Dewberry’s spa.

As for the morning yoga, I’m able to strike poses I never thought I could. “Remember,” Nuenighoff says, “it’s not pain, it’s sensation.” And now I’m relaxing on a mat, listening to the bells, feeling the breeze, and noticing that the intervals between my breaths are growing longer, as if soon I will hardly need to breathe at all—the closest I’ve ever come to meditation.

My next challenge is Ravenel Bridge. I noticed it earlier, its graceful lines arcing up over the Cooper River on the peninsula’s east side and connecting downtown to the suburb of Mount Pleasant and the Isle of Palms beyond. “It’s the only hill in town,” the concierge at the HarbourView Inn, my next address, confirms as she points me in the right direction. And, just in case, she hands me two carefully annotated running maps of downtown, showing shorter three- and five-mile routes on tear-proof paper.

The Ravenel is tough, the arc not so gentle when you’re on it, the distance to Mount Pleasant seemingly infinite in the subtropical sun. I try to not be a wuss from the North. It helps that below the biking and running lane (wohnder’s way, says the sign) South Carolina’s Lowcountry unfolds in all its sublime beauty, a vista of muted greens, browns, and blues, the flat bits of land intersected by marshy waterways lined with pluff mud and teeming with bird life.

Back at the HarbourView, my next workout begins immediately: rooftop yoga again (it’s very much the thing), with another first-rate instructor, Michelle Fitzgerald of Pivotal Fitness. Seagulls wheel above us. “Listen to the church bells,” says Tamara.