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STARRY-EYED SURPRISE

The newest owner of a Charleston icon aims to make it the city's first five-star hotel.

Written by Bridget Williams

There's comfort in consistency. The Charleston Place is the "OG" of the Charleston tourism machine. When it originally opened in 1986, the three-acre, 433-room property, situated in the heart of Charleston's historic district, catalyzed revving up the tourism engine, whose current full-throttle operation is evidenced by Explore Charleston's \$24 million budget and countless multi-page ads in national glossy magazines. The result is the Holy City enjoying a decade-long stretch as the No. 1 city in the United States, as voted by readers of *Travel + Leisure*.

After being acquired in late 2021 for \$350 million by local philanthropist and businessman Ben Navarro/Beemok Hospitality Collection (BHC), The Charleston Place shed its Belmond flag and reemerged several months later as a locally owned and independently managed hotel (for the first time in its history). Today, the crown jewel of Charleston succeeds without gimmicks or schtick, leaning instead on its recently refreshed and classically appointed public spaces and guest rooms matched with thoughtful amenities, elevated food and beverage offerings, and impeccable service.

BHC plans \$150 million worth of upgrades and renovations to preserve The Charleston Place's treasured identity while aiming for a five-star designation. Navarro is going for the gold with an all-star team comprised of luxury interior design firm Pierre-Yves Rochon, credited with the renovation of the Four Seasons George V in Paris and the Waldorf Astoria in New York and Beverly Hills; Atlanta-based architect Cooper Carry, whose projects include The Sanctuary at Kiawah Island; New York landscape firm Rees Roberts & Partners; and Charleston interior designer Cortney Bishop Design.

With an arrival that coincided with an extended torrential downpour, I had plenty of time to explore the property's indoor amenities. My spacious room projected a feeling of tranquility with two-tone taupe and grey walls accented with wainscoting and wall-to-wall carpeting designed to mimic an Oriental rug. An ornate tieback mirrored the elegance of the multi-layered window drapery, which, when opened, revealed a glimpse of several of the more than 400 church steeples that punctuate the city's skyline. Antique mirrors accentuate the wardrobe, and an expanse of crisp white marble defines the elegant and spacious bathroom.





The Charleston Place's expansive lobby serves as the city's living room, particularly during the holidays, when fidgety children dressed in their Sunday best are lined up for photographs on the split staircase. It's a behemoth property, but it's a sumptuous sprawl with wings holding boutiques and a breakfast-to-after-dinner array of dining opportunities that aren't mere hotel restaurants but gastronomic destinations in their own right.

At the pinnacle of dining options is the Charleston Grill, where, under the direction of Chef de Cuisine Suzy Castellon, seasonally-inspired and beautifully presented dishes match the understated elegance of environs outfitted with gilt bamboo five-arm chandeliers, champagne-colored walls with mirrored arched alcoves, contemporary art, and a moody dark painted bar. Long back-to-back camel-colored velvet banquettes line the center of the dining room, which overlooks a brick courtyard shared with the Palmetto Grill. Open for dinner Wednesday through Sunday, live jazz complements the elevated experience.

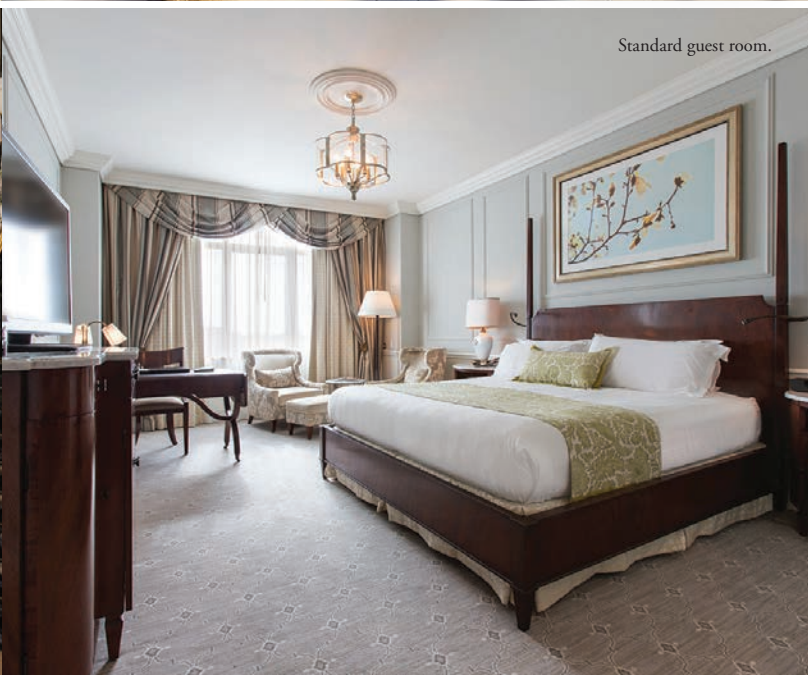
Unable to decide what to order, I asked my waiter, Drew, if three courses were too many. He replied, "I eat for sport," and encouraged me to follow his lead for an evening of perfectly paced culinary theatre. An asparagus mousse amuse-bouche complemented the Grill's derivative of a Paper Plane cocktail with vibrant blood orange notes. My tuna crudo, topped with delicate micro greens and colorful edible flowers, presented a balanced blend of sweetness and heat. Savory strawberry gazpacho represented summer in a bowl. Colorado lamb with traditional pea purée and tableside jus was among the most memorable main courses I'd enjoyed in some time. By the time the third course arrived, I was already plotting the next day's out-and-back walk over the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge as penance for my totally worth-it overindulgence. When it came time for dessert, I initially ordered the classic carrot cake with cream cheese ice cream just for the frosting, but I dove deeper to savor the pronounced ginger overtones in the moist cake.



Indoor and outdoor terraces are found on the hotel's spa level.



The Thoroughbred Club



Standard guest room.



The spa level at The Charleston Place includes a lap pool with a retractable roof.


At the Palmetto Cafe, open for breakfast, brunch, and lunch, the blue/green walls with petite table lights in the same hue, louvered shutters on the angled ceiling, and a plethora of tropical plants and greenery lend the feeling of dining in an Orangerie. Here, patrons can indulge in Lowcountry classics interspersed with French-inspired dishes.

The dark wood-paneled walls of the Thoroughbred Club contrast the adjacent lobby's polished marble floors and white walls. It was my first stop upon arriving, and, as I was famished, I didn't think twice about indulging in both the steak tartar and house-made truffled potato chips as I observed the ebb and flow of activity in the lobby. Gastropub fare is on offer at Meeting at Market, open daily for lunch and dinner.

I always log miles and miles during my visits to Charleston, so I scheduled a massage at The Charleston Place Spa, where treatments employ holistic, therapeutic practices and products to alleviate and rejuvenate. Part of a larger complex that includes an indoor lap pool with indoor and outdoor lounge areas and a large fitness facility,

the spa offers nine treatment rooms and leading-edge treatments, including Intraceuticals' range of performance-driven skincare.

Already steeped in history, Charleston's charm is even more pronounced during the holiday season, and Charleston Place transforms into a true holiday wonderland with extensive holiday decor covering the hotel top to bottom, including 139 trees (more than the Biltmore and the White House) and a custom-built 41-foot tree in Market Street Circle; nightly snowfall in the Market Street Circle, offering guests and the community to enjoy a White Christmas in the South; and mini-performances of The Nutcracker ballet in the lobby.

Under BHC's leadership, patrons of The Charleston Place can expect continued excellence in consistency and calculated change. In a statement released after the opening, Casey Lavin, President BHC, said, "We believe that hospitality is a transformative art and that The Charleston Place has the ability - and responsibility - to inspire and nurture our guests, team members, and partners." 

For more information, visit charlestonplace.com.