

Southern Exposure

Six off-the-ship excursions in Charleston. | *By* SUZANNE WRIGHT

Last May, Carnival Cruise Lines launched year-round cruises from Charleston to the Bahamas and Key West. Whether you're a first-timer or a return visitor to this gracious Southern town—nicknamed the Holy City for the church steeples that punctuate its skyline—there's plenty to see downtown before or after the cruise. Or head to the rural coastal islands just south of the city for vineyards and local seafood.

Top Chef Tips 2.5 HOURS

Learn the secrets of delicious Lowcountry cuisine from culinary masters on the **Chef's Kitchen Tour** (\$42; www.culinarytours-ofcharleston.com). Lunch on praiseworthy hushpuppies and shrimp corn dogs slathered with Carolina mustard at **Amen Street Fish & Raw Bar**.

The Word on Gullah 2 HOURS

Gullah refers to both the people and the language of the region's first black inhabitants, mostly descendants of African slaves. Historian Alphonso Brown brings the patois to life on his **Gullah Tours** (\$18; www.gullahtours.com).

Meander Meeting Street 3 OR MORE HOURS

Museum Mile (www.charlestonmuseummile.org) offers a rich concentration of the city's cultural sites—35 in all—including African-American, Revolutionary, and Civil War history, art, and architecture. If your feet begin to ache, flag down a **pedicab**.

Discover Secret Gardens 3 HOURS

Charleston's legendary gardens—colonial era and contemporary—make for splendid strolling in every season. Admire the autumnal color during the **34th Annual Fall Tours of Homes & Gardens** through October 24. Tickets \$45, www.preservationsociety.org.

Tea Time 2 HOURS

Wadmalaw Island, southwest of the city, is home to the **Charleston Tea Plantation**, America's only tea farm. Beyond the Spanish moss-draped oaks are 150-year old imported bushes that yield blends like Governor Gray. Afterward, try sweet tea vodka at the nearby **Firefly Distillery**.

Ride a Bike 1 HOUR

The Arthur Ravenel, Jr., Bridge spans the Cooper River, linking downtown to Mount Pleasant. A **bike path** under the trusses makes for fine pedaling; the Bicycle Shoppe rents wheels (www.thebicycleshoppecharleston.com).



Perfect porch: The veranda of the Edmondston-Alston House frames views of Charleston Harbor.