Soak up the city's charm on two wheels, savour some shrimp and grits, then take in the view from a rooftop bar.

By JEANNIE RALSTON

Charleston has an uncanny way to fascinate — its complex, magnolia-lined history, for hospitality so grand as the stately houses that hold the faded Battery, for its surrounding beaches and increasingly its food scene. But Charleston also has an important tie to a Christmas icon. In the 1830s, Joel Roberts Poinsett, a native son and the first United States senator from South Carolina, brought a red winter-flowering plant back to his home state and eventually Cupid's favorite poinsettia became the ubiquitous botanical symbol of the season. Today you'll see plenty of poinsettias around Charleston during the holidays, and winter, in general, is a great time to visit. Crowds are fewer, and with the sea-foam green, mistletoe-covered waters, you can still spend plenty of time outdoors — other downtowns or just across the river in the lovely Lowcountry town of Mount Pleasant.

Friday

4 P.M. > SHOPPING CENTRAL

Since the early 1800s, the Charleston City Market has been a center of commerce, and its renovation a few years ago, it’s never looked so good. The main section of the market, the Great Hall, was enclosed and got skylights and a more expansive, elegant layout. The Historic Charleston Foundation offers all things Charleston, including the most beautiful downtown buildings ($2S). Check out the Charleston Shoe Company, Charleston Shoe Company, which sells look-good, feel-good shoes designed for comfort and wear (starting at $90 a pair).

5 P.M. > UP ON THE ROOF

Because Charleston is on a peninsula with good weather in every season, it’s no wonder that rooftop bars are the rage. The perfect spot in Charleston is Market Pavilion Hotel, near City Market, which offers rooftop views. For drinks, Peninsula’s roof provides a beautiful view of the harbor. For light drinks (alcoholic or not), the rooftop menu is illustrated by “$9” drinks: imaginative takes on mimosas ($5), martinis ($7 to $8) and margaritas ($8 to $9).

7:30 P.M. > SON OF FRUIT

Charleston is a city of 135,000, is home to a concentration of world-class dining normally seen in cities five times the size. For the past few years, the king-daddy of Charleston restaurants has been Husk, and several worthy spots are following in the footsteps of Husk’s executive chef, Sean Brock. For instance, Two Boroughs Larder (the name refers to the restaurant’s location, to an emerging area known as the Cannonborough and Elliotborough neighborhoods) offers an ever-changing menu in a stripped-down interior with wood floors, bar stools and locally blended cocktail mixers for sipping. The menu includes the incredible tomato sausages, with herb bread, heirloom tomato salad, duck confit (with black olives and green garlic pesto) and a heritage pork dish made with charred onions and chitterlings ($15 to $20).

9:30 P.M. > FULL YOUR TANK

As long as you’re in the neighborhood, stop in at Fuel Cafe, a renovated Exxon station. The décor is blase-collor, with old gas pumps and signs as accents. The roll-up garage doors are open; the scene is much more upscale than your standard Exxon. Though burgers, fish tacos and sandwiches are served here, the main event is a full coffee lineup (including its own brand) and a “southern favorite” smoothie section with a mix of green crème de vola, pineapple juice and melon liqueur. If you are not in the mood for a coffee, try a cake on the back patio.

Saturday

7 A.M. > WHEELES ON THE GROUND

The quickest way to soak up all the city’s marvells is on two wheels. Rent beach cruisers from the Bicycle Shoppe, where you can also pick up route suggestions. The best place to see the spectrum of architecture is the Battery. Stroll through the historic area, including the classic “single house” with porch running along one side, or south of Broad Street. Don’t miss Legare Street with its famous wrought-iron gates or we, brick-paved Stalls Alley. Rainbow Row — a stretch of 19th-century townhouses in shortlex lanes — is a few peds push away. The narrow, shady streets open up to Battery in the southern tip of the peninsula. Catch your breath (then beer) again taking in the view of the harbor at White Point Garden.

8 A.M. > UNDER THE BRIDGE

The two-mile-long Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge, as it can be seen from almost anywhere in Charleston, but one of the most impressive views is from below. The neighboring town of Mount Pleasant, across the Cooper River from downtown Charleston, has opened a handsome park on a peer beneath the bridge. After a 60 minutes on the Skaneateles Cultural Art Festival. Many places and traditional souvenirs are featured, originally used for plantation work, such as raising rice, but have a handsome museum property tells them in historical context. Watch local women weaving and buy a basket ($25 or more).

10 A.M. > TARAR TARAR TARAE

Borne Hall Plantation in Mount Pleasant is still a working plantation that earned extra cachet last fall when the Blakely family and Ryan Reynolds were married on the Cooper Dock, which sits in the middle of the main house enshrouded somber grandeur while the rest of slaves, now housing an exhibition on black culture, offer a sobering contrast. The Blakely family probably the best reason to come here is the en- gagement: three boxes of 1970's to 1980's live oaks coping with Spanish moss. Admission, $10.

5 P.M. > PLUFF MID AT SUNSET

Shem Creek in Mount Pleasant is long been a harbor for shrimpers; well into December you'll find new attractions shoring up in another, often passed by for favorites. But, in the Shem Creek neighborhood, you’ll find Charleston’s most vibrant new restaurant. The decked-in silverado with arched windows feels like a temple set adrift. By the old bank vault in the raw bar, tile glowing, tiles, glass, and drapes, tiles. The picked shrimp is a masterpiece, and the smoothest of smooths, in harmony, oh, extraordinary. Dinner, $60 for two.

10 P.M. > DINNER ON THE TIGER

If the weather has been bad, a chance you’ll see another name, the Blimey Tiger. The appellation refers to a number of establishments used during Prohibition. The front of this bar’s logo has a Nearly, dyes with — black-and-white checkered boa scarf thrown barometers and the feel of the wall. In the one in Garnett bar, where seating areas are tucked behind crumbling brick walls or under beaches.

Sunday

10 A.M. > BREAKFAST GLORY

There are reportedly more than 400 churches in Charleston. The most interesting sacred space is the Magnolia Cemetery, which dates to the 1750s and shows the influence of the Cooper River. Here the headstones may be shaped like pyramids or adorned with angels, and mausoleums are architectural wonders with columns and flood lights. One sacred pond has a fetching white footbridge across it and in the pond is a hidden danger: “S.C. Law Prohibits Feed- ing Alligators,” a sign that is a warning to the curious is famous for its Civil War hospital site — including those belonging to three major Civil War figures. Blakely, the first to sink submarines and the first to sink ships, is part of the Civil War site. (You can see the Blakely, discovered 138 years ago, on weekends in the reclamation.)

11 A.M. > AMUSING DIMS

At Half Moon Chophouse, two Sunday rituals come together: brunch and worship. Near the piazza at the comer, a singer/guitarist “Amazing Grace” and other gospel standards are sung. “I’ll Fly Away” (we’ll hear car- dios steeped with soul). Upstairs, the hun- gry sit on benches by the fire. The thyme and dig into crab cake eggs Benedict, shrimp and grits. Several half fly across are hush. Think of this robust dose of Southern hospitality and Sunday’s re- creation point ($25 for two).