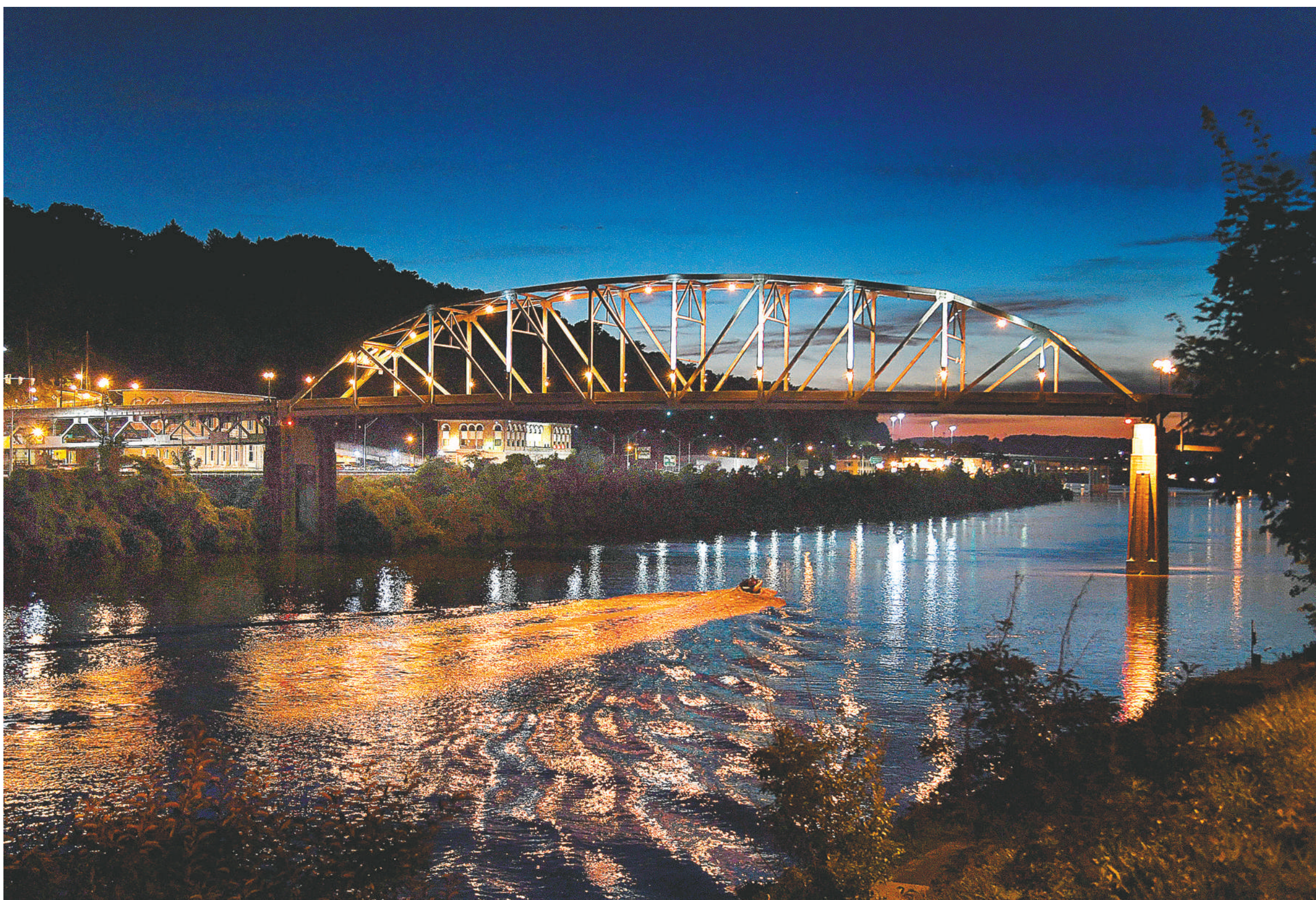


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**TRAVEL**

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PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN  
*Special to The Washington Post*

A city that has time for you is a win. In Charleston, W.Va., you can park your car all day for \$3, catch free live music almost every night and be seated right away — sans reservations — at the city's best restaurant. Servers and shopkeepers have the time to exceed expectations, often in delightful ways: The owner of Swiftwater Cafe designed me a custom sandwich, and the owner of Elk City Records, after we bantered about dogs, asked, "Ever heard Portuguese music?" Seconds later, a record spun and a gorgeous sound emanated from the speakers.

YOU'RE GOING WHERE?

## Charleston

The capital city of West Virginia, set in the shadow of the Appalachians, is full of creative artists and chefs — but forget the reservations

I've visited three times in the last four years, taking small detours from road trips to eat at one of my favorite restaurants in the region, Bluegrass Kitchen. This time, I cast a wider net. Located on the banks of the Kanawha River, this bikable capital city has visible scars from its economic struggles: boarded-up houses and vacant storefronts in the middle of town. As I wheeled around, I had the recurring thought that the city was far short of capacity, both in people and businesses. But that means it's a welcoming (read: affordable) place for artists, small businesses and visitors escaping big-city prices and crowds.

CHARLESTON CONTINUED ON F4

TOP, FROM LEFT: In Charleston, W.Va., the wares at Sullivan's Records; a couple dance at the Wine & All That Jazz Festival; the state's Capitol building is taller than the U.S. Capitol. ABOVE: Dusk colors abound near the South Side Bridge across the Kanawha River, which separates the city.



## A genuine city experience — sans crowds

CHARLESTON FROM F1

### Go

#### Local Faves

Little in Charleston impressed me more than **1** Live on the Levee, and it wasn't the music. The city comes out of the woodwork for this free and weekly outdoor concert series in Haddad Riverfront Park — bikers in cowboy boots, teenage girls in too-high heels, hippies, canoodlers, dancers, smokers, dogs, strollers, young and old. In the lineup: 10,000 Maniacs in July and Tusk: The Ultimate Fleetwood Mac Tribute in August.

One morning, I biked across the Kanawha River and found myself in a wooded haven, the **2** Sunrise Carriage Trail. I walked a .65-mile zigzagging path up 180 feet to a spot that offers a generous view of the city when trees are bare. The path was built in 1905, when horse-drawn vehicles hauled material to build the hilltop estate of Gov. William MacCorkle. Today, it houses a law firm.

#### Guidebook Musts

On the East End of town, I joined a fourth-grade class at the **3** Capitol Complex for free tours of the Capitol building and Governor's Mansion. (Also in the complex: the West Virginia State Museum, where you can see the late Sen. Robert C. Byrd's 1978 LP, "Mountain Fiddler.") Our guide, Grace, pointed out the mansion's West Virginia-shaped raised garden bed and the Dutch clock that plays seven baroque arias. A kid asked Grace if she had met the governor. "I have. He's a very nice man. Very tall," she deadpanned, adding that he sleeps in an extra long bed. We had no choice but to believe her — the upstairs was off-limits.

Open year-round, **4** Capitol Market is where locals meet for coffee and tourists look quizzically at items like chowchow (a regional relish). Inside, you can buy meat, seafood, chocolate, wine, grains and spices. Outside, the fresh produce is irresistible. I bought a small jar of locally harvested J.Q. Dickson salt and avoided the spicy offerings — Uncle Bunk's 14-day sweet hot pickles, Yoder's jalapeño pickled eggs and Ordinary Evelyn's hot pepper butter.

### Eat

#### Local Faves

If dining at **5** Mi Cocina de Amor feels like sitting in your Mexican grandmother's kitchen, owner and chef Frank Gonzales has done his job. Using generations of recipes from his family, he opened this Elk City spot, which has become a favorite of locals. For a laugh: the Bad Hombre Tacos. For a deal: Margarita Monday or Taco Tuesday. For a West Virginia spin on beverages: peach moonshine margaritas and Appalachian iced tea. Keep an eye out for Gonzales's next neighborhood joint, Gonzoburger, opening this summer.

After biking up steep Bridge Road, I needed to refuel and stumbled upon a restaurant in a converted, century-old house: **6** Lola's. Funky art adorned the walls, and the Supremes wafted through the speakers. I settled on a large, purple-cushioned bench in a sunny room. Lola's is known for handcrafted artisan pizza and locally made Ellen's ice cream. A beet salad with goat cheese and candied walnuts hit the spot, and general manager Mike offered me shopping tips on the West Side.

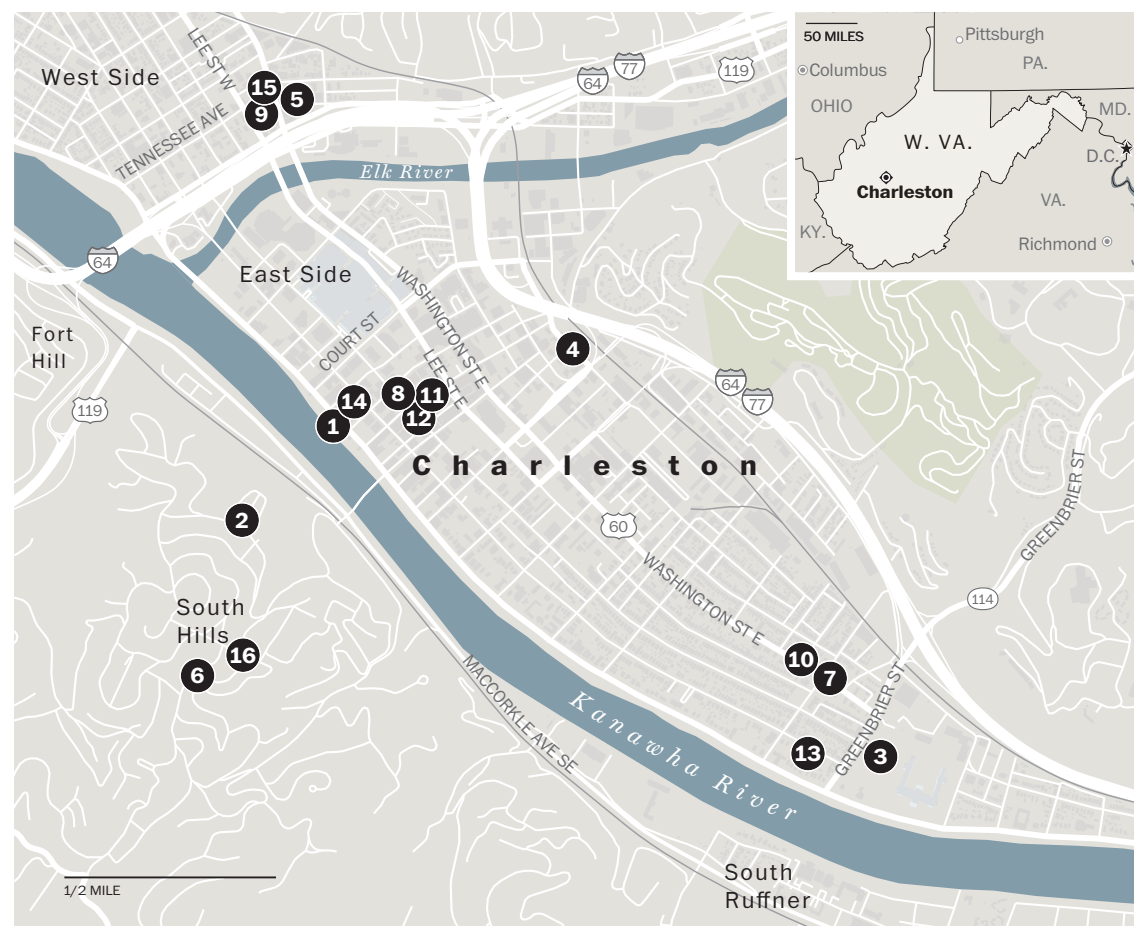
#### Guidebook Musts

**7** Bluegrass Kitchen stands out in a city where Tudor's Biscuit World (fast food in biscuit form) is often named as a favorite restaurant. But it also has been celebrated far beyond the city, and for good reason. For 12 years, the owners have been putting an upscale, eclectic spin on comfort food, celebrating the state's Appalachian heritage with a menu that changes daily. At Bluegrass, you can wear flip-flops, chat with locals and eat sustainably and organically. And there's more: kitschy vinyl tablecloths, pressed tin ceilings, live music nightly, house-pickled ramps and dilly beans, creative cocktails and plenty of vegetarian options. This time, I ordered the mock chicken and herb dumplings. The blueberry buttermilk pie with vanilla bean whipped cream? I order that every time.

Located downtown, **8** Black Sheep Burrito & Brews was perfectly situated after a long morning of shopping. I sat at the bar, with a front-seat view through the glass-walled Bad Shepherd Brewery next door and ordered a flock of tacos



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST



Source: Maps4News/HERE

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**1 Live on the Levee**  
600 Kanawha Blvd. E  
[liveontheleveecharleston.com](http://liveontheleveecharleston.com)

**2 Sunrise Carriage Trail**  
746 Myrtle Rd.  
304-344-5075  
[charlestonwv.com/listing/sunrise-carriage-trail.aspx](http://charlestonwv.com/listing/sunrise-carriage-trail.aspx)

**3 Capitol Complex**  
1900 Kanawha Blvd. E.  
304-558-4839  
[www.wvculture.org/agency/capitol.html](http://www.wvculture.org/agency/capitol.html)

**4 Capitol Market**  
800 Smith St.  
304-344-1905  
[capitolmarket.net](http://capitolmarket.net)

**5 Mi Cocina de Amor**  
711 Bigley Ave.  
304-205-5461  
[www.mexicanfood.com](http://www.mexicanfood.com)

**6 Lola's**  
1038 Bridge Rd.  
304-343-5652  
[lolaswv.com](http://lolaswv.com)

**7 Bluegrass Kitchen**  
1600 Washington St. E.  
304-346-2871  
[bluegrasswv.com](http://bluegrasswv.com)

**8 Black Sheep Burrito & Brews**  
702 Quarrier St.  
304-343-2739  
[blacksheepwv.com](http://blacksheepwv.com)

**9 Kin Ship Goods**  
613 Tennessee Ave.  
[kinshipgoods.com/pages/about-us](http://kinshipgoods.com/pages/about-us)

**10 Sullivan's Records**  
1588 Washington St. E.  
304-344-4355  
[facebook.com/SullivansRecords/](https://facebook.com/SullivansRecords/)

**11 Taylor Books**  
226 Capitol St.  
304-342-1461  
[taylorbooks.com](http://taylorbooks.com)

**12 The Purple Moon**  
906 Quarrier St.  
304-345-0123  
[thepurplemoon.com](http://thepurplemoon.com)

**13 Brass Pineapple Inn**  
1611 Virginia St. E.  
304-344-0748  
[brasspineapple.com/Brass\\_Pineapple/Welcome.html](http://brasspineapple.com/Brass_Pineapple/Welcome.html)

**14 Four Points by Sheraton Charleston**  
600 Kanawha Blvd. E.  
304-344-4092  
[starwoodhotels.com/fourpoints/property/overview/index.html?propertyID=3901](http://starwoodhotels.com/fourpoints/property/overview/index.html?propertyID=3901)

**15 Elk City Historic District**  
Washington Street between Pennsylvania and Ohio avenues, specifically Washington and Tennessee  
[charlestonwestside.org](http://charlestonwestside.org)

**16 South Hills**  
Bridge Road in South Hills, specifically Bridge and Walnut  
[bridgeroad.org](http://bridgeroad.org)

new to my palette, including one with tempura avocado and another with fresh roasted beets. They arrived on aluminum plates, individually wrapped in foil. The restaurant serves four types of sangria and beers with names like Bad Shepherd Milk Stout and Why Ewe Whining.

### Shop

#### Local Faves

**9** Kin Ship Goods had me at the Charlie Brown turntable and the retro camping trailer socks. That's a lie — the shop's resident beagles lured me in. Located in a space with exposed brick walls, it's the kind of store in which you start justifying gifts; after all, you know the perfect recipient for the toy wooden banjo, the "Ask me about my dog" tee and that set of lumberjack-tool temporary tattoos. The owners hold occasional workshops and talks with artists and musicians. T-shirts are printed on-site.

One of two record shops in town, **10** Sullivan's Records has a robust selection of vinyl, from Fleet Foxes to Flaming Lips, Bach to Billie Holiday. Shop owner Sam also sells turntables and band posters that took me back to the '80s (the Clash, the Smiths). I donned headphones to sample an Earl Scruggs album. Homeward Bound Books recently opened in the back, with enough inventory to have a section on sex, directly above the section called "Wrestling with God." On my way out, an older gentleman asked Sam if he had any Dire Straits. "I miss it," he said. "Money for nothin' and chicks for free."

#### Guidebook Musts

Every time I visit Charleston, I spend more of my time at **11** Taylor Books. Important for its fine selection of Appalachian titles ("Mountain Measures: A Collection of West Virginia Recipes" for adults and "A is for Appalachia" for kids), beloved for its welcoming coffee shop that sells no-bakes (a sweet regional favorite) and surprising for its adjacent gallery of local art and basement screening room, Taylor is an institution. This visit, I discovered the large used-book section in the back. Next time, I'll stay for live music.

Among Charleston's several vintage and antique retailers, **12** the Purple Moon takes the cake — and probably serves it on a fab midcentury modern platter. The shop's rooms are tastefully filled with stylish furniture, lighting and glassware, from a mod spaceship desk lamp to a West German pottery vase. The owner, Connie, stood by a thoughtfully curated collection of vintage glass and briefed me on regional handblown items from pioneering companies such as Blenko and Fenton. Purple Moon is part of downtown's ArtWalk, held the third Thursday of every month.

### Stay

#### Local Faves

Just a block from the Capitol Complex, the **13** Brass Pineapple Inn was built in 1907, well before construction of the new state Capitol building. Operating as a bed-and-breakfast since 1989 — with obligatory floral prints, four-poster beds and antique claw-foot tubs — the inn sits among late-Victorian residences on a tree-lined street in the city's historic East End. Every spring for a quarter-century, the neighborhood has hosted what is supposedly the state's largest one-day community yard sale.

#### Guidebook Musts

At the **14** Four Points by Sheraton Charleston, you'll have the best views, the best goings-on on your front porch and perhaps the best happy hour in town. Rising above the river, the Sheraton is front row for Live on the Levee and big festivals such as Biker Bash, a motorcycle rally in June; and Rod Run Doo Wop, a classic-car show in October. Every Wednesday is Brews and BBQ (free samples of local craft beer and barbecue) for lobby bar patrons. Tip: Ask for a river view on the east end of the ninth or 10th floor to see the dome.

### Explore

#### Local Faves

Like a dream come true, every shop I entered in the **15** Elk City Historic District on the West Side had a shop dog. Take Calvin the hound mix at Elk City Records, whose title is director of security and morale. But I also saw a neighborhood beginning its renaissance. Thanks to affordable commercial space and a rebranding campaign, the creative class has set up shop here. Base Camp Printing, next door to Kin Ship Goods, is a storefront letterpress print shop. Nearby: Mi Cocina de Amor and Bully Trap, a walk-in only, cash-only barber shop. At Calvin's shop, owner and retired lawyer Phil Melick is hardly a starving artist, but he shares the passion and energy of other small business owners here. Plus, he has a mighty fine collection of records for Calvin to protect.

#### Guidebook Musts

One afternoon, I pedaled over the river and up to the **16** South Hills neighborhood. And up. And up. I wasn't prepared for the steepness of the hill. But I was pleased at the top to find the Bridge Road Shops, a little hilltop destination of clothing boutiques, salons and restaurants, a respite from the gritty downtown. Eclectics sells locally made accessories and gifts; Sarah's Bakery has sweet and savory pies; and Lola's has a charming patio for dining alfresco. The Folded Leaf yoga studio offers donation-based community classes on Sundays. Opening this summer: gelateria Caffè Romeo.

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**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: One of the colorful murals in the Elk City Historic District; a mix of older and newer architecture is a trademark of the city; an appetizer plate with pickled ramps, onions, blue cheese and stone-ground mustard at Bluegrass Kitchen; the wares of a storefront in the hilltop Bridge Road Shops.**

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