

The City Magazine Since 1975

# charleston

March 2013

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## White Hot FASHION

*The season heats up with  
white-on-white looks*

### Back to the Future

*Designer Jeff Daly helps  
return the Gibbes Museum to  
its Beaux Arts splendor, with  
a vision for years to come*

**Plus!**  
The great cruise  
ship debate, getting  
gritty with Geechie  
Boy Mill, planting  
passionflowers,  
three recipes for  
local clams, & not-  
to-miss events

SPECIAL SECTION:  
**BAKER MOTOR COMPANY  
CHARLESTON  
FASHION  
WEEK**

**MARCH 19-23**

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► "DIANA VREELAND REALLY WOKE ME UP AND TAUGHT ME HOW TO BE CONFIDENT." — See page 110

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## House Rules

A veteran of downtown home tours shares notes on the etiquette of snooping—er strolling—through someone else's abode

Before moving to Charleston, I'd never lived in a town where hosts followed the customary "May I take your coat?" and "Can I offer you a drink?" with "Would you like a tour of the house?" All this time, I, an avid design hound and overall snooper, had to make do with the surreptitious tours I scored while "getting lost" on the way to the loo. Or the kitchen. Or the back patio.

So for the last decade, the out-in-the-open invites have been a boon to my curiosity. It seems Charlestonians are as proud of their homes as they are of their history, and since the two are so often tied together, we feel it's our duty to share heirloom floor plans with friends, family, and whomever shows even the most meager passing interest.

This "come-on-in" approach is no doubt part of what has made us the most hospitable city in the country, and the most polite to boot. But, even though we're inviting nearly everybody and their brother up onto the porch, there's an unspoken contract when embarking on a house tour, be it one that your neighbor is offering or one that the preservation groups host.

First and foremost, a guest is never, ever to ask about price. Most hosts will feign deafness at estate value queries, and docents will sniff as though you've let forth something foul. But despair not, oh gauche one: Just hop on the Internet, search for the tax records, and enter the address. Ta-da, the price is there for all to see. The same goes if you're gagging with envy over that 30-year-old S.O.B.'s Battery digs and wondering if it's really her place (or her daddy's or sugar daddy's). Don't embarrass yourself with an ask: the same Web page will tell you who's on the deed. Indeed! And follow suit when trying to find out who owns the house you're poking

about on that ticketed tour. The poor docents might share a few details about the “anonymous” family who lives there, but they tend to guard the residents’ surname as if it were their own mama’s pimiento cheese recipe.

Those are the biggest no-nos. Of lesser import, but still along the lines of you-just-don’t-do-that is “look, don’t touch.” Yes, we’re all dying to know if it’s a repro or the real deal, but like a proper bathing suit, let’s leave a little up to the imagination. As for whom that portrait of so-and-so is, since so many folks are buying their family trees via antiques shops these days, let’s not go there. Trust me, if the person in question’s a relative, Charlestonians will let you know.

Next, if you’ve paid to tread in a stranger’s house, make sure you’ve taken care of business before you start gawking. Typically house tour bathrooms are for peeking, not peeing. Also, be prepared to wear flats or even take off your shoes. Homes on tour get hundreds of visitors, and since the fine rugs have usually been rolled back, no one wants your heels pock-marking their way across the hardwoods. I once visited a manse whose owner had minor heart attacks when any speck of driveway gravel made its way inside to mar his pristine heart pine floors. I understand homeowners who want to curb a mass audience, but God bless that poor man who, on nearly all fours, tracked each and every guest who came through the door. Pavers, next time, mister, for sure.

Last, don’t take photos. Personally, I’ve always thought odds were that at least one visitor (maybe that one with the camera?) could be casing the casa for later. A friend who lives in a house museum argues that his clientele “just aren’t that kind of people,” but I’m not so sure. A few years back, there were those sly dogs who’d pull up to well-heeled homes around town and “remove” valuables, ostensibly to clean or repair them. There was even a case of a “Don’t-we-know-each-other?” woman who stalled a resident outside a Tradd Street townhouse while her accomplice made off with the family silver. In short, don’t feed the paranoia by snapping smartphone shots of that grandfather clock.

I could go on with the dos and don’ts, but I’ve had to sort these things out myself. Every misstep has made me walk the line a little more properly, as if I were one of the real Peninsula pack. And isn’t that the point—to get behind the curtain long enough to dream that we were master or mistress of the mansion?

Senior editor Melissa Bigner lives in a tiny cottage and proudly walks guests over every inch of it as if the place were a manse. She recently wrote *Coastal Living: 101 Decorating Ideas..* — *Melissa Bigner*

