



TRAVEL

Portsmouth–New Hampshire



By Richard Levy

I just returned from my first visit to historic Portsmouth, New Hampshire, one of America's oldest cities, founded in 1623 and nestled beautifully on banks of the Piscataqua River. I was pleased to see how Portsmouth has managed to beautifully blend the sophistication, art and culture you'd expect to find only major cities like New York, Boston or San Francisco with their Yankee past.

One of the country's hottest, most desired vacation destinations, Forbes Traveler called Portsmouth "one of America's prettiest towns," Prevention magazine called it "one of the best walking cities," The National Geographic Travelers list of the Globes "Historic Places" designated Portsmouth #6 in the USA while CNN said, "This low-key gem is great for relaxing, shopping, and pretending you never have to go back to your real life." Recently, Coastal Living Magazine called Portsmouth "One of the 10 Happiest Towns in America." (Not too shabby for a quaint little seacoast town.) Be sure to stop by "Discover Portsmouth" in Market Square on your first day to help get yourself oriented.

The narrow side streets and red brick sidewalks are quaint and lined with many fashionable boutiques, restaurants, cafés, galleries and antique shops that are fun to explore.

Paul Revere took his "first historic ride" on December 13th, 1774, to warn Portsmouth's "Sons of Liberty" that the British were secretly storing arms down river at Fort William and Mary. The next night, 400 brave souls surprised the British in a daring raid and made off with all the ammunition; a critical mission, as this helped us defeat the British at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

John Paul Jones, Naval Captain and founder of the United States Navy lived in Portsmouth while his ships the "Ranger" and "America" were built in the Shipyard here. His battle cry, "I have yet begun to fight" became the most famous in American history.

In 1791, newly elected President George Washington visited Portsmouth on his tour of the Colonies to thank them for voting for him. He attended services in the historic North Church,

the centerpiece of Portsmouth, and also at St. Johns Church, founded in 1761. A Bible that once belonged to Queen Caroline, wife of King George II is kept upstairs and it was dramatically altered in the colonial era (cut and pasted) to remove all mention of "Pray for the King, Queen or Empire." Look on top of the first page for a major typo that says "Vinegar" instead of "Vineyard". Daniel Webster, the renowned Statesman also lived in Portsmouth and practiced law here.

In 1905, as the Russo-Japanese war raged, President Teddy Roosevelt invited dignitaries of both countries to meet at Portsmouth to try and work things out. Weeks of tenuous negotiations ensued. During a critical impasse, when negotiations nearly broke off, the folks of Portsmouth started entertaining their foreign guests every night to help "warm things up." As a result, the peace treaty was signed, Teddy Roosevelt was awarded the Noble Peace Prize and Portsmouth has been known around the world over ever since.

The Portsmouth Shipyard has played an important role in our country's defense for three centuries, building America's warships and many of our nuclear submarines.

Portsmouth's historic past is preserved at "Strawberry Banke," the original name for the city, after early settlers discovered strawberries "the size of fists" growing everywhere. This 10 acre outdoor living museum, like colonial Williamsburg, VA on a smaller scale, is a neighborhood of 42 buildings, preserved as they were in the 17th and 18th century. Visitors can walk through some buildings to see how early colonists lived.

In the "Aldrich House" you'll learn about famous writer and editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich and how his book, "Story of a Bad Boy" influenced his good friend, Mark Twain, to write "Huckleberry Finn." One of the most surprising historical houses was the "Shapiro House" where you'll meet Mrs. Shapiro, a Russian-Jewish immigrant, making traditional "Latkes" and "Kreplach." (And you won't find a "Shapiro House" in Colonial Williamsburg, VA.)

With a local population of about 21,000 residents, there are an astonishing 100 restaurants, bars and cafés. In



North Church and Trolley. Photo credit: Courtesy Greater Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce.



Restaurant back decks on the Piscataqua River. Photo credit: Bridgette Desmond

fact, if everyone who lives in Portsmouth all went out to dinner on the same night, they could all be seated quickly. Most places by the water have decks in the back where you can eat or have cocktails and watch the ships go by.

Among all of the places I have traveled, Portsmouth appears to qualify as "The Lobster Roll Capital." I've never encountered so many spectacular lobster rolls, all over-flowing with hunks of lobster claw and a touch of mayo, served on homemade buns. My favorite was the one I devoured, or should I say inhaled, at the Old Ferry Landing restaurant located on the water right next to an active tugboat dock. Order their fried scallops and clams appetizer.

My dinner at The Cava Tapas and Wine Bar was amazing. When you call for reservations, ask for a seat at the "Chefs Table," so you can watch Executive Chef Gregg prepare his delicious tapas right before your eyes. (The best I've eaten since I visited the Plaza



Portsmouth Harbor. Photo credit: David J. Murray, Clear Eye Photo

de Mayor in Madrid.) My favorites: Duck Breast with hazelnuts- crisp duck skin, chevre and cherries; Char-Grilled Baby Octopus with ink, oregano, potato and tomato; and Medjool Dates stuffed with Manchego cheese and Serrano ham. Be sure to leave room for their fabulous Paella de Cava for two.

Another restaurant you'll love is the Portsmouth Gaslight Company located in an historic building, but don't expect to find "Pub Grub" here: their amazing dishes were worthy of any fine restaurant. Start by ordering the Pulled Pork Nachos: beer braised pork on crispy corn tortilla chips topped with melted pepper jack cheese, green onions, jalapeños, tomatoes, cilantro and black olives. (OMG) Then order the Lobster Stuffed Haddock: a rolled up Haddock fillet filled with delicious lobster stuffing, baked in a citrus tarragon beurre blanc. (OMG) I couldn't decide which beer or Ale to order, so they gave me a "taste-test" of five shot glasses of their most

outstanding beers and ales. I chose the local Redhook Audible Ale.

Another restaurant I loved was the Salt Kitchen & Bar in the Wentworth by the Sea Hotel & Spa. Order their to-die-for wood-roasted oysters, prosciutto wrapped Maine scallops and amazing Salmon Salad.

On your last night in Portsmouth, plan to have dinner at the Library Restaurant, nestled in the historic Rockingham Hotel, that dates from 1785. Past quests include George Washington, Teddy Roosevelt and JFK. After all that wonderful seafood, you'll probably be craving a great steak and their steaks would give "The Palm" stiff competition. You must also try the Library's incredible crab cakes: huge hamburger-sized, delicious crab cakes made from 100% fresh Maryland crabmeat, lightly spiced and sautéed.

Live music abounds in Portsmouth and you can generally find music performances somewhere in town, every night of the year. My favorite place is the Press Room, offering too-good-to-be-true jazz and along with other music every night. Tuesday night is "Open Mike" night and it really gets sizzling as local musicians and singers deliver incredible performances from 6-9P. There's no cover and if you get hungry, try their homemade clam chowder and fried oysters.

Portsmouth is also not the typical seaside touristy shopping experience. Like everything else here, their shops

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are fashionable and sophisticated and stores stay open until 8PM every Friday night. (With no sales tax!) Most of the shopping is for ladies, but now there's a new men's shop, "Sault," that would be right at home in Soho. One of the most unique shops in Portsmouth is the Salt Cellar, an amazing store where just about everything is made from Pink Himalayan salt.

For souvenirs of Portsmouth go to Tugboat Alley, where you will find a unique selection of hats, sweatshirts and other great stuff. I bought a great looking stone washed hat with a beautiful illustration of three tugboats embroidered on the front. (An original Portsmouth frame worthy work of art.)

For breakfast, head over to Popovers on The Square everyday and devour their popovers served with maple butter or stuffed with scrambled eggs -- deliciously addictive!

You'll absolutely be captivated by Prescott Park, Portsmouth's spectacular sprawling waterfront park with magnificent lawns, lots of flowers, amazing harbor views and free concerts every week during the summer.

Portsmouth's unequivocal cultural masterpiece is The Music Hall, built in 1878. This is the seacoast's premier performing arts center with daily events in its gorgeous 900 seat Victorian theater, offering a diverse program that includes opera, music, comedy, theatre,

dance, classic films and interviews with best-selling authors. The Music Hall was designated as an "American Treasure for the Arts," by the United States Senate. Upcoming performances include Wynton Marsalis and The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, July 15th, Mary Chapin Carpenter July 1, Boz Scaggs Aug. 2, Composer Graham Nash Aug 14 and Salman Rushdie, Sept. 22. (Order tickets early before they sell out.) The Seacoast Repertory Theater offers a wide array of professional shows for all ages, including musicals, dramas and comedies.

Don't miss taking a sail on the "Gundalow" Piscataqua -- an authentic replica of the river barges used to transport goods in the 18th and 19th centuries. For an unforgettable day, make reservations for a Thomas Lighton Cruise around Portsmouth Harbor or better yet out to the "Isles of Shoals," approximately a 45-minute trip. Hike around the lovely small island, stop at the deli to pick up a picnic lunch and check out the haunted hotel.

Plan to spend a couple hours at the USS Albacore Museum and take a guided tour of one of the most advanced U.S. Navy submarines ever built before the advent of atomic submarines.

If your budget permits, splurge and take a private two-hour luxury cruise with Captain Steve's Vista Yacht Charters on his "Wildest Dreams" powerboat. Bring a picnic lunch and



Mary Chapin Carpenter concert at Prescott Park Photo credit: David J. Murray, Clear Eye Photo

beverages and let Captain Steve show you around the Harbor and beyond. Also Check out Portsmouth Kayak Adventures for tours and rentals.

One day walk, bicycle or drive over Portsmouth's newly restored historic Memorial Bridge. You can spend an afternoon at Kittery Maine where there's great discount shopping.

Where should you stay? If you can afford it and love old-world luxury, splurge and stay at Wentworth by the Sea Hotel & Spa in secluded Newcastle,

a small island community connected to Portsmouth by small bridges; a very special place to stay. You'll also love staying where I stayed, at the charming Martin Hill Inn, a classic New England inn with four-poster beds where the hosts cook up homemade breakfasts like Lemon Ricotta Pancakes with bacon. (Make reservations early.)

If they're booked try the Ale Inn, the historic Portsmouth Hotel, or the very lovely Hilton Garden Hotel conveniently located in the middle of town

with a fitness room and saltwater pool, open until 11PM. And if you'd like to bring your pooch, the Coachman Inn and Hampton Inn are pet friendly.

Portsmouth is unequivocally one of the most quaint, idyllic New England seacoast towns you'll ever experience. The perfect place to escape for a long weekend, week or perhaps rent a place for this Summer. The best way to get to Portsmouth is to drive. It's only about 4 ½ hours from Westchester right up Interstate 95. (But you don't absolutely need a car in Portsmouth. You can fly into Boston and take the C&J luxury bus, in 1 ½ hours you'll be in Portsmouth. Or take Amtrak to Exeter, rent a car or take a taxi to Portsmouth. Enterprise Rental Cars is based in Portsmouth and will pick you when you arrive by bus or plane, or during off-hours, can deliver a car to the bus or air terminal. If you don't love long drives, take a luxury C&J bus from the Port Authority, it's only 5 hours, and very comfortable, with WiFi, a lavatory, free refreshments, fresh coffee and a movie.

I really fell head-over-heels over Portsmouth. So much so, I'm even considering moving up there, from Westchester, it is that special. For more information go to portsmouthchamber.org or goportsmouth.com to make hotel reservations for dates you'd like to come. Check out who'll be appearing at The Music Hall and buy tickets. Lastly, be sure to think of me when you're eating your first amazing "Portsmouth lobster roll".

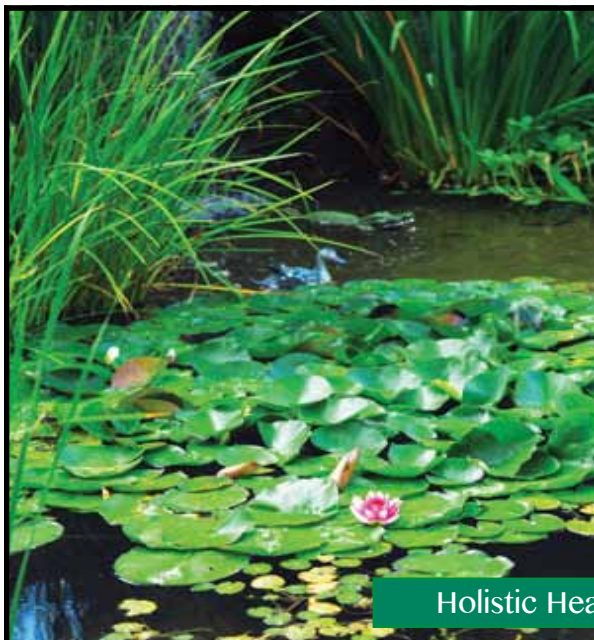
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