

Delightfully Surprised by Norfolk, Virginia

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Bright blue sky and cottonball clouds en route to Norfolk.

From New York's JFK to our initial descent into the sky above Hampton Roads, Virginia, an incredible cloud bank outside my window preoccupied my thoughts, so that the only thing on my mind was beauty. Not, the highly destructive relationship I had with my father growing up... which was the only tie binding me in any way to [Norfolk, Virginia](#), prior to this trip. He was born on the Naval base in Norfolk, largest in the United States. All my knowledge of the city stemmed from my knowledge of him. Not much to recommend a place! However, the cloud formation parted to reveal a silvery, shimmering sea and the beginning of a port city with clues like an over-water bridge and white sails tossing sunlight back from boats making their way out to sea.

I steeled myself for a city full of memories. Memories that weren't even mine. Could I like Norfolk given my weak, but no less poignantly negative, connection to it?

Landing and finding my driver, appropriately named Elvis because he had the King's easy grin and smooth voice, began to thaw my negative emotions. I watched inlets and bridges speed past the windows of our SUV on the short ride into town, which was perhaps the quickest commute I've ever experienced from an airport to a city center. Arriving at [The Tazewell Hotel](#) immediately convinced me I might have been wrong all along about Norfolk. No sad memories

lay waiting in dark corners, no haunting pasts were creeping around columns. Norfolk bears a simple, happy cheerfulness that is hard to attribute. From the accessible size of the city to the friendliness of its inhabitants and even the newness of its buildings that retain a sense of history even made with new materials — it was hard to find fault in any immediate impression.

My first day in Norfolk continued to ease my now irrational fears as I experienced the best meatloaf sandwich I have ever had at quirky-but-cozy Ten Top, took in a glass-blowing demonstration at the Glass Studio at the Chrysler Museum of Art, stood awestruck in the largest collection of Tiffany Glass in America inside the main Chrysler Museum and even as I rode [The Tide light rail](#), so clean it could have been days old.



Tastiest meatloaf sandwich ever at Norfolk's Ten Top restaurant.

Norfolk is not a flashy metropolis full of LCD billboards, street performers and a Starbucks on every corner. This Hampton Roads port makes a point of artisan coffee houses, Southern hospitality and an appreciation of beauty as well as social and environmental responsibility. The

headquarters of PETA are in Norfolk. Women are addressed as, “Ma’am.” Dinner is an occasion to ditch jeans and try a dress.

As I drifted to sleep in my comfortable suite at The Tazewell, local Virginian wine filled my happy belly and I rode a wave of tipsiness into a dreamland filled with men in dress whites saluting me from the bow of a ship. The second day of my getaway to Virginia would provide more than enough chances to glimpse bows of ships. Alas, no sailors. Yet my first turn on a Segway proved fruitful and I mastered the tricky device far quicker than my companions. Past ships, a tea house gifted by Taiwan to the city of Norfolk and ancient brownstones on bumpy cobblestone, tree-lined streets we rode.

The farther I drove my Segway, the more I came to adore the places passing my vision. A turn in a kayak down the waterways which helm the city in, while also cutting it into pieces, reminded me of a more temperate Boston. Yet it was the local wine festival that followed our morning and completed our day that truly did away with any lingering negativity I still harbored. I learned that Virginia’s climate lends itself well to wine production and that *Travel + Leisure* proclaimed Virginia one of five up-and-coming wine regions that are a must-visit for those travelers who go where the wine is best.



Norfolk is known as an up-and-coming wine region; sample varietals at an annual autumn wine festival.



Board the American Rover sailing ship for a cruise around Hampton Roads Harbor.

The next morning, my last in Norfolk — I turned my face to the wind on the bow of the [American Rover](#) sailing ship and realized that the only way one might leave and still not have fallen in love with Norfolk is if one has a predisposition to a place that has almost all of the cosmopolitan offerings of a city such as Chicago, yet with the pace of life in rural Louisiana. [Hampton Roads](#) is an area of the South nearly overflowing with cultural and historical significance to the story of who and what America is. Cannon balls are still embedded in the stone walls of homes in the oldest neighborhoods. However, there is no 24-hour Chinese delivery in Norfolk, as there is in New York. Even while looking forward to my home and cheap dumplings in Chinatown, I realized my heart has more room than I knew. And my mind is open enough to know that the past, even when alive and present in a place, holds no sway that we do not give it over our present. When I think of Norfolk now, I smile.

PhotoGal [Kirsten Alana](#) has been a professional photographer for nearly a decade and uses that now to fuel her second love: travel. Her iPhone photographs (a new medium from her previous 35mm) have been featured in galleries, won awards and are in the homes of private collectors. Alas, her iPhone was stolen in London before she was able to backup her photos from her trip to Norfolk, Virginia (every photographer's nightmare); the above images are those Kirsten salvaged from Instagram. Follow the travel photographer, writer and social media consultant on Twitter @kirstenalana.

Thanks to the Norfolk Convention & Visitors Bureau for hosting Kirsten's visit to Virginia.

