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**Travel**  
**Norfolk: Navy, art and festivals**

**The Tidewater, Va., city has undergone a major facelift and caters warmly to tourists.**

By NANCY HEISER Special to the Maine Sunday Telegram

The Virginia city of Norfolk is the third largest port city on the Eastern seaboard, after New York and Savannah. It's also home to the world's largest naval base, with 70,000 civilian and military personnel.



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Boats fill the Elizabeth River during the Parade of Sails in Norfolk, Va.

Nancy Heiser photo



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The mermaid is the city's new brand.

Nancy Heiser photo

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But for many travelers, this city of 220,000 surrounded on three sides by water sails under the radar.

In the last 25 years or so, Norfolk, one of seven cities in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia also known as Tidewater, has worked to improve its infrastructure and image to embrace tourists. The once shabby downtown has been transformed into an area with waterfront parks, hotels, museum, cruise ship dock, and historic walking trail.

A light rail system to take locals and visitors around the city and eventually to Virginia Beach is nearing completion. The up-to-date airport is easy to navigate and lushly landscaped. And scattered about the city are dozens of mermaid sculptures painted or decorated to correspond with the business plaza or public space they occupy -- all part of a public art and branding project the city instituted in 2000.

What a visitor to Norfolk finds is an attractive, welcoming, and prideful city with a thriving dining and art scene, a penchant for waterfront festivals, a love for its naval heritage, and many free or low cost options for entertainment concentrated in a pedestrian-friendly downtown. I visited in June on a subsidized press trip that coincided with Harborfest, a three-day outdoor festival.

Our small group took a tour on Segways along the brick sidewalks of the waterfront, where condos border the imposing Navy destroyer, USS Wisconsin. We navigated our two-wheeled vehicles to the historic Freemason district, with its grand homes and brick townhouses, iron fences, and crape myrtles in full bloom and got as far as The Ghent, a diverse neighborhood of cafes, funky shops, art galleries, and the Chrysler Museum of Art.

The art museum is a treasure. Car company heir Walter Chrysler, whose wife was from Norfolk, gave his vast collection to the museum in 1971. It covers 5,000 years and includes the work of several masters. We sped through some of the museum's 62 galleries on a tour

with chief curator Jeff Harrison. Chrysler "transformed a sleepy provincial museum to one of the great mid-sized museums in the country," said our host. The best part? Admission is free.

Aside from an impressive performing arts scene, Norfolk is host to more than 100 festivals annually, devoted to jazz, wine, the arts and more. The city stages about one per weekend from March to November. Many of them are free and held at 25-year-old Town Point Park, which had a \$12 million dollar renovation last year.

Harborfest, the largest outdoor festival in the Hampton Roads region, has been an institution for 34 years. It draws many to Norfolk's city center to pay homage to the tall ships, pleasure boats, tugboats and military vessels that make up the two-hour Parade of Sails. This year the culminating ship was the Arleigh-Burke class destroyer USS LaBoon, built at Bath Iron Works.

Harborfest brims with retail booths, crafters, and food carts. During the day, grab some shade and a glass of Virginia wine and enjoy the stilt walkers, canine competitors, and strolling characters at this clean and well-managed festival. Enjoy free live music after sundown. If this one is any indication of the others on the annual list, Norfolk knows how to throw a party.

Bordering Town Point Park is Nauticus, a 120,000 square-foot maritime and marine science museum with touch tanks, high-definition films, and hands-on activities. The USS Wisconsin, now owned by the city and permanently berthed next to Nauticus, is open to visitors with museum admission (\$9.50 to \$11.95).

A cruise of the miles-long harbor on a tour boat gets you a view of the magnitude and variety of the city's marine industry, including naval destroyers and aircraft carriers and freighters bound for Europe and China filled with coal from the mines of West Virginia. Yet a river can't be home to heavy industry and not pay the price of contamination. Efforts are under way to get the broad Elizabeth River "fishable and swimmable" by 2020. Those who want to dip in coastal waters head for Virginia Beach, 20 minutes away by car.

Norfolk is home to other worthy attractions, the Norfolk Botanical Garden and the Virginia Zoo among them. Something else Norfolk deserves credit for -- its commitment to convenient and cheap transportation for tourists. Hop on a free metro bus to get to various points along a two-mile route. Or flag down a golf-cart-like vehicle known as FRED (Free Ride Every Day). The vehicle will take you wherever you want to go downtown within 12 city blocks, for free, no tipping. Norfolk wants visitors, and it's finding creative ways to keep them coming.

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