

You Won't Believe the "New" Norfolk

by [Steve Cook](#)
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I was all set to do our annual May article on summer beach travel. You know, I was going to say something about there being lots of sand and sun and waves and all that. Trust me, it would have been a marvelous article. But before I could write it, something happened. I spent a few days in Norfolk.

First, a confession: When I received my invitation from Erin Goldmeier, media relations manager for [Visit Norfolk](#), to be part of a press trip, I was less than thrilled. About a dozen years ago, I lived in Hampton, and I used to drive over to

Norfolk looking for something fun to do. I spent many a day watching plastic grocery bags being blown down nearly deserted downtown streets by the almost continual breezes that come off the Elizabeth River. In my opinion, Norfolk was a dud.

If the city had not done a complete 180, you'd now be reading about how sandy the beaches are and how wet the water is in Virginia Beach. Instead, I'm dying to tell you about the "new" Norfolk, Virginia. The Norfolk that I visited this past March is not the same city that I remember from 12 years ago. This is a city filled with vibrancy and energy and nightlife and fun and virtually anything that you'd want to find in a vacation destination.

Now, I'm not going to tell you to forget the beach. Old habits die hard. And, indeed, I still love Virginia Beach. Whether it's the main resort strip or the quieter Sandbridge or Chic's beaches, Virginia Beach is a wonderful beach town. But, then, you already know that. What you might not know is that just a few minutes away, in my opinion, is one of the most exciting cities on the East Coast. I had to keep reminding myself where I was. It kind of felt like Baltimore, especially with the new and improved version of [Waterside](#). But, it was cleaner and more user friendly than Baltimore. It really is its own, unique city, and I think that if you'll take the time to check it out, you just might come away as impressed as I was.

Not only should you check out Norfolk at night, after your fun-filled day of sand and sun, but if you're staying at the beach for more than a couple of days, why not take one day and spend it in Norfolk.

Let me tell you about some of the highlights of my visit.

After checking into the [Sheraton Norfolk Waterside Hotel](#) (777 Waterside Dr.), and checking out my spacious room overlooking the lovely Elizabeth River, I walked over to meet the other travel writers at [The Main](#) (100 E. Main St.) — Norfolk's ultra-cool, super hip downtown Hilton Hotel, located at the corner of Main and Granby Streets. The last time I saw Granby Street, there was nothing to see. As I approached the Hilton, I kinda felt like Marty McFly coming Back to the Future! This area was bustling. The only thing that hadn't changed was the breeze.



The Main's Grain Rooftop Beer Garden overlooks the Elizabeth River.

I met my group in [Saltine](#), an absolutely gorgeous restaurant and raw bar on the first level of the hotel. The fresh seafood — and lots of it — beautifully displayed at the raw bar was the first thing that I saw upon entering. I always have been a sucker for a crab leg and raw oysters. Everything was as fresh and as tasty as it looked. I was especially fond of the she-crab soup and the excellent crab cake. If you visit Saltine between 5 and 7 p.m. on any weekday, oysters are just 50 cents each and the jumbo peel-and-eat shrimp are a buck.

After lunch, I took a tour of the hotel. I don't think there's a hotel in New York, Chicago or Las Vegas that rivals the opulence and uniqueness of The Main. The lobbies and public areas are a marvel, showcasing more than \$2 million worth of art, including a faux stairwell designed to simulate M.C. Escher's stairwell. Seriously, if you get anywhere near Norfolk, you need to pay this hotel a visit. On Wednesday night, I had the opportunity to visit the hotel's [Grain Rooftop Beer Garden](#). The outdoor patio, overlooking the river, was closed — 32-degree weather and 20-mile-per-hour breezes tend to do that. But, I can only imagine how much that joint will be jumping in the summertime. Grain offers more than 100 beers on tap, plus the full-service bar features a good selection of wines and craft cocktails. If you're a real wine lover, though, you'll probably opt for [Varia](#), an upscale Italian restaurant in the hotel. Their "wine studio" is filled with more than 100 hand-selected wines. More than 50 can be ordered by the glass.

I visited **NEON**, Norfolk’s art district, a couple of times during my stay. The name is an acronym for New Energy Of Norfolk, but there’s a lot more than energy. Passion and creativity also permeate this area. Long time cultural institutions, like the **Chrysler Museum of Art** and **Harrison Opera House**, anchor the District, while new art venues like **Glass Wheel Studio** and **Work I Release** provide artists a place to make, create and show.

There are plenty of excellent places to dine in NEON, too. The cuisine at **Nouvelle** (217 Grace St.) for example, is phenomenal. I had the fresh flounder with saffron rice and butternut squash. The flavors melded perfectly.



Although Todd Jurich’s Bistro menu highlights seafood, there’s something for every taste, from lamb and pork to unique salads.

I also enjoyed a great lunch at **Todd Jurich’s Bistro** (150 W. Main St.). Todd has been cooking in his downtown Norfolk restaurant for more than 25 years — long before the area became the cool, trendy neighborhood it is today. Fresh seafood is a menu highlight, but there’s also plenty of steak, lamb, pork and chicken options. My Mediterranean Salad was packed with fresh shrimp, calamari and anchovies.

I was not prepared to be impressed with **Fruitive** (1501 Colley St.), a “plant-based 100-percent-organic” restaurant in Norfolk’s cool Ghent neighborhood. They use the word organic a lot and as a longtime junk food junkie, I’m often

frightened by that word. But, I was pleasantly surprised. We started our breakfast with a refreshing beet juice cocktail. I hate beets, but I loved the cocktail. Next came a sampling of the charcoal lemonade. The jury's still out as to whether charcoal is good for you. Regardless, the drink was rather pleasant — totally unique. I ordered what was perhaps the most delicious breakfast dish I've had since my mother used to cook up her unorganic flaked fish on toast. The avocado herb toast featured flax and spelt bread topped with avocado, basil pesto mayo, oregano, sea salt and black pepper. It was simple and simply amazing.

I did more than eat, however. For instance, I visited the [Chrysler Museum of Art](#) (1 Memorial Place). Who knew that the son of the car company founder was such an art collector? Not I. I have to admit, it was quite a thrill — even for someone who really doesn't know art — to be standing about six inches from an original Renoir. Even if you only have an hour or so to visit, here are two things to know. It's all free, and they have one of America's top glass art collections. If that doesn't thrill you, just go take a look.

[Norfolk Botanical Garden](#) (6700 Azalea Garden Rd.) is another great spot, especially to take the kids. It provides 175 acres of roses, camellias and crape myrtles, as well as a very popular Butterfly House and a three-acre Children's Garden.

Time didn't permit me to do all that I wanted, but I'm anxious to go back and visit Waterside, Nauticus and the Battleship Wisconsin. I also want to see the zoo. Discover all the wonder that the city has to offer at [VisitNorfolk.com](#). Or better yet, visit Norfolk for yourself. You'll make a new discovery at every turn, and you may even find that there is so much to do and to see and to taste that next year you may try to squeeze in some time to get to the beach while vacationing in Norfolk.