

New England's jewel

Portsmouth has it all: charm, brew pubs and family fun

Rochelle Lash

Postmedia News

Saturday, August 07, 2010

The quaint New Hampshire town of Portsmouth is so entertaining a destination, it's like a theme park -- but a dignified theme park that focuses on the arts, history and a gracious lifestyle.

Forget the image of a brassy tourist trap with carousels and arcades. Portsmouth, with a population of 21,000, has a vibrant culinary scene, a busy cultural calendar and 400 years of seafarers lore retold in an engaging way.

Named one of America's "prettiest towns" by ForbesTraveler.com, Portsmouth has as its core a charming neighbourhood of 19th-century brick buildings and vintage cobblestone streets lit with black lanterns. Most visitors start at Market Square, where cafés, brew pubs and boutiques advertise with hand-painted signs, not neon signs or billboards. Plus, there is the attraction of shopping in New Hampshire, which has no sales tax.

In Portsmouth, you're never far from water, a big part of the charm and postcard-pretty scenery. The Piscataqua River runs through town and the Atlantic Ocean is less than five kilometres away.

With all the bustle of an authentic New England port, the town's harbourfront is a great place to get the local flavour in a peaceful setting. Buy a Dutch chocolate cone at Annabelle's Natural Ice Cream, settle on a park bench in Prescott Park, and watch the lobster boats, sailboats and tugboats.

To get some insider information, take the Portsmouth Harbour Trail Tour, a one-hour guided visit to historic houses and the riverfront, highlighted by tales of George Washington and Paul Revere, both of whom passed through town.

If transportation reflects the personality of a community, Portsmouth is a kind and gentle place. It is an eminently walkable town. Visitors who come to dine or shop around Market Square are encouraged to stash their cars at a parking garage on Hanover Street and enjoy the scene on foot.

For an adventure on the high seas, old-style steamships take cruises into the Atlantic to the mysterious Isles of Shoals. It was here, an archipelago nine kilometres offshore, where settlers of the 1600s first fished for cod and lobster.

In summer, one of Portsmouth's great attributes is that it's the gateway to a 28-kilometre stretch of beach that runs south along the Atlantic Ocean through Rye, Seabrook and Hampton. This is New Hampshire's Seacoast Region, less well-known, but every bit as wet, salty, wavy and thrilling as the beaches of Maine and Massachusetts.

You can rent bikes at Papa Wheelies on Islington Street and head for the oceanfront cycling route.

Another way to travel is the Coast Trolley, the antique-style shuttle bus that cruises around town with hop-on, hop-off rides that cost \$1 to \$3.

Portsmouth loves kids so much, even the prestigious annual Prescott Park Arts Festival has an exceptional repertoire of culture for youngsters. One of the musicals this year is

Peter Pan, and the warmup act

before the curtain rises is a troupe of puppets. The festival takes place outdoors from June to September in the harbourfront park, and events are free, although a donation of a few dollars is

suggested.

Next door to Prescott Park is Portsmouth's best-known historic site, Strawberry Banke, where history comes alive in a recreated old-time village. There are garden tours, gift shops and lore about George Washington and Paul Revere. Each building shows a slice of life from a bygone era, with costumed actors playing blacksmiths, cooks and weavers at work.

The Art 'Round Town gallery tour gives Portsmouth a slick, big-city, stylish feel. The walkabout visits about six downtown galleries from 5 to 8 p.m. on the first Friday of every month. The wine flows and art lovers are treated to a variety of multimedia works that range from local to international, and traditional to avant garde. The creativity spills onto the street, where sidewalk artists and street musicians amuse strollers.

The Sheraton Portsmouth Harborside Hotel is so family-friendly it permits guests to bring along the family dog at no charge. The Harborside is a big, bright and spacious hotel with a great location overlooking the port, and lots of conveniences like an indoor swimming pool, babysitting and children's menus.

With the Family Togetherness Package, you can sleep up to five in a two-bedroom townhouse that costs \$209 U.S. per night and includes in-house movies and kids' perks. Or you can look into the Birthday Package, where you pay a rate starting a \$199 U.S. for your first night and an amount equal to the year of your birth for your second night. The older you are, the better this works. If you were born in 1955, you pay \$55 for the second night.

If you go

Getting there: Portsmouth, New Hampshire, is a seven-hour drive from Ottawa. Drive to Montreal. From there, take Highways 10, 35 and 133 to the U.S. border, then Highways 89 and 93 south to Route 101 east. Then take Highway 95 north to Exit 7.

Things to do: Many attractions are free. The Harbour Trail Tour costs \$5 to \$10 and is free for children younger than eight. Strawberry Banke costs \$7 to \$15. Children younger than eight get in free.

Where to stay: Sheraton Portsmouth Harborside Hotel:

250 Market St., Portsmouth, N.H.;

1-866-716-8120, 1-603-431-2300. Discounts of up to 15 per cent when you reserve 14 days in advance.

More information: Portsmouth Visitors' Center, 1-603-610-5510, www.portsmouthchamber.org

www.strawberrybanke.org, www.arroundtown.org and www.jazzmouth.org.