

VIRGINIA

Going nautical in Norfolk

Harbour sights include yachts, battleships, tall ships and more



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Yachts, battleships, tall ships in Norfolk, Va.

IMAGE: 1 OF 6



A ship's helm with Norfolk yachts as a backdrop. LORI KNOWLES/Special to QMI Agency

The time to tour the docks of Norfolk, Va., is 7 a.m. on a summer morning, just as the yachtsmen and women are brewing coffee, flipping eggs, stirring grits, searing bacon. It's dangerous to make the tour feeling hungry, but it's worth it. The sun at this hour lights the unfurled sails a pale yellow. The breeze -- as lulling as a warm bath -- makes the masts' halyards tinkle and flutter. Waves lick the ships' hulls. There's an ocean of music in the air. It's hard to believe there's all this southern comfort at the heart of a busy American city.

Norfolk (or if you're local: NAH-fek) is a family friendly coastal community 27 km west of Virginia Beach at an especially deep part of the Elizabeth River. The river, which snakes in from Chesapeake Bay -- and beyond that, the Atlantic Ocean -- was named after Princess Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of King James I who is the namesake for Norfolk's original settlement, Jamestown. It is here in the 1600s that Britain's Royal Navy sailed inland from Chesapeake Bay looking for a safe place to anchor its ships and establish a trading harbour. Norfolk, as it is now called, has been busy with the navy, shipbuilding and trading ever since.

These days the Norfolk harbour is as nautical as ever. Pleasure boats line its piers. Paddlewheeled ferries and water taxis shuttle people to and fro. There's a massive shipyard just across the way. The U.S. navy's enormous Norfolk Naval Station

is only minutes down river. And at the heart of the community -- at the point where the city's floodgates are situated and the river meets the downtown streets -- looms Battleship Wisconsin, now a naval museum.

An early morning tour can begin at the Sheraton Norfolk Waterside Hotel, whose balconies overlook the multifaceted shipbuilding and repairing facility of Newport News, just across the river. Kids could wile away an hour watching the tugboats push and pull aircraft carriers and naval frigates three times the size of a football field. They jockey the massive steel structures into position, slide them into their substantial slips, tie them off and voila ... they're ready to be serviced.

Next, Norfolk's winding waterfront path leads past the yachts and sailboats resting in port. Town Point Park, where locals picnic during the lunch hour, has a main stage featuring major southern talent, including Bruce Hornsby and Colbie Caillat. Festivals -- Cajun, crab, Caribbean, wine, fireworks and children's -- happen here all summer. The annual Norfolk Harborfest -- a June event -- welcomes tall ships from around the world; families are free to tour the ships, spin the helms, hoist the sails, even swab the decks. One local tall ship, the American Rover, offers sailing tours April through November.

A little farther along and anchoring Norfolk's tourism is Nauticus, home to Hampton Roads Naval Museum, an aquarium, and Battleship Wisconsin. The Wisconsin, one of the last and largest battleships built by the U.S. navy, saw action off the Japanese coast in World War II and later during the Korean War. It is open daily for tours.

Perhaps one of the most moving of U.S. war memorials is only steps away from the Wisconsin at Town Point Park. The Armed Forces Memorial is a collection of 20 cast- bronze tablets bearing inscriptions of letters written home by soldiers only days before they lost their lives in battle. These haunting letters, dating as far back as the Civil War, and World Wars I and II, appear as thin sheets of paper scattered across the ground, as if blown by the sea wind. Families can spend up to an hour reading these soldiers' hopes and dreams for their lost futures; it is impossible not to be touched.

In sharp contrast and only minutes down river is Norfolk Naval Station, one of America's largest naval bases. Water and land tours of this 1,740-hectare complex are offered regularly but, as the home-port of many U.S. navy aircraft carriers, submarines and destroyers used currently in the Gulf, photos are prohibited.

Naval officers dressed in smart white uniforms walk all over the base; there are helicopters, jets, Tomcats and F18 Hornets everywhere you look. Supply ships, known as "floating Walmarts" are moored at the docks. There's a golf course, a gym, mess halls, barracks and two McDonalds on the base -- one of them is the second busiest fast food restaurant in the U.S., second only to the McDonald's in New York's Times Square!

A visit to Norfolk is capped off nicely with a stop at Doumar's dairy and diner (the original owner is credited with inventing the ice-cream cone). As the story goes, Abe Doumar set up his waffle-maker next to an ice-cream vendor at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Abe figured out a way to shape the waffle into a cone, and persuaded the ice-cream seller to place a scoop inside -- the rest is history. Abe's nephew -- 90-something Al Doumar, whose hat says "Big Al" -- can still be spotted outside Doumar's daily all year round. His job? Making ice cream cones.

For more information on both nautical and ice-cream tours of Norfolk, see VisitNorfolkToday.com.

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