



A scene from the Seacoast Repertory Theatre presentation of *Chicago*, on until August 26

Water Country, musical theatre and fine dining highlights in historic Portsmouth

By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

PORTSMOUTH, NH — For years I have heard people speak glowingly about Portsmouth, New Hampshire (<http://www.portsmouthnh.com>), a city of roughly 21,000 people that sits near the mouth of the Piscataqua River, which divides New Hampshire and Maine. Settled in 1623, Portsmouth claims to be the nation's third-oldest city. It served as a focal point on the Eastern seaboard until the late 1800s when rail travel did in the shipping industry. John Paul Jones' ship *The Ranger* was built in Portsmouth, and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard (which lies across the river in Maine) was established in 1800 as the country's first of its kind.

The geographic location, historic past and cultural strength of Portsmouth regularly lands it on various "best places to live" lists. *Prevention Magazine* named Portsmouth one of the top 100 walking cities in the America for 2008. The region as whole is noted for its many restaurants, attractions and shopping opportunities, which include downtown Portsmouth, outlet malls in

nearby Kittery, Maine, as well as the large Fox Run Mall in Newington.

Funky shops, elegant inns, varied restaurants and fun clubs make Portsmouth's historic brick and cobblestone downtown one of Northern New England's most popular tourist destinations. Anywhere you land in downtown Portsmouth, you're never more than a 10-minute walk from your diversion of choice. From early summer right through the dead of winter, people stroll the narrow, colorful streets, watch the tugboats guide huge freighters out of the harbor, take in free outdoor by-the-sea performances at scenic Prescott Park, or just people watch in Market Square over a cup of high-octane coffee. Twice a year - Market Square Day in June and First Night Portsmouth on New Year's Eve - the quaint downtown becomes a giant pedestrian mall dotted with street performers, vendors, musicians, and parades, and always, lots and lots of food.

There's a lot to do in Portsmouth besides eating and shopping. Music fans can hear live bands in downtown clubs. Local theaters and the non-profit Prescott Park Arts Festival produce plays throughout the year. The historic Music Hall

attracts nationally prominent performers. Local cinemas feature hard-to-find independent flicks.

The beaches of Rye, North Hampton and Hampton in New Hampshire and York/Ogunquit in Maine are a short drive out of Portsmouth. Boat cruises, deep-sea fishing trips and whale watches run daily from Portsmouth and Rye harbors during the warm weather.

Portsmouth is steeped in history. The Strawberry Banke Museum and historic mansion tours replicate life in Portsmouth throughout its 300-plus-year history. There are many different tours in Portsmouth including: the Black Heritage Trail; Ghostly Lighthouse Walk; Historic Portsmouth Legends and Ghost Walk; and the Portsmouth Harbour Trail featuring 10 National Historic Landmark buildings.

Portsmouth is intricately tied to its maritime history and working seaport. Summer visitors are missing out if they do not take a cruise out to the Isles of Shoals, nine miles off the coast, or experience a kayak tour. The white sandy beaches from New Castle to Hampton are a traditional summer destination for many Canadians and those from around New England and farther.

Visit portsmouthchamber.org and click on the

downloadable Seacoast Guide for pictures, lists of hotels, restaurants, shops, historic homes, calendar of events, attractions, activities and a map of the downtown that might help you get the lay of the land.

Take my advice and stay in nearby Dover, a mere 15 to 20 minute drive from Portsmouth via Highway 16. The hotels in Portsmouth are overpriced.

A trip to Portsmouth during the summer months is certainly not complete without visiting Water Country (www.watercountry.com). This is New England's largest water park, featuring signature thrill rides for a full day of fun for the entire family. Situated at 2300 Lafayette Road, daily admission is \$37 for those 48 inches or taller and \$24.99 for those under that height and seniors. Children two years old and under enter free.

Water Country is one of the few amusement parks in the US to allow and encourages its guests to bring picnic lunches into the park. A number of large picnic areas are available for free at various points throughout the park so guests can eat without having to leave. Owned by Palace Entertainment, Water Country tests the limits on Double Geronimo or Thunder Falls and allows one to take a break in the relaxing Adventure River. The slide we liked the best is called the Screamer. It is lightning fast, but too quick for one to be scared by the steep drop.

There are over 26 acres of fun here. We went on a busy Sunday, opting for the preferred parking option (\$15). This represented a very short walk to the front entrance. We rented a locker, which had plenty of room for the three of us to store all of our gear. The wait in line for different slides was not exceptionally long. Staff here are on the ball and take all safety precautions necessary.

The newest attraction this year is Dr. Von Dark's "Tunnel of Terror," the first water ride of its kind in New England. Two people at a time descend in a two-person tube into a twisting 40-foot plunge through a totally enclosed, totally dark tunnel. Along the way, a wicked tornado funnel leaves your head spinning and your fears in your throat! It's a 300 foot trip into the dark side of thrills, their website reads.

The park does pay close attention to guests with special needs. I saw many people in wheelchairs the day of our visit. Pathways leading to every part of the venue are very

much wheelchair accessible.

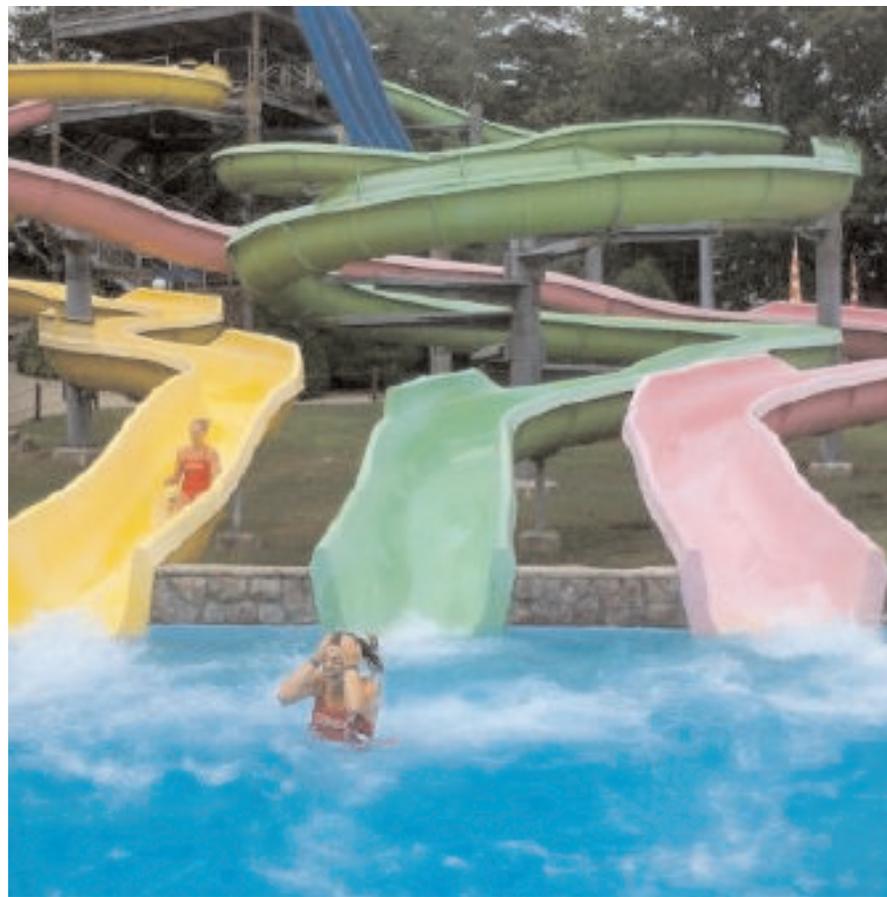
Says Marketing Manager Danielle Barry: "We've had guests with physical limitations who were unable to enjoy certain attractions in the park with our standard ride tubes, so for these guests we allow them to use a 'double tube' to comfortably accommodate their needs where safely permissible to do so such as the Wavepool, Adventure River and the Whirlpool. We have some pools with a sloped entrance that will allow a guest in a wheelchair to enter the water axel deep – at that point they are submerged enough that they can easily transition from their chair to a tube."

You can rent cabanas here, available for up to eight people. Guests with special needs may contact Guest Relations at (603) 427-1112 for information regarding admission, locker accessibility, and wheelchair usage.

We were fortunate to be in town recently when the musical Chicago was playing at the Seacoast Repertory Theatre (www.seacoastrep.org), located 125 Bow Street and better known as the Rep.

The Rep is a not-for-profit arts and educational institution and has been in business since 1988. Until the 1970s the facility actually served as the warehouse for the Portsmouth Brewing Company. This is the Seacoast's only professional, year-round live theater. It is dedicated to enlightening and entertaining the broadest possible audience through professional Main Stage productions and programs that expose all ages to the experience of live theatre. The Rep's Main Stage season selections blend musical and drama, the familiar and the classic-to-be, the thought provoking and the just plain fun. In addition to this, the Rep supports engagement at all age levels through hands-on programming and performances designed to entertain the very young.

Locally and regionally, I am told, people plan their summers around their productions and travel to the Seacoast to experience live theatre. In the winter its year-round subscribers engage in a dialogue around compelling and high quality work including packed pre-show symposiums and post-show discussions. The local community has ownership of the theatre as a vital component of its social fabric and the transient community supports the theatre for the dynamic, provocative and yet entertaining element to their summers and week-



Water Country remains open until Labour Day weekend.

ends.

The presentation we saw of Chicago was first class, featuring an excellent cast, great sound and terrific use of a small stage space. It continues there until August 26. I loved the cozy layout of this oval theatre. There is truly not a bad seat in the house. Artistic Director Craig Faulkner opened the show with some words of welcome. He even sold snacks at intermission, interacting with the audience. There are clearly many regulars here, but this is also a popular spot for tourists.

Over the past two and a half decades, more than 300 Main Stage and youth productions have been presented. Chicago had been preceded this season by Ain't Misbehavin', Things We Do For Love and the Full Monty.

With more than 40 restaurants in downtown alone, Portsmouth is one of the eating capitals of New England.

The perfect spot for a pre-show dinner turned out to be the Portsmouth Oar House (www.portsmouthoarhouse.com), located at 55 Ceres Street in the historic Merchant's Row building at the edge of Portsmouth's old harbor. This spot serves fine food in a setting filled with mementos of the city's long and proud maritime heritage and features live music inside on Thursdays through Saturdays. The waterfront deck is open in summer and there is on-site valet parking. This turned out to be a real

bonus for us. We were able to leave our car here for the evening and walk a few minutes down the street to the Rep.

We were thrilled to see one of our favorite New England dishes, the Lazy Man's Lobster Pie, on the menu. The seven ounce Maine lobster, completely cut up, featured sherry butter and seasoned crumbs. Owner Raymond Guerin takes pride in the many appetizing choices available. The Lobster Bisque turned out to be a delicious appetizer as did the Caesar and Caprese salads. As for the homemade desserts, do not leave without trying the key lime pie. You can also sample shrimp, grilled pizza, a variety of seafood options (pan seared salmon, broiled Atlantic Haddock, scallops) as well as meat and poultry dishes.

The Oar House is located in Portsmouth's Old Harbour area, which in the late 1700s and early 1800s was a thriving seaport. In December, 1802, 120 buildings burned in Portsmouth's most disastrous fire, including the wooden mercantile structures that occupied the restaurant site. The citizens of Portsmouth rebuilt almost immediately, in the early months of 1803, using brick to eliminate future fire hazards. The buildings on Ceres Street, including the one now occupied by the Oar House, were constructed at this time. Owner Raymond Guerin has many historical photos on the wall of historical ships in Portsmouth's history.