

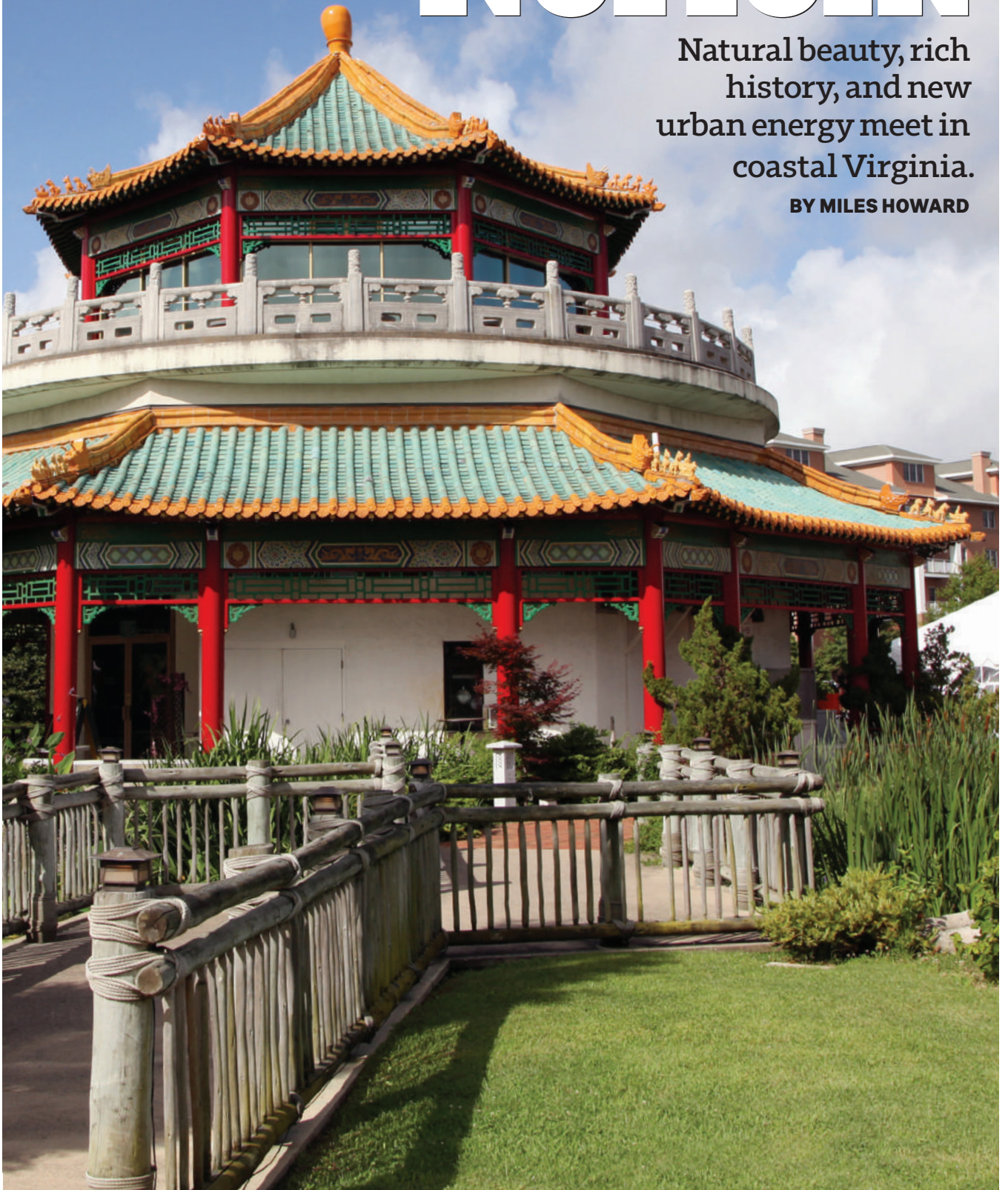
Pagoda and
Oriental Garden

THE CITY YOU'RE MISSING

Norfolk

Natural beauty, rich
history, and new
urban energy meet in
coastal Virginia.

BY MILES HOWARD





T

he floor is on fire. Young people festooned with glow sticks are splashing flammable liquid on the concrete deck of the Chrysler Museum Glass Studio, spelling out words and setting them alight. From the corner, a guitar-and-drums two-piece fills the room with music. Partygoers mill around the room and sip wine as a

mustached, older man uses small hammers to shape a piece of hot, pliable glass into a serpentine dragon. The fires of the glass forge cast dancing shadows on the walls of the dimly lit space.

It's the kickoff for Norfolk's NEON Festival, which highlights the city's arts district with creative showcases and pop-up galleries. This particular soiree is billed as a "happening," a throwback to the parties-slash-performance art events of the 1960s, when scenesters would gather to play music, make art, and freak out. But Norfolk's spin on the happening is less concerned with hippies expanding their consciousness. It's more about celebrating the city's sense of community and connecting people from all walks of life. I bump shoulders with creative types but also find myself slipping into conversations with a woman who works as a climate resilience

strategist, and with a marketing professional who found his way here after many years in Costa Rica's resort circuit.

When I left Boston to spend a few crisp days meandering and munching around Norfolk, I expected a mid-Atlantic mirror image of my hometown, a place where, as the writer George Packer once observed, "history has already happened." I knew I would find battleships and monuments. Norfolk, after all, is a historic Navy town, home to the biggest naval base in America. But this colorful night is sinking my preconceptions of the city, whose roots go back all the way to the country's colonial days. Norfolk has long opened itself to the world, welcoming people who bring their own unique heritage, culture, and creativity with them. At a certain point, the city established something of a civic tradition of diversity. History here is a canvas for sketching what comes next. This explains the energy I feel in the room, which is full of both newcomers and longtime locals. Together, they are telling the story of Norfolk. Over the next 72 hours, I'm going to listen in.

Power up

When I arrive in Norfolk at dusk, the sky is a faint purple. My first destination is the Sheraton Norfolk Waterside Hotel, which overlooks the Elizabeth River and a multitude of ships. The hotel is in the Waterside District, with its many restaurants and entertainment venues, where visitors can feast on local crab-stuffed flounder and then burn off the calories at silent disco parties. After checking into my room, I head back downstairs and step out into the cool evening air.

From there, it's on to the NEON District, a resurgent neighborhood full of new businesses and art spaces. (NEON is an acronym for "New Energy of Norfolk.") To get there, I walk through the city's gorgeous downtown along a winding red brick sidewalk. I pass bars, restaurants, and boutiques housed in old-fashioned brownstones. Colorful mermaid statues, an ode to the city's maritime history, seem to pop up on every corner. Tall trees that line the streets are flush with golden leaves, and I'm one of many out for a stroll this evening.

All of this is a testament to Norfolk's efforts to revitalize its city center. Toward the end of the 20th century, Norfolk began to focus on making its downtown more livable by connecting streets and public spaces to the waterfront and building pedestrian-friendly improvements. The NEON District, on the northern edge of downtown, is home to cultural heavyweights like the Chrysler Museum of Art and the Harrison Opera House. The city's official arts district also boasts galleries, pop-ups, and ample green space. And then there are the murals, which greet me as I set foot in the neighborhood.

Imagine a studio art class where the professor assigns every student a building, hands them a palette the size of an inner tube, and says, "Have fun." Every wall is emblazoned with brilliant colors, as well as kaleidoscopic patterns, aliens, giant eyeballs, and—my favorite—a swarm of bumblebees riding unicycles. The city's top marketing officer, Michael Brown, gives me a tour.

"As something of an art collector myself, I really got acquainted with Norfolk by simply coming down and wandering around here," Brown says as we wind around a corner and head into Sanctuary, a rock 'n' roll bar packed with young people and decorated with collage artwork. (We sit beside a piece mashing up Elvis Presley and *The Silence of the Lambs*.) Brown and I order barbecue chicken and organic black bean tacos. We take our food outside to the porch as a 20-something guy in a bright flannel shirt walks over and high-fives Brown. This is Hampton Boyer, a local skateboard wizard, illustrator, and muralist.

"There's a real culture of openness here," Boyer says. "When I was getting started with my art, I used to put on a suit, walk around downtown, and just go into offices and meet people. Eventually, things took off."

It's the first day of the NEON Festival, and Boyer is helping with a skateboarding showcase tomorrow. As



BLASTS FROM THE PAST

↑ Nauticus / Tour the battleship USS Wisconsin, launched during World War II, and dive deeper into Norfolk's long naval history at this maritime museum, which also features exhibits on marine science and aquatic life.

Attucks Theatre / A rich part of the city's African-American history, this landmark was opened by black entrepreneurs in 1919. It continues to host live shows and events, 100 years after it introduced audiences to performers like Duke Ellington and Mamie Smith.

Cannonball Trail / The self-guided tour begins at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, the only building left standing after the fires of the Revolutionary War. (The cannonball that remains in the church's wall gives the tour its name.)

Boyer heads off to get ready for the event, Brown and I finish our tacos and walk over to the happening at the glass studio. A cheer goes up when a fire is lit in the mouth of the dragon-like sculpture on the studio's roof. The resident DJ throws on a record, and within seconds, I see people of all ages and backgrounds dancing on the steps of the studio. And it's not even 8 p.m.

The art of roaming

I rise from bed at dawn the next morning and go for a jog along the Elizabeth River. I pass a hulking battleship, the USS Wisconsin, which first served during World

War II. Today, it's open for tours as the flagship attraction of the Nauticus maritime museum. Just beyond, I happen upon a walled Chinese garden, complete with fountains and a pagoda. This little oasis is a gateway to the dreamy neighborhood of West Freemason.

I run along cobblestone streets and past old homes, stunning specimens of Federal and Greek Revival architecture. West Freemason is a historic district, full of old-school beauty that preserves the neighborhood's landmark charm while nurturing newcomers. Near the edge of the district, I stumble across Cure Coffeehouse, a chic little cafe. Inside, there are people typing away on laptops and sketching on notepads. I even see someone knitting as they sip their latte. It's a boutique shop with a distinctly workshop-esque vibe.

Clad in neon spandex and sneakers, I'm in no state to visit my next stop, where I'll see art spanning centuries and continents, as well as one of the country's greatest collections of glass. So after finishing my macchiato and smashed avocado toast, I jog back to the hotel, clean up, and hop aboard The Tide, Virginia's first light rail system, which connects downtown to Norfolk State University and the Eastern Virginia Medical School. The train quickly ferries me to the entrance of the Chrysler Museum of Art.

After touring wings featuring art from ancient Egypt and the Mayan civilization, I encounter a contemporary gem, a painting of a young African-American man in streetwear fashion, posing with a lopsided wooden cross.



It's "St. Andrew" by Kehinde Wiley, the artist behind Barack Obama's presidential portrait, whose work often places contemporary people of color amid ornate backgrounds borrowed from traditional—and traditionally very white—European portraiture. Just as vivid is the museum's assortment of blown glass flowers, which fill me with wonder as well as a creeping paranoia that I'll slip on something and go crashing into one of the pedestals containing the sculpted glassworks. Thankfully, I make it through the gallery without breaking anything.

I leave the museum for a nice, aimless walk through the nearby neighborhood of Ghent. It's just as leafy, old-fashioned, and visually sumptuous as West Freemason, but with a bit more funk. Within half an hour, I've popped into a French home decor shop to look at ornamental doilies, investigated the menu at a cozy ramen bar, and considered buying a ticket for a gonzo horror movie at the local art house theater, the Naro. Then it hits me. I'm really hungry. All that art and exploration have primed me for a hearty multicourse meal. Norfolk is just the right place to be.

City of sustenance

Situated on the mid-Atlantic, sandwiched between the seasoned North and deep-fried South, Norfolk is a city where great food happens as naturally as the spring-time bloom. This becomes clear when I reach the border of Ghent and enter the Railroad District, where a long line of



A mural in the NEON District



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THE BEST FESTS

← **Harborfest** / From June 7–9, you'll find plenty of food and drink on land, as well as a two-hour boat parade on the Elizabeth River—they call it a “maritime festival” for a reason.

Hampton Roads Pride / The largest Pride festival in Virginia—and the only Pride boat parade in the country—takes place in June.

Virginia Arts Festival / This cultural heavyweight presents a full season of shows from performers like Kristin Chenoweth, comedian Leslie Jones, and jazz legend Ellis Marsalis.

people are waiting at a little box-shaped restaurant called Handsome Biscuit. I join the queue, and within 20 minutes, I'm biting into a fluffy burnt-orange sweet potato biscuit the size of a bocce ball. Packed with fried chicken, pickles, dijon mustard, and honey, it's a soul food-inspired masterpiece, as comforting as a friendly bear hug.

Handsome Biscuit is one of many new culinary enterprises that have mushroomed up around Norfolk over the last decade, part of a roster of restaurants that are striking in their diversity—which is fitting, in light of the city's history as a portal to the wide world. If my lunch at Handsome Biscuit exemplifies the *nouveau cuisine* scene, tonight's dinner will introduce me to one of Norfolk's pioneers of modern gourmet: Todd Jurich, the executive chef of Todd Jurich's Bistro, who's something of a celebrity to local gourmands and part of the reason Norfolk has such an outsized place on the culinary atlas.

I meet up with Jurich at his namesake restaurant on the waterfront. Jurich, the sleeves of his chef coat rolled up in a way that reminds me of a politician on the campaign trail, is leading a cooking class today. I join his students in the kitchen and learn to prepare some pumpkin crab soup. Since Jurich's classroom is a five-star restaurant, the next logical step is to sit down in the dining room and enjoy a bowl of our work, which arrives garnished with a small slice of cinnamon toast. Every creamy

spoonful is good enough to make me declare, “Whoa.” This is a great way to publicly out yourself as someone who doesn't often dine at five-star restaurants. Later, a final walk along the Elizabeth River, under the stars, proves the perfect closer for a day of digging into Norfolk's creativity, both artistic and edible. I've only scratched the surface, as I'll soon learn.

Come together

Norfolk is a city that appreciates the communal power of a public showcase. Each year, various festivals cater to an eclectic set of interests. There are festivals for gardeners, boat captains, jazz and Boogaloo fans, tattoo artists, children's storytellers, and, on the weekend of my visit, regional chefs and winemakers. The Commonwealth Coastal Classic (a gourmet cooking showcase) and the Town Point Virginia Wine Festival (exactly what it sounds like) are about to kick off next door to my hotel. Clouds have moved in and it's drizzling outside, fine enough weather for joining



the throngs and slurping down some local grilled oysters, along with other delicacies.

The Commonwealth Coastal Classic is brand new, launched by chef and food journalist Patrick Evans-Hylton to celebrate the culinary achievements of Virginia. After checking out the wine festival vendors and trying a few small sips

of blueberry wine from the Native American-owned Mattaponi Winery, I run into Evans-Hylton near

History here is a canvas for sketching what comes next.

the sprawling Chef's Table tent, where participating chefs from a bevy of regional restaurants are firing up grills and opening containers of veggies, meats, and seafood. Evans-Hylton is fascinated by Virginia's rich culinary history, down to an especially granular level. "The dock that we're standing by right now used to be the Trader Joe's of spices, herbs, and all kinds of goods," he says. The circuit tour through the food tent is crowded and fruitful—my

favorite small plate is the squid ink deviled eggs from The River and Rail's chef Aaron Deal—but the real highlight of the festival is the riverside oyster pop-up.

As cooks dish up steaming hot oysters, seasoned on the grill, a Virginia gospel quartet called The Glorylanders of the New River Valley perform from a nearby stage. I can't help but marvel at the improbable mix of ingredients here. Fresh oysters, big battleships, pattering rain, people with umbrellas milling around with glasses of wine, and a spirited rendition of "Roll, Jordan, Roll." It's as inspired as the happening I saw the other night—pure creativity at a diverse gathering.

When the rain picks up, I leave to check out another kind of show, this time by the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. Resident conductor JoAnn Falletta, a Grammy-winning globetrotter, is on hand for a performance of Maurice Ravel's "Boléro." It takes a bit of effort to squeeze into a formfitting suit after 48 hours of feasting and drinking, but I manage and make my way over to the gleaming Chrysler Hall.

As audience members take their seats in the orchestra section, I meet a young woman named April. Her husband, a professional musician, will be onstage with the rest of the orchestra in just a few minutes. April tells me that this will be one of his first performances here—the



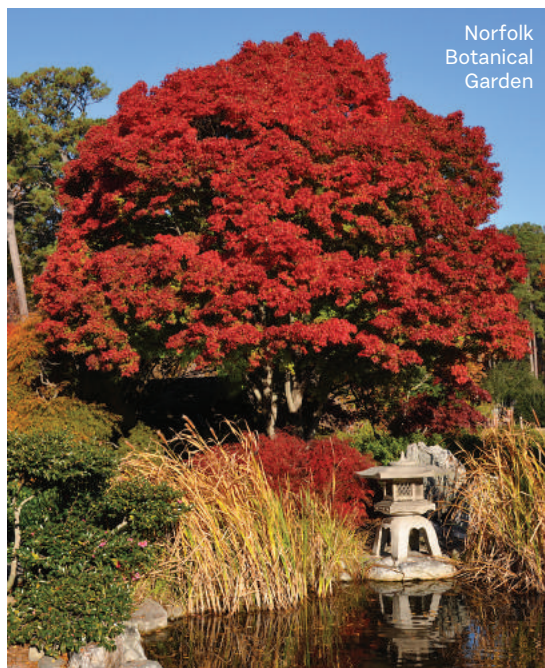
couple relocated to Norfolk within the past year, knowing little about the city. Judging from the warmth of April's voice, it sounds like they're staying.

All aboard

Sadly, my own migratory path leads back to the Northeast, and it's almost time to take off. But I've got a full morning left, and it's a stunning one, with blue skies, tuft-like clouds, and wind strong enough to spike your hair. So in the spirit of Norfolk's history as a port town—a place where merchants, sailors, metro planners, diplomats, chefs, musicians, and so many more have come in with the tide—I take a ride on the Elizabeth River.

The vessel is a sleek two-story yacht named the Virginia Elite, one of several local ships managed by Spirit Cruises. It's a small group of seafarers today, and as the ship pushes off from the docks, we head to the bar for Norfolk-style "oyster shooters," which are essentially bloody marys paired with fresh oysters. With a fiery kick and a nice salty aftertaste, they feel right for the setting.

We stand outside on the deck, gazing at the surf and several cranes on the shore, until brunch is served at a long table in the lower deck dining room. Our captain keeps the ship steady as we help ourselves to coffee, fresh pastries, vegetable frittata, and more. Tastes change, but some things—like a good seabound meal—never get old.



After we pull into port, I summon a car to take me to Norfolk International Airport. But instead of heading for the departures zone, I ask the driver to drop me off next door at the Norfolk Botanical Garden. The 175-acre preserve features thousands of flowers and plant species, as well as 60 themed gardens. And you can connect directly to the airport from the botanical gardens by taking a pathway that curves around a glassy and reflective lake before it reaches a gate into the airport parking lot. This is my Norfolk exit strategy.

The gardens are busy. As I walk past some azaleas, pulling my suitcase, I notice that many kids and adults poking around the brush are aiming their smartphones at the flowers. A new generation of nature photographers, I start to think, until a woman in a University of Virginia Cavaliers cap explains to me that today is Pokemon Go Day, and most of these folks are here to catch digital pocket monsters.

Some might shudder at the idea of turning masses of Pokemon fans loose on these gardens, but I can't resist smiling. The botanical gardens have been here for years, a piece of living history. And yet, new flora—and people—from near and far have taken root. The newcomers only add to the beauty of the landscape. What could be more Norfolk?

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