

# Exploring sites and sounds of NH's most walkable city

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PORTSMOUTH – My husband refuses to stay in bed and breakfasts. He thinks they're fussy and filled with knick-knacks, like stuffed ducks, grandmother's china and stenciled wall art.

**ONE-TANK TRIP** He doesn't want to speak in whispers, and he won't make

polite breakfast talk with strangers. He's happier staying in a Motel 6 and eating a doughnut for breakfast.

Not me. Give me a night out on the town and a gourmet breakfast.

I quote some cranky Mark Twain for him.

"The only way to keep your health is to eat what you don't want, drink what you don't like and do what you'd rather not."

That doesn't convince him to go to a bed and breakfast in Portsmouth.

"You need to listen to some blues," I say.

The Sidewalk Boys are playing at the Press Room that Wednesday night, and the 45-minute drive back and forth to our house on a weeknight was not appealing.

"We can walk to the Press Room," I tell him. "Stay until midnight."

He ponders that thought and soon agrees to a bed and breakfast that is walkable to the blues.

Twain never liked visiting Portsmouth much. He wrote about the Portsmouth of 1908: *A memorial museum of George Washington relics could not excite any considerable interest if it were located in that decayed town and the devotee had to get to it over the Boston and Maine.*

Today, Portsmouth is smooth and cultured and has been named New Hampshire's most walkable city. Twain would not recognize the place: spruced-up mansions next to boutique shops intermixed with more than 100 restaurants. Surrounded by a working harbor and ocean, it's a historical gem. Trademark tugboats sit in the Piscataqua like frozen gray and red sculptures as we drive

through Market Square, and Prescott Park is decorated in frosted pine and empty flowerbed.

The Governor's Inn is on a tree-lined street, just a 15-minute walk to the Press Room and 10 minutes to our favorite seafood place, Jumpin' Jay's. Built in 1917 as the home of New Hampshire Gov. Charles Dale, it is a perfect oasis for a winter stay.

We are greeted at the door the innkeepers' two friendly dogs. Maddy, a yellow Lab, wags her tail in unison with Sam, the larger black Lab, and they follow us as we go on a tour of the Georgian Colonial through a living room harboring a roaring fire, a garden room lit in soft lights and the dining room with its gleaming oak table and candles. As we pet Maddy and Sam, I know my own Lab, Buster, will be jealous the next day.

We stay in the Peacock Room, which is decorated in an Art Nouveau theme and has a mural of "The Lady and the Peacock" on the walls of our shower-for-two. With a queen-size bed covered in Frette linens and feather pillows, we will be spoiled for the night. An especially nice touch is a tiny refrigerator filled with complimentary bottled water, soda, juice and wine.

"Motel 6 won't give you this," I tell my husband.

He just opens the wine bottle and pours us each a glass.

If we weren't going out for dinner and music, I would've been happy staying in the elegantly comfortable room watching one of the 100 DVDs the inn provides to guests.

There's nothing better than walking to and from dinner in downtown Portsmouth. Even when it's hovering around 20 degrees and the wind is blowing strong off the Piscataqua River.

The city of Portsmouth is the second oldest in New Hampshire and was settled in 1623 as Strawberry Banke. You can still walk on cobblestones in parts of the city. Many of the historical mansions are open for tours, and as we walk down the back alleyways and iced sidewalks of Colonial Strawberry Banke, I



Courtesy photo by TOM COCCHIARO/GREATER PORTSMOUTH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

### A trio of tugboats float in the Piscataqua River.

stare into the windows of restored history and imagine the merchants and shop owners, think of how the fishermen and boat builders worked the tide and made their lives in this coastal town.

Twain would have liked this walk. As he stated in "A Tramp Abroad," *The charm of pedestrianism does not lie in the walking, or in the scenery, but in the talking. The walking is good to time the movement of the tongue by, and to keep the blood and the brain stirred up and active . . . but the supreme pleasure comes from the talk. It is no matter whether one talks wisdom or nonsense, the case is the same, the bulk of the enjoyment lies in the wagging of the gladsome jaw and the flapping of the sympathetic ear.*

We talk as we walk, bundled up in mittens and hats and scarves, and almost stroll past Jumpin' Jay's.

It's warm and candlelit inside with the smell of bread and spice. Soon, we're holding another glass of wine as we watch the darkened, empty streets

from our table. There is laughter and red cheeks and the clinking of glasses.

*Shut the door, Twain has written. Not that it lets in the cold but that it lets out the cozyness.*

Jumpin' Jays is, indeed, cozy.

At the Press Room, the Sidewalk Boys play banjo, mandolin, guitar and kick drum, and the crowd claps and sings along to many of their songs. I feel like a sailor or seafaring gal as I drink Guinness on tap and listen to that banjo ricochet its chords against the ancient

brick of the pub.

Twain loved the banjo. He wrote that the *piano may do for love-sick girls who lace themselves to skeletons, and lunch on chalk, pickles and slate pencils. But give me the banjo . . .*

In an essay for the San Francisco Dramatic Chronicle called "Enthusiastic Eloquence," he says that *banjo is the music that will come right home to you like a bad quarter, suffuse your system like strychnine whisky, go right through you like Bran-*

*dreth's pills, ramify your whole constitution like the measles, and break out on your hide like the pin-feather pimples on a picked goose, - when you want all this, just smash your piano, and invoke the glory-beaming banjo!*

I have to agree with Twain.

Built in 1925, the Press Room has been the pub to go to for traditional jazz, folk and blues. According to New England Folk Network, this building is one of the first fireproof buildings in Portsmouth. I'm glad that we won't catch on fire that evening, because the band is burning up the folk and blues. Their songs run the gamut of chunky bluegrass to lyrical folk, and we stay until the last set.

Walking home that night, the cool air feels good upon our flushed faces. The streets are vacant, and the Governor's Inn is warm. I'm thinking that Twain would like this inn as much as my husband has learned to. With feather pillows around our heads, we dream of an innkeeper breakfast and strong coffee sipped next to a morning fireplace.

As Twain so famously said about adventure in unlikely places: *Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.*

"Bed and breakfasts are not so bad," my husband says.

And this fact makes me smile.