

Portsmouth, England: A Rich Naval History

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Guest Contributor

There are many places in England that immediately spring to mind whenever you think of the top visitor attractions. London is usually at the top of most people's lists, followed closely behind by cities like Oxford, Cambridge, York and Stratford-upon-Avon. It's very difficult when you've got such a high caliber of cities available to make your way round to see other parts of a country and that's definitely been the case with us over the years. However, there's much more to England and it's about time we explored that, particularly as we've seen so much of other countries. So we set about correcting that, heading off to Portsmouth on the south coast.

Portsmouth's claim to fame lies in its location, as for many years, it was a vital naval port, helping to defend the country from the French and the Spanish. That's one reason why it's now home to the [Portsmouth Historic Dockyard](#), which has some of the country's most famous ships.

The major attraction here is HMS Victory, the flagship of Lord Nelson, who died during the battle of Trafalgar. Think you've heard those names before? That's probably because the country remembers him with his statue at Trafalgar Square in London, one of the popular stops for most tourists visiting the capital. Why was the battle so important that it's remembered all these years later? It changed the whole course of the Napoleonic wars between England and France and Spain, with the British seen as the masters of the sea for many years afterwards.

The HMS Victory dates from 1765 and you can only visit it by taking an hour long guided tour. It's been meticulously restored and looks absolutely stunning, although somehow it doesn't seem so stunning when you think about how many men would have been on board and their living conditions. Our guide explained some of that to us, including their food and drink rations and how they were punished for stepping out of line, and it wasn't pleasant. It was a fascinating contrast to the officers' quarters and particularly Lord Nelson's own living area, which included a sumptuous dining table, complete with fine china. Of course, all of it would be hastily packed away when they headed into the heat of battle and one of the neighboring museums included the chest that it was packed into.

The other highlight at the dockyard, the Mary Rose, is even older, dating from 1545, when it capsized on its maiden voyage just outside of

Portsmouth. The flagship of King Henry VIII, she lay at the bottom of the sea for the next four centuries before finally being recovered in 1982. Layers of silt had preserved her and she's in a remarkable state, considering what she's been through. Today, you visit her in her own building and view her from a gallery above where you can see the ship being preserved below at a constant temperature and with water being sprayed on to her. It's hoped that eventually visitors will be able to walk through the Mary Rose and, if they're able to raise the funding for that, it will be something worth seeing.

We've seen a lot of historic ships over the years, particularly Viking ships in Oslo, and this was something special. Perhaps it's the place it has in my heart, having seen the thing being raised from the sea when I was a child, but the viewing gallery had an air of quiet hush, as if everyone was humbled by what they saw in front of them.

It's not just the ship itself that you can visit, as over the years of excavation, literally thousands of artifacts have been brought to the surface, which are on display at a nearby museum. Standing there and looking at these items, it was impossible to think that they were more than 500 years old. The cannons looked brand new and things that you never would have imagined surviving that amount of time were on display in front of you, such as shoes. I somehow can't ever imagine today's footwear still being around in another few hundred years' time.

The marine theme continues just across the harbour in the neighboring town of Gosport, which is home to the [Royal Navy Submarine Museum](#). Once again, the highlights here are the submarines and, just like the dockyard, a guided tour is needed to get you on board HMS Alliance.

Built at the end of the Second World War, this submarine served in the Royal Navy for the next two decades, after which time she became a training base. Despite all those years of service, no missile was ever fired in conflict from her, which is quite something.

Elsewhere in the complex, you can see the Holland I, the Royal Navy's first submarine, which, just like the Mary Rose, sank just outside Portsmouth Harbour, only this was on its final voyage on the way to being broken up. Both vessels were raised from the seabed at around the same time and, considering that the submarine was on its last journey, it looks in a really good state. We walked in, both expecting to find a rotting hulk, but nothing could be further from the truth.

However, this was far from being the first submarine and the main exhibition building explains about the history of the submarine. The first one dates from the American Revolutionary War in 1776 and was

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used by David Bushnell in New York Harbor to blow up British warships.

Although Portsmouth has a rich maritime history, not everything to see and do here is water based. The city's undergone some major work in recent years, which have led to the opening of some new attractions, most notably the Spinnaker Tower, a 170 meter tall viewing platform, based on the design of a sail, hence the name. Overlooking Portsmouth Harbour, you can see across the water to Gosport - and on a good day to the Isle of Wight, which lies about six miles off the mainland. The city also stretches below you, including the massive Gunwharf Quays shopping complex where the town is based. It's a new out of town shopping mall, packed with discount designer names and is certainly worth a browse, as we picked up a few bargains during our visit there.

All in all, there's a lot to see and do in Portsmouth and we came away wondering why we'd left visiting the city for so many years. In all honestly, it's probably because there are just so many great places to pick from when it comes to visiting England. I guess it's like every country, you only head for the lesser known places when you've explored the most popular ones.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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