

New at the Beach

This family favorite in Virginia has more to offer than

ever. Come check it out. By Annette Thompson, photography Meg McKinney

It's time to return to Virginia Beach. If your memories revolve around crowded T-shirt shacks and gritty mom-and-pop motels, you're in for a big surprise. This vacation magnet (your grandparents may have met here!) now sports a fresh style. It's nudged the beach bum culture aside for upscale hotels and condos, good restaurants, fun shops, and sparkling high-rises.

Don't worry. You can still relax in flip-flops and cutoff jeans in most places. The oyster bars, beach bands, and miniature golf courses with silly dinosaurs still thrive. Meanwhile polished businesses have opened that show a better look. Here's our guide to the best. >>

Neptune, a 12-ton, 24-foot-tall bronze statue, looks out toward Virginia Beach's boardwalk at the 31st Street crossover.

Stay and Play A 3-mile row of high-rise hotels and condos overflows with sun-loving guests from Memorial Day to Labor Day. To the east of these tall blocks of lodging, a boardwalk and a separate bike path hug an amazingly wide stretch of flat silver beach. To the west, Atlantic Avenue, a four-lane thoroughfare, jams with cruising vacationers reveling in the colorful scene.

At first glance, Virginia Beach—the state's largest city—seems the same from year to year. Take a closer look for an entirely new and vibrant scene.

The crowds still flock here (Southwest's affordable flights arrive in Norfolk, just 20 minutes away). Others make the drive. Parking is easier with two new garages at 9th and 31st Streets. For only \$3 a day, the trolley delivers visitors to shops, restaurants, and their favorite public beach access.

Another constant is the stream of patrons at one of the country's most visited Dairy Queens at 17th Street Fishing Pier. But now you have choices. For a cool treat with a wider range of flavors and homemade taste, be a maverick and try Kohr Bros. Frozen Custard across the street.

Don't Miss the Beachfront Nightlife After sundown, the city heats up with more activity. Concerts fill parks between Atlantic Avenue and the beach (for the schedule, visit www.beachstreetusa.com). Meanwhile, entertainers—musicians, jugglers,

clowns, and comedians—perform on street corners too.

Major steps forward: On the north end of the beach, a gleaming new hotel adds swank and swing to the scene. The Hilton, at 31st Street and Atlantic Avenue, sports stylish guest rooms and an exquisite rooftop pool and bar, plus it sits adjacent to the Neptune Park band shell, home of free concerts.

Across town, the newly developed Town Center hosts blocks of brand name shopping and dining, a towering new Westin Hotel & Residences, and the Sandler Center for Performing Arts.

And if the weather doesn't cooperate for a day in the sun? Head to the Virginia Aquarium to see creatures native to the area. It's the perfect way to tie up your visit to the Tidewater.

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: The rooftop pool at Virginia Beach's Hilton Oceanfront blends into the view of the Atlantic. Catch 31 restaurant at the Hilton features dishes such as Salmon Carpetbagger and Dancing Shrimp. Hotels and condos line the boardwalk where visitors enjoy the wide, flat beach.



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Rent a surrey with the fringe on top from Cherie's Bicycle & Blade Rental to pedal up and down the boardwalk.

Visitors' Guide

WHERE TO STAY

- **Hilton Virginia Beach Oceanfront** sports fabulous views and remarkable dining. Rates from \$259. www.hiltonvb.com or (757) 213-3000.
- **Sheraton Virginia Beach**, a recently remodeled beachfront with pretty granite baths. Rates from \$209. www.sheratonvirginiabeach.com or (757) 425-9000.
- **The Sanctuary at False Cape**, with handsome condo units, sits 15 miles south of the resort area. Weekly rates from \$1,260. www.sanctuaryresortva.com or (757) 457-0050.
- **The Westin Virginia Beach Town Center** rises from this shopping area 8 miles from the beach. Rates from \$159 on weekends. www.starwoodhotels.com/westin or (757) 557-0550.

WHERE TO SHOP

- **The Shoppes at 31 Ocean** sit across the street from the Hilton. Go to **Jody's** for flavored popcorn. The best accessories shop in town is **The Globe** (pictured below), featuring linens from Provence and Murano glass jewelry. www.31ocean.com.
- **Town Center** offers name-brand shops such as **346 Brooks Brothers** and **Origins** and after-you've-shopped spots such as the **Funny Bone Comedy Club** and **Keagan's Irish Pub**. www.vabeachtowncenter.com.



WHERE TO DINE

- **Catch 31** at the Hilton attracts locals from the entire Hampton Roads area for seafood. You can dine outside by the fire pit for a casual meal with a sea breeze.
- Dress up for **Salacia**, an upscale seafood/steak house with impeccable service.
- **Terrapin** offers sophisticated dinners of local seafood, vegetables, and meats.
- Congregate in **Rudee Inlet** where two spots, Rudee's and Rockefeller's, welcome the day's end with libations and fresh food.
- **Sonoma Wine Bar & Bistro** (in the Town Center) mixes an after-work scene with small plates of appetizers, entrées, and the region's best wine list by the glass.
- Go to **Doc Taylor's** for breakfast and comfort food in a revamped bungalow. ●