



Pies and piers

PORTSMOUTH IS THE ONLY CITY IN ENGLAND WITH A GREATER POPULATION DENSITY THAN LONDON. IN THE BUSTLE OF THIS NAVAL PORT, CONTEMPORARY CULTURE MINGLES WITH HISTORICAL TREASURES CREATING AN ECLECTIC, AND ECCENTRIC, CITY OF CONTRASTS

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English coastal towns are different from other places. They just don't have the weather for it. But with a cold wind whipping through the clothing I layered on, the salty tang in the Portsmouth air evokes childhood memories of bone-achingly chilly dips in the ocean in early summer and sandwiches on the beach, crunchy with a fine coating of sand. And that was in Australia. I won't be dipping my toes in the freezing water here in any literal sense, but I'm about to discover that Portsmouth has more going for it than the deep, dark sea.

My local-living friend Andrew is keen to show me the best that Portsmouth has to offer. He explains that Portsmouth has the distinction of being the United Kingdom's only island city, on Portsea Island where the Solent strait joins the English Channel. On a clear day the Isle of Wight is visible. To illustrate the point, he gestures to a hovercraft lifting off to transport a chattering group of tourists.

We scale the heights of the Spinnaker Tower to see the city spread out below us. Shaped

like a sail billowing in the wind, the tower is the centrepiece of a harbour redevelopment project that has revitalised Gunwharf Quays, converting it into a trendy area tightly packed with retail outlets, restaurants and bars. On the observation platform, I slip my shoes off and stand on the central glass floor panel, testing my body's ability to deal with vertigo as I gaze at the supporting beams.

A quick bite of creative Latin cuisine at Las Iguanas settles my stomach and we walk the harbour, skirting the still-operating naval base, home to the oldest dry dock in the world and the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. We press on to the bronze statue depicting a mudlark in front of the majestic *HMS Warrior*, Britain's first iron-hulled warship. In olden times, children in Portsmouth would wade into the mudflats and entreat passers-by to throw coins. As the seagulls caw, the breeze carries the voices of long ago.

Sitting on the southern point of the island is Southsea Castle, less a ramparts-and-

drawbridge attraction, and more a stolid fort squatting on a hill, spying on incoming cruise ships. A pleasant stroll along the pebble beach, with a plethora of flat stones perfect for skimming over the water between waves, takes us to the seaside highlight, the South Parade Pier. The history of the pier is eventful – it was partly dismantled during the Second World War to hinder invasion and has caught fire several times, including during filming of the 1970s rock opera *Tommy*. The pier retains a sense of faded grandeur, a photographer's delight against its ocean backdrop as the sun sinks under its pylons.

With grumbling stomachs, we race towards dinner at Pie & Vinyl. An eclectic combination greets us – a record store matched with one of England's favourite comfort foods; the pie. A Pieminister Moo pie made of British beef steak and fresh herbs in rich gravy with creamy mash, and minty mushy peas offers curative benefits. Or is that the fresh sea air? 🍷