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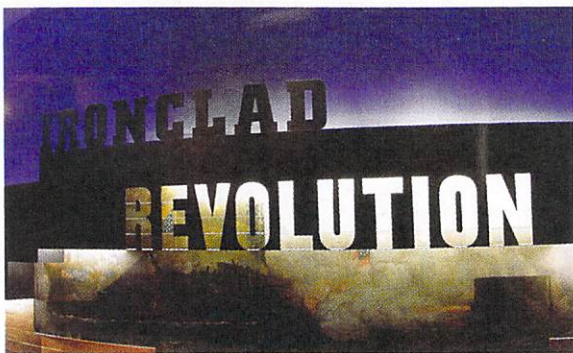
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Newport News takes its place among the commonwealth's wide array of historical, cultural and recreational treasures.

BY MONICA REID OLSON



The Virginia Living Museum (top) is home to more than 250 wildlife species native to the commonwealth, including loggerhead turtles. The exhibition "Ironclad Revolution" (above) is part of the USS Monitor Center inside the Mariners' Museum.

Virginia has a mind-boggling abundance of historical sites, monuments, museums and parks. Some—Colonial Williamsburg, Historic Jamestown and the presidential estates Mount Vernon and Monticello, to name a few—are so popular, they tend to overshadow the state's other riches.

For an experience off the beaten path, Newport News is the place.

The city offers easy access to several major East Coast cities—Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia—as well as the popular Virginia tourist towns of Williamsburg, Norfolk and Virginia Beach. But Newport News has its own diversions worth discovering.

The Mariners' Museum

Folks with an inkling of interest in maritime history need to put the sprawling Mariners' Museum on their itinerary. At least half a day should be dedicated to exploring this magnificent place.

One of the museum's crown jewels is the USS Monitor Center, home of the recovered Civil War ironclad that sank along the North Carolina coast during a storm in 1862. *USS Monitor* was the first ironclad commissioned by the Union Navy and played a significant role in the 1862 Battle of Hampton Roads. *Monitor's* innovative revolving gun turret distinguished it among battleships of the day.

USS Monitor Center is more than a display space; it's an active reclamation center where visitors can see recovered pieces of the ironclad—such as the gun carriages, Dahlgren guns, turret and engine—being conserved in their current condition to stop further deterioration. Video footage of the recovery site can be viewed, and there's a full-size replica of the ship's deck and propeller on display.

Also not to be missed is the popular Miniature Ships of August and Winnifred Crabtree Gallery, which holds 16 vessels created by world-famous model maker August F. Crabtree. Impeccably detailed, Crabtree's miniatures tell the story of boatbuilding through the centuries.

Life-size exhibits (top) are found throughout the U.S. Army Transportation Museum. Miniature ships (middle) illustrate the history of shipbuilding at the Mariners' Museum. Visitors look over a two-story replica of a waterfall (bottom) at the Virginia Living Museum.

Drawings of the ships and the tools Crabtree used to create these stunning works of art complete the exhibit.

The International Small Craft Center features almost 150 boats from around the world, showcasing their diversity. Examples include a homemade vessel that carried Cuban refugees, a Venetian gondola and racing craft. The gallery Abandon Ship takes a look at what it's like to be lost at sea. Guests experience stories of people who have lived through the initial sinking and then what it took to survive adrift at sea. Depictions of daring rescues, including actual audio transmissions, offer a welcome relief to an unnerving exhibition.

The remaining permanent galleries touch upon sea exploration, the U.S. Navy, steamships, and the life and career of naval hero Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson.

Virginia Living Museum

Celebrating the state's natural beauty, the Virginia Living Museum is home to more than 250 wildlife species native to the commonwealth. Loggerhead turtles, spider crabs, alligators, flying squirrels, otters, red wolves and eagles are just some of the wildlife on display in both indoor and outdoor exhibits.

Inside, museumgoers will find areas dedicated to the mountains, coastal plains, cypress swamp and underground environs. There are plenty of activities for children, including hands-on activities in the Discovery Center, a touch tank with a variety of underwater creatures, and the recently opened Wild & Well, a permanent exhibit that teaches children how museum staff take care of their charges.

Outside, a three-quarter-mile wooden boardwalk leads to exhibits featuring foxes, coyotes, bobcats, bald eagles, red wolves, otters and beavers to name a few. There's also the greenhouse, native plant garden, children's play area, a play fossil dig, an amphitheater and an aviary.

Throughout the year, the museum displays temporary exhibits. Through Sept. 7, "Frogs! A Chorus of Colors" will feature more than 70 live frogs in various habitats. Interactive games and displays will teach visitors about frogs' biology, their interactions with humans and how they adapt to changing environments.

Army Transport Museum

Set up as a means to educate soldiers, the U.S. Army Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis is a fascinating look at how troops and supplies are moved from place to place during wartime. The museum is a lesson in American history and ingenuity.

Exhibits cover the Revolutionary War through Afghanistan and Iraq, from an 18th-century Conestoga wagon that could carry up to 5 tons of cargo to machine-gun-equipped Up Armored HMMWVs built to withstand explosions from grenades and IEDs. An extensive portion of the museum is dedicated to Vietnam, and in the Korea section, visitors will swear they've walked onto the set of *M*A*S*H*. Outdoors, exhibits include various amphibious craft, helicopters and original railway cars from the Berlin duty train, which ran in Germany after World War II.

Among the huge vehicles are small exhibits that bring human stories to life, such as a World War I-era footlocker belonging to a soldier with the Transcontinental Motor Convoy. The soldier's service medal, plates, utensils and pin-ups are inside the locker.

Planning Your Trip

For more information on Newport News, contact the Newport News Tourism Development Office at (888) 493-7386 or www.newport-news.org. For vacation-planning assistance, contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel. **H&A**

Monica Reid Olson is web editor of Home & Away.

