

Thar she blows

Portsmouth is awash with more than maritime history, as **Chris Alden** discovered when he spent 48 hours in the city

A tour of Nelson's flagship can't be missed when you're visiting Portsmouth. Standing on the deck of HMS Victory when the weather is foul it feels as if you're out at sea although, as your guide will explain, you wouldn't want to exchange your cosy existence for life on board Victory in 1805 – unless you enjoy sleeping in a hammock, eating weevil-infested sea biscuits and being peppered with grapeshot from a French gun. The daily allowance of eight pints of beer and half a pint of rum might, however, be a measure of compensation.

Visitors to the Historic Dockyard can also see what is left of Henry VIII's favourite warship, the Mary Rose, whose starboard side was preserved in the Solent, guns still on deck, some loaded and ready to fire.

Also worth a visit is HMS Warrior, which moved under both steam and sail – a vast inverted castle, launched in 1860, where you can descend six decks to the engine rooms in the bowels of the vessel. If the weather is better than it was on my visit, take a boat tour to see the modern warships in the harbour.

Hairier than that even, is the viewing platform of the 170-metre Spinnaker Tower, opened in 2005, which – on a blowy, rainy day like today – is designed to shift from side to side.

"It's swaying a bit – you might get seasick," says the guide as I prepare to stride out on one of the most famous attractions of maritime Portsmouth.

Minutes later, my first step out to the platform is a "wow" moment. From up here, I've a bird's-eye view of Portsmouth harbour, from angry clouds



Flagship: take a tour of HMS Victory at Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard

over the Isle of Wight to the waves crashing onto Southsea esplanade and the masts of historic ships in port.

Then, as warned, I feel a wobble. It's not seasickness. I'm feeling the urge to go down, but not before I've walked on the tower's most famous feature – the largest glass floor in Europe, below which is only 100 metres of clear sky.

The Spinnaker Tower might be the adrenaline rush, but its beauty is that it is a focal point for visitors to Portsmouth, who spend hours or days wandering round the Historic Dockyard and maritime museums before discovering the pubs of Southsea and even a little literary history, too.

It's perhaps because life at sea was so tough that the citizens of Portsmouth, an island city, developed their reputation for a certain insularity of character – but walk around Southsea in the driving rain and you'll soon see the true friendliness of the locals.

Arriving 15 minutes early at the City Museum, I am ushered through to a room where I can wait for opening time and stay dry, too. Here, until March, there is an exhibition on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The creator of Sherlock Holmes, Doyle was a doctor and

sportsman, too, playing in goal for the team that became Portsmouth FC.

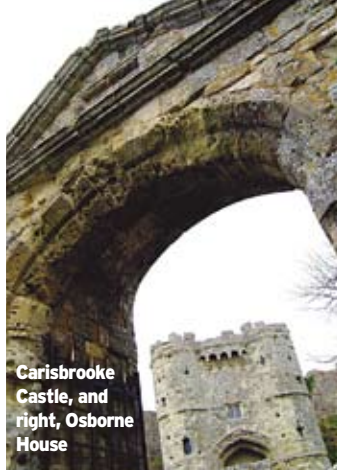
The welcome is also warm at The Retreat, a luxurious and highly recommended B&B. Here, you're only a stone's throw from the pubs and restaurants of Southsea. Do visit Great Southsea Street, where you'll find the Hole in the Wall, for real ale; and the India Arms, reopened last year, whose "tiffin bar" offers Indian food with a difference. There's also a new Georgian tea room – Storehouse 9 – due to open at the dockyard this year.

In the morning, you can follow the Millennium Trail around Old Portsmouth, visit the D-Day Museum, the Royal Marines Museum or the Royal Naval Museum in the Historic Dockyard.

I can't wait to come back for Meet the Navy (July 25-27) – a fantastic event for the city as the dockyard comes alive with demonstrations and re-enactments.

The only trouble is: just when you get your sea legs, it's time to go home.

● **INFORMATION:** www.visitportsmouth.co.uk/ timeless; Historic Dockyard, www.historicdockyard.co.uk/; Spinnaker Tower, www.spinnakertower.co.uk/; The Retreat, www.theretreatguesthouse.co.uk/; City Museums, www.portsmouthcitymuseums.co.uk



Carisbrooke Castle, and right, Osborne House



Great escapes on the Isle of Wight

Just a skip across the Solent is the Isle of Wight, where royals resided and sailing is a world-class event. By **John Naish**

Mention the words “Isle of Wight” and “heritage” and Queen Victoria’s Osborne House jumps instantly to mind. But the little island has a wealth of other historic treats that can be discovered by taking a Red Funnel ferry on the short trip across the Solent.

Osborne House, at East Cowes, is undoubtedly the island’s gem. Bought with 1,000 acres of gardens and meadows by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1845, it offered sanctuary to a couple who loved to escape the pressures of court life. After Albert died, Victoria spent most of her time at Osborne House and died there in 1901.

Little has changed since then. Most magnificent of all Osborne’s treasures is the Indian-themed Durbar room. Built as a tribute to Victoria’s reign as Empress of India, the rich interiors feature display cases filled with gifts presented to her – ivory workboxes, silver models of Hindu temples and slippers embroidered with

gold thread. Throughout summer, the house hosts classical concerts in its grounds, where picnickers can enjoy Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra performances culminating in fantastic fireworks displays.

History is never far off on this island, which measures only 23 miles by 13. The relics of a rather less joyous royal residence can be found on a hill near Newport. The 900-year-old Carisbrooke Castle is most famous for the fact that Charles I was imprisoned there in 1647. Despite being given his own bowling green, he twice tried to escape.

You can visit his cell to see the window bars that the hapless monarch got wedged in during his second foiled bid for freedom. You can also see coded letters written by Charles to his accomplices, which were signed with the letter J. The tread wheel in the well house is still worked by donkeys on demonstration days – and they all have names that begin with J.

The Isle of Wight is fast building a reputation as being the home of big events. The high point of all is the world-famous Skandia Cowes Week – from August 2-9 this year – when the coast fills with sailboats.

The island is spoilt for places to eat.

St Helens Restaurant in St Helens prides itself on using the best fresh produce from local farmers and fishermen.

There’s an open log fire and a highly rated wine list. The Red Lion in Freshwater is a gastropub that serves fine real ale – sailors often arrive by boat, leaving their yachts in the beautiful Georgian port of Yarmouth.

You can stay at the charming Wisteria House in East Cowes, which is within walking distance of the ferry terminal and close to Osborne House.

Alternatively, Freewaters is a peacefully picturesque farmhouse in the Isle of Wight countryside.

● **INFORMATION:** Osborne House and Carisbrooke Castle, www.english-heritage.org.uk; Skandia Cowes Week, www.skandiacowesweek.co.uk; St Helens Restaurant, www.sthelensrestaurant.com; Red Lion, tel: 01983 754925; Wisteria House, tel: 01983 295999; Freewaters, tel: 01983 721439.

● **GETTING THERE:** Red Funnel’s ferries run all year. There are two services. The passenger and vehicle ferry runs between Southampton and East Cowes and takes 55 minutes. The Red Jet high-speed passenger-only hydrofoil, running between Southampton and West Cowes, takes 23 minutes. There is no booking facility for the hydrofoil – just turn up and go. For details, visit www.redfunnel.co.uk, tel: 0844 844 9988.

For more information on heritage, events and culture in the South East, or to order a brochure, go online at www.visitsoutheastengland.com/timelesstreasures