



Staten Island Advance

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THE REVIVAL OF LONG BRANCH

Another installment in AWE'S ongoing tribute to a Staten Island summer tradition

By JODI LEE REIFER

It's late afternoon on the Jersey Shore. The sun burns hot and bright over this stretch of the Atlantic Ocean lapping five miles of sand. Children kick soccer balls, toned 30- and 40-somethings volley for serve and bronzed beach bums lie on oversized towels.

Up top, hundreds of people stroll 2.5 miles of the boardwalk along Ocean Avenue, and peruse the adjacent cluster of upscale restaurants and shops known as Pier Village (www.piervillage.com).

A short walk away, a classic rock cover band is cranking out tunes behind the posh, \$299-a-night Ocean Place Resort & Spa (www.oceanplace.com, 800-411-6493), while a crowd is gathering at its tiki bar, downing \$10 Jersey Sweet Tea cocktails.

Nearby, curious crowds are poking their heads into Bungalow (www.bungalowhotel.net, 732-229-3700), the new boutique hotel designed by Bob and Cortney Novogratz, stars of Bravo's docu-series "9 by Design." Summer midweek rates start around \$249 nightly.

Welcome to Long Branch, N.J.

This is the town where Hollywood actors and presidents summured in the 1800s, and where Bruce Springsteen was born in the U.S.A., before wicked storms and a fierce fire obliterated the

boardwalk in 1987. By the '90s, the area was practically a ghost town and its pier was raised.

But today, with the 4-year-old Pier Village at its heart, Long Branch bustles.

"There's been a whole renaissance here. The entire oceanfront has changed," says Nancy Kleiberg, executive director of the Long Branch Chamber of Commerce (www.longbranchchamber.org).

The beachfront destination is probably never more a buzz than July 4, when the chamber throws its Oceanfest Independence Day Celebration. The 20th annual affair, beginning at 10 a.m. between Seven Presidents Park at Seaview Avenue and Pier Village at Laird Street, boasts 25 food vendors, more than 100 vendors, face-painters, balloon artists, a pirate show, live music and what is billed as "the Jersey Shore's biggest fireworks display" at 9 p.m.

Plus, more than 10 tons of sand is trucked in from Atlantic City – because of its fine quality – for professional sand sculpture art. A sandman, John Gowdy, doubles as a painter who'll likewise work his magic in that medium at 1 p.m. for a project called "Flying Colors." Using a 5-foot canvas on a rotating easel, Gaudy throws, brushes and rubs on paint to the beat of music.

"The audience can feel the music go through me," says the artist, "That is, I

paint with emotion."

Viewers won't see what he has painted because the picture is upside-down until he flips it at the last minute.

In total, more than 200,000 people are expected to visit Long Branch this July 4, says Kleiberg.

Still, at only 40 minutes away from the Outerbridge Crossing (without traffic), this tranquil and tony Jersey Shore town has enough going on all summer to warrant a day-trip or a weekend-long getaway for Staten Islanders.

WHERE TO PLAY

No doubt, many Long Branch visitors arrive here to work on their tans. With season beach badges priced at \$35 and day passes going for \$5 (with free admission for those younger than 17 and older than 62), this oceanfront's beach pass (732-571-6545) is among the most affordable on the Jersey Shore.

Restrooms, showers, volleyball nets, lifeguards and a handicapped ramp at Morris Avenue make it the complete package. Garage parking is available at Pier Village, where a \$10 fee applies. Or if you get lucky, you might score a metered spot.

Nancy Ellithy of Old Bridge, N.J., and her family try to hit Long Branch nearly every weekend.

"There are closer beaches. But this is

cleaner. It's classier," says the 35-year-old homemaker, jokingly referring to herself and friends as the "Real, Real New Jersey Housewives of Middlesex County."

When beach-goers need a change of scenery, shopping opportunities on the pier abound: Aside from specialty shops like Candy's Cottage, which sells seashore-themed house wares, the pier hosts two midsummer sidewalk sales: July 15-18 and Aug. 12-15. Every Saturday through October, 10a.m.-4 p.m., an Asian Market unfolds in the pier's Festival Plaza.

Another big attraction in Long Branch is Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park (732-229-0924), named for the commanders-in-chief who summered there, beginning with President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869. This park is owned and operated by Monmouth County, not the town of Long Branch, so separate entrance fees apply. Daily beach rates are \$7 for adults and parking is \$6-7.

Season beach badges range from \$23-\$60. Seven Presidents is known for its three beaches with lifeguards, designated surfing and volleyball areas, outdoor showers and kiddie playground.

WHERE TO PARTY

Like most Jersey Shore towns, Long Branch draws its party crowd, but its bar scene doesn't only reflect the orange glow of MTV's "Jersey Shore" "hypertanned and overmuscled caricatures...err, we mean characters.

The attitude-free Brighton Bar (121 Brighton Avenue, www.myspace.com/thebrightonbar, 732-229-9676) has earned a reputation for promoting local musicians and bringing in national acts. The club's Wall of Fame lists acts who have played there including alternative rockers Fountains of Wayne and Ween.

Likewise Jack's Goal Line Stand Sports Bar & Grill (149 Brighton Ave., 732-870-8800, www.myspace.com/jacksribandale) nurses a relaxed homey feel with maybe the cheapest beers in Long Branch: \$2.50 drafts of Miller Lite and Coors and \$3 bottled domestic beers. Every Tuesday, is karaoke night, DJs spin on Thursdays and singer-songwriter Chris Morrisey, a local

favorite, holds court every Saturday night. This sports bar with multiple flat-screen TVs and a big menu (Mexican, burgers, ribs) never charges a cover.

Crowds interested in refined experiences might do well ducking into the Wine Loft in Pier Village (32 Laird St., 732-222-7770, www.thewineloftnjpier.com), which stocks 350 wines by the bottle, ranging from \$30-\$350 and 70 wines by the glass. "It's an alternative to the louder clubs," says manager Vincent Trapozzano of the 15-month-old spacious spot with comfy couches. The lounge, which features a tapas menu, hosts live jazz every Thursday night, 8:30-12:30 and deeply discounts on Tuesdays.

WHERE TO EAT

The beachside Pier Village is loaded with dining options: Italian, Greek and sushi restaurants are among others.

Avenue (23 Ocean Ave., 732-759-2900, www.leclubavenue.com) is a glass-and-steel 5,000-square-foot French brasserie, that despite its swanky appearance offers a pretty reasonable menu. Beef bourguignon is priced at \$22 while mussels with fries in white wine sauce is \$19. The busy spot does 1/2-priced specialty cocktails, 75-cent littleneck clams and \$1.50 oysters, 3-7 p.m. daily, and runs the same specials until 11 on Friday nights.

For an entirely different experience, drive down Ocean Avenue and look for the faux, three-story windmill, which appropriately enough is The Windmill, a burgers and cheese fries institution on the Jersey Shore. The spot (586 Ocean Avenue, 732-870-6098, windmillhotdogs.com), has been open since 1963 and is now a franchise.

Burgers are about 5 bucks. "It's a nice change of pace from the standard Jersey Shore eateries," says Leslie Cook, 27, an esthetician from Jackson, N.J. "It's a good place to get away from the fist-pumping guidos and guidettes." And it's especially popular with the bar crowds looking to squelch the late-night munchies.

Up the road a bit, close to Seven Presidents Park, is Lighthouse Italian Ice (65 New Ocean Ave., 732-222-1990,

www.lighthouseitalianice.com), another local favorite. Around since 1976, this place churns out creamy ices for \$2.75-\$3.25, depending on size, in flavors such as blue raspberry, pina colada and kiwi-strawberry.



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