

Asbury Park, NJ: The Other Jersey Shore

Forget about Snooki, "The Situation" and the other guidos and guidettes on MTV's "reality" TV show, *Jersey Shore*. About thirty miles up the coast from Seaside Heights, the scruffy resort town where MTV films *Jersey Shore*, Asbury Park is one of the best kept gay Meccas on the East Coast.

Asbury Park began its journey from a city in decline to a gay hot spot after race riots burned down much of Asbury Park's downtown area in 1970. Gays from New York City bought Victorian homes at bargain basement prices and spruced them up, gentrifying parts of the city and planting seeds for a vibrant gay community on New Jersey's northern shore.

In 1998, Shep Pettibone, the DJ famous for his writing and production collaborations with Madonna, converted an abandoned hotel across the street from the ocean into the Paradise Nightclub. He later renovated the rest of the building and opened the Empress Hotel, New Jersey's first gay oriented hotel.

What to do

Now, weekends in Asbury Park rival those on Fire Island. The Paradise Nightclub is the premier hotspot. Though women are welcome, the Paradise Nightclub draws a young, mostly male crowd. Boys literally swarm the Paradise's two dance floors (each with its own DJ), heated pool, sundeck, tiki bar and balconied rooms. In addition, the Paradise hosts a drag show every Friday night and Karaoke every Sunday. Across the street and yet a world away from the Paradise Nightclub, the Watermark, is a swanky cocktail lounge popular among gays and lesbians creates the perfect ambient setting to chat with lovers and friends. Seated on the second floor, the Watermark offers stunning views of both the boardwalk and the ocean through floor to ceiling windows. In summer months, the bar expands to an outdoor deck that affords the opportunity view the ocean under the stars. A few blocks north, the Dauphin Grille & Berkeley Bar at the Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel offers a less frenzied, more mature scene with a tiki bar and poolside dining. Though the clientele is mixed, the Berkeley is a big draw in the gay community. A mile away, Georgie's offers a relaxed neighborhood bar setting. They also host nightly events, including karaoke and drag shows, to keep things happening. Though Georgie's crowd is mostly male, girls come out on the weekends. Also in town, La Sierra hosts drag wars every Monday

night. And back to the boardwalk, McLoone's Supper Club has live music every weekend, and hosts bi-monthly "Cabaret For Life" fundraisers which raise money for people living with AIDs and similar debilitating diseases. McLoone's also hosts monthly Sound of Music Sing-a-longs.

In addition, Asbury Park is home to a number of special events. For the last few seasons, The New York City Gay Men's Chorus has launched their Big Gay Sing Concert in an open rehearsal at the Crystal Ballroom at the Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel in March. April brings an LGBT Film Festival to town. Jersey Pride revs up the town every June. Last year's Pride Festival and Rally boasted more than 20,000 people. And Sandblast Weekend is *the* must attend event on the Shore in late July for both men and women. Sandblast Weekend is three days of fun including volley ball and dodgeball tournaments, swim parties, dance parties, cocktail parties, T-dances, brunches, an art crawl and a bike ride.

Beyond the bars, Asbury Park offers wonderful, well manicured beaches protected by beefy life guards. The waves vary but tend to be gentle enough to swim without being totally thrashed and yet wild enough to body surf, ride a boogey board or surf. In the summer months, be prepared to get a beach pass to walk on the beach between 10:00 am – 6:00 pm. In the off-season, the beach is free.

Boardwalks edge the beach from the north side of Asbury Park all the way down to the southern end of Avon-By-The-Sea, making the boardwalk a great place to walk, run, and, in the off-season or before 10:00 a.m. in the summer, bike. If you haven't ridden a surry bike (4 wheel bikes that look like golf carts) with your honey on the boardwalk you haven't lived. You can rent them and standard fat tire bikes from Brielle Cyclery on the boardwalk. Shops, restaurants, bars, a miniature golf course, a water park for kids, a psychic stand, and an old fashioned arcade line the inland side of the boardwalk between the old Casino and the Paradise Theatre, making the boardwalk a happening place even in the off season.

If you get tired of the frenetic energy of Asbury Park, head a few moments south to Ocean Grove. It's a little more laid back and more family oriented. The beach in Ocean Grove tends to be less crowded and the parking is free. The tree lined streets of this quirky little one square mile town boasts the highest concentration of authentic Victorian architecture in the country. Ocean Grove was founded as a Methodist Camp Meeting site and the

religious roots remain. During summer months, they sponsor beach games, hold services and live music in both the Pavilion on the boardwalk and in the Great Auditorium. *If your experience being around religious folks has been painful, fear not. The mantra of the Methodists is "all are welcome" and the vibe in Ocean Grove is one of welcoming acceptance. Ocean Grove's Main Avenue has a number of quaint shops and reasonably priced places to eat. *Cheese On Main* and *Yvonne's Devil's Food* are mandatory destinations for foodies. If you are looking for artwork or handmade jewelery, *Main Avenue Galleria* is the place to go. They display works made by a variety of local artist and even offer art classes and workshops.

Where to stay

While the general vibe in Asbury Park is pretty gay friendly, several hotels specifically welcome GLBT guests. As previously mentioned, The Empress, the only gay-owned hotel in town and home of the Paradise Nightclub, caters to a young crowd who want to dance all night. The Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel is a bit more upscale and caters to a less rowdy crowd. Rooms are elegantly appointed and many sport ocean views. Another notch up the scale, the Hotel Tides specializes in pampering their guests. They have an on-site spa and their own art gallery. Guests sleep on imported Italian Anichini sheets and shower on floors made from river rocks. If you're more the bed and breakfast type and prefer a quieter locale, check out The Inns of Ocean Grove. The rooms are tastefully decorated, the beds are comfortable, and staff members are warm and gracious. One block from the beach, a number of rooms provide ocean views. In the off season, they offer a wonderful Winter Getaway deal that includes a gourmet cheese plate and bottle of wine or sparkling water of your choice and gift certificates to select area restaurants for lunch and dinner. More B&B listings can be found at www.purpleroofs.com.

Where to eat

Restaurants abound in Asbury Park and nearby Ocean Grove. The following highlights some favorites based on vibe and view. Moonstruck is the place to go if you want to dine in a gay owned establishment. They offer American and Italian food and their cocktail bar is a popular gathering place. If trendy is what you're after, the Langosta Lounge on the boardwalk may be your pick. Langosta offers fusion cuisine and a fun atmosphere. Craving Italian and are willing to dress up for dinner? Set your sites on the Stella

Marina. They are especially known for their extensive wine menu. For fabulous ocean views, make your way to McLoones Asbury Grill. They offer a variety of menu options including edamame, fried green beans, oysters on the half shell, ribs, and burgers. They offer a nice beer selection, have a respectable wine list, and the service and food are excellent. They host live music in the supper club upstairs. Finally, if healthy is your thing, drop by on the Basin Bar. Located in Yoga Basin, a yoga studio, the Basin Bar offers fresh pressed juices, smoothies and healthy, organic snacks.

Getting there

Asbury Park may be the easiest beach to get to on the East Coast. It's about the same distance from C-bus as New York City, but with less traffic. If you fly in, you can get to Asbury Park by bus or train and take a short (five minutes or less) cab ride to the beach.

If you don't have the time or energy to get to Fire Island and long for more of a beach scene than you can find in P-town, Asbury Park may well be your destination of choice.

For more information:

New Jersey Pride: <http://www.jerseypride.org/>

LGBT film festival:
http://www.asburyparkevents.com/Asbury_Park_Events/NewFest.html

Sandblast weekend: <http://sandblastweekend.com/Home.html>

Georgie's: <http://georgiesbar.com/GeorgiesBar/Home.html>

Paradise Nightclub and the Empress Hotel:

<http://www.paradisenj.com/> and <http://www.asburyempress.com/>

Berkeley's Oceanfront Hotel and the Dauphen Grill and Berkeley Bar:

www.berkeleyhotelnj.com

Hotel Tides: <http://www.hoteltides.com/>

Main Avenue Galleria: <http://www.mainavegalleria.com/>

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