

Explore Friendly Gay Asbury Park

Two of the best-kept secrets of the Jersey Shore are Asbury Park and its adjacent neighbor, Ocean Grove. Touted as “the best place to be on the Jersey shore,” Asbury Park is the up and coming gay mecca of the mid-Atlantic region.

Just about one hour (55 miles) from New York City are some of the best beaches and one of the friendliest gay communities on the east coast. Once known as the “Duchess of the Jersey Shore,” Asbury Park’s fine Victorian homes, wide avenues and parks fascinate the large crowds that visit during the summer.

Like Miami Beach before it, this once grand resort town is being resurrected by a pioneering band of gay men and lesbians. Rainbow flags fly from just about every fifth residence. The downtown of Asbury Park is humming with restoration projects, as a flurry of new gay-owned and gay-friendly shops and restaurants prepare to make it their home.

The mile long boardwalk adds to its downtown atmosphere. Over on the beachfront, Convention Hall and the Paramount Theatre are alive with concerts, operas, sporting events and more. The legendary Stone Pony is rocking with exciting lineups of live music.

The state of New Jersey has empanelled a board to oversee a \$780 million renovation of the boardwalk. Preliminary plans for entertainment include pavilions, luxury condos and even the reintroduction of the swan boats in Wesley Lake that separates Asbury Park and Ocean Grove.

Asbury Park hosts 4 major bars catering to lesbians and gay men within its one square mile and they’re all within a few blocks of the beach.

Record numbers of visitors (many of them from Manhattan) are buying -- and restoring -- fabulous historic homes as weekend retreats or as year 'round residences.

History

Asbury Park was established in 1871 as summering spot for temperance advocates so that the nearby camp meeting center of Ocean Grove would have no unseemly neighbors. During the late 1930’s and 1940’s, Asbury Park’s mile-long boardwalk and its centerpiece, the restored Convention Hall, made the city a premier shore resort.

The city declined during the 1960’s as newly constructed shopping centers drew people away. It gained new life, however, as a music center. Local blue-collar bars such as the Stone Pony began nurturing their own brand of home-grown rock .n. roll, soon made famous by such performers as Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi, and Southside Johnny.

Ocean Grove

Ocean Grove, a family-oriented seaside resort, has been under the leadership of the Camp Meeting Association of the United Methodist Church since 1869. Of historical interest is the Victorian architecture typical of many of the community’s houses. Centennial Cottage, a restored 1874 vacation home at Central Avenue and McClintock Street, is open to the visitors.

Musical performances featuring well-known pop and symphony concert artists as well as entertainers, cultural events and religious services and programs are held throughout the summer at the 6,500 seat Great Auditorium. Organ concerts are given Wednesdays and Saturday on a 1908 Hope-Jones pipe organ.

Also of interest is the tent colony surrounding the auditorium. A tabernacle, chapel, pavilions, parks, the boardwalk, and the beach complete Ocean Grove’s Chautauqua setting.

Things to Do

Asbury Park

Stroll along the newly renovated mile-long boardwalk
(Ocean Avenue, from Asbury Avenue to Deal Lake Drive)

Admire Paramount Theatre and Convention Hall, distinctive and majestic landmark Beaux Arts style buildings, designed in 1923 by Warren and Wetmore (Grand Central Station architects), with Grand Arcade for the boardwalk (Ocean Avenue, between Fifth Avenue and Sunset Avenue)

Wander through Sunset Lake Park (with a pedestrian foot bridge across lake past Grand Avenue)
(Between Sunset Avenue and Fifth Avenue, starting just past Kingsley Street to Main Street)

Visit the home under restoration of Stephen Crane, author of “Red Badge of Courage” (open by appointment)
(508 Fourth Avenue, just past Grand Avenue, 732-775-5682 www.stephencranehouse.org)

Make a pilgrimage to the great rock ‘n’ roll venue, The Stone Pony
(Ocean Avenue at Second Avenue, 732-502-0600 www.stoneponyonline.com)

Explore downtown galleries, antique shops, and restaurants
(Cookman Avenue and Mattison Avenue, from Grand Avenue to Main Street train station)

After Dark Walking Tours (about 1¼ hours) with Tall Tales & True Tales at 8 pm
(reservations at Paranormal bookstore, 627 Cookman Avenue, 732-455-3188 www.paranormalbooksnj.com)

Walk through the former glory of the Casino to the “other side” and discover Ocean Grove’s boardwalk and pier.

Ocean Grove

Wander along street after street of Victorian vacation houses, such as the restored 1874 Centennial Cottage
(Central Avenue and McClintock Street)

Enjoy a 1908 Hope-Jones pipe organ concert at the Great Auditorium built in 1894
(Pilgrim Pathway, between McClintock Street and Bath Street)

Discover restaurants and shops along Main Avenue, reminiscent of a bygone era.

On the way home (about 30 minutes away) ...

Jackson Premium Outlets (over 70 outlet stores)

Interstate 195, between Garden State Parkway and New Jersey Turnpike, near Six Flags Great Adventure park.
537 Monmouth Road, Jackson, NJ 732-833-0503 (www.premiumoutlets.com/outlets/store_listing.asp?id=54)

Directions: Asbury Avenue to Route 18 South to Route 138 West to Interstate 195 West.
Exit 16 on Interstate 195 for Monmouth Road (Route 537).