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Down Time

In Bridgeport, Hockey, a Zoo and Barnum's World



George Ruhe for The New York Times

Young spectators at the Arena at Harbor Yard for a Bridgeport Sound Tigers hockey match.

By NANCY M. BETTER

IT was the second period of a closely contested ice hockey game, and Lauren DiFullio, 14, watched intently as the skaters prepared a five-on-three power play. The Sound Tigers of Bridgeport, Conn., quickly scored against the Admirals of Norfolk, Va., and the crowd went wild. Ms. DiFullio, clad in the home team's blue, gold and white jersey, let out a war whoop, settled back into her seat and high-fived her father. Around the arena, fans began doing the wave as enormous video screens flashed and rock music blared.

This wasn't Madison Square Garden, where center-ice tickets sell for \$150, if you can get them. It was the Arena at Harbor Yard, just off Interstate 95 in Bridgeport, where the best seats in the house cost \$32 and may be available just before game time. "It's more fun than the N.H.L., because the crowds aren't so rowdy," Ms. DiFullio said. "You can bring your family and really have a good time."

As vendors hawked cotton candy, hot dogs and ice cream, fans soon turned their attention to the on-ice antics of Storm, the Sound Tigers' blue plush mascot. Accompanied by two Lycra-clad cheerleaders, he tossed T-shirts into the stands. Meanwhile, an announcer introduced two local mite hockey teams, composed of 5- and 6-year-olds, who were scrimmaging between periods on this Sunday afternoon in January. The atmosphere was upbeat, and the audience participated in a series of dance contests until the lights went down and the game resumed.

The Sound Tigers of the American Hockey League, the top affiliate of the New York Islanders, are part of the renaissance sweeping Bridgeport and attracting increasing numbers of families seeking high-quality and low-priced weekend fun. The Sound Tigers' home is Harbor Yard, a sleek new sports complex that includes the arena and an outdoor stadium.

After the Sound Tigers' 40-game home season, which runs from mid-October through mid-April, fans will flock to see the Bridgeport Bluefish, the city's independent Atlantic League baseball team, which plays from late April through late September. Just 55 miles from Midtown [Manhattan](#), Bridgeport is the largest and most diverse city in [Connecticut](#), with a population of nearly 150,000. Despite its gritty, working-class reputation — in contrast to those of its Gold Coast neighbors, Greenwich and Westport — Bridgeport actually has more protected historic districts and more parks than any other municipality in the state.

After decades of neglect, a long-awaited revitalization is under way. Visitors will find an abundance of family activities, more than enough to fill a day before a night game, along with readily available parking, few lines and no hordes of tourists.

Start the day at the city's northern end with a visit to the Beardsley Zoo, where brilliantly colored peacocks and guinea hens roam freely around the grounds. The Beardsley, the only zoo in the state of Connecticut, has surprisingly extensive collections, featuring 300 animals of about 100 species, from North and South America, many of which are endangered or threatened. Its 32 acres, inside a 130-acre park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, are a year-round delight for children. The size is manageable, the signs are clear and the docents are friendly and helpful. A tropical rainforest is populated by pygmy marmosets and a rare ocelot. There are also Alligator Alley, a stroll-through aviary and the [New England](#) Farmyard, with an enclosed area for rabbits, goats, sheep and geese.

Should the little ones tire of looking at live animals, for \$1 they can take a spin on a new vintage-style carousel in an octagonal pavilion. Rich Cannone, an operator of the carousel, recently retired after 35 years as a zookeeper at the Beardsley.

"This zoo isn't just a collection of animals," he said. "It's more intimate than many other zoos and more oriented to science and education. We've always focused on species survival, which means tending to the animals more personally."

Near the carousel are the Peacock Café and the Jungle Canteen, as well as a large gift shop with toys and games related to science and nature.

Another Bridgeport stop is the Barnum Museum. There's a sucker born every minute, and it's easy to be sucked into the strange world of Phineas T. Barnum, who was Bridgeport's most famous resident eccentric. Built in 1891 in the Romanesque Revival style, the red sandstone Barnum Museum celebrates the life and times of its namesake. In the lobby is the 6-foot-8-inch Baby Bridgeport, Barnum's stuffed pachyderm star.

The first floor guides visitors through Barnum's multifaceted career — he was a newspaper editor and mayor of Bridgeport before he started his circus — with displays of period rooms and

cases of memorabilia. A 7,000-square-foot addition houses a mechanized miniature three-ring circus complete with tents, railroad cars and tiny acrobats balancing on trapeze wires.

The second floor is dedicated to Bridgeport's industrial past, with an emphasis on local manufacturers like Remington Arms (weapons), Warner Brothers (corsets) and Wheeler & Wilson (sewing machines). Don't miss the scale model of Iranistan, Barnum's Bridgeport mansion, which was fashioned after the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, [England](#). Completed in 1848, this behemoth was destroyed by fire in 1857.

On the top floor are a hand-carved miniature circus encircled by an elevated viewing ramp and several of Barnum's beloved curiosities. Dan Miranda, an advertising copywriter from Shelton, Conn., marveled at the canopied marriage bed of the 33-inch Tom Thumb and his 32-inch wife, Lavinia Warren. "This museum is amazing," he said. "It's a hidden gem nobody knows about. If you love history, it's a real find."

In the Education Room, children can dress up in clown costumes, put on a puppet show or make circus-themed crafts. There is a small gift shop with a good selection of toys and books including the 1881 classic "Toby Tyler," about a young boy who runs away from home to join the circus.

Around the corner from the museum, Bridgeport's downtown district is good for a stroll with stops at many small art galleries. At the City Lights Gallery one day this winter, children were captivated by the exhibit "Bridgeport: Past, Present, Future," including a \$200 collage of photos, maps, quotations, buttons and paint by Mary Witkowski that was labeled "P. T. Barnum: He brought the world to Bridgeport. Some of it was made up, some of it was true."

The city has plenty of dining options that are friendly to both families and family budgets. At KA2, a trendy Japanese restaurant, try the sushi roll special (\$11.95 for any three basic rolls served with miso soup) or the bento box tempura (\$10.95 for fried chicken and vegetables with salad, rice, and dumplings).

Locals familiar with the cuisine of the large Portuguese community recommend Omanel for specialties like the \$12.50 carne de porco e alentejana, a traditional pork and clam stew, served in an Old World environment.

If you're craving Italian food, head for Vazzy's, which Connecticut magazine recently named the No. 1 family restaurant in Fairfield County and the No. 2 family restaurant in the state. Try the rustica pan pasta (\$12.95) or a specialty pizza like the small [Maine](#) lobster pie (\$12).