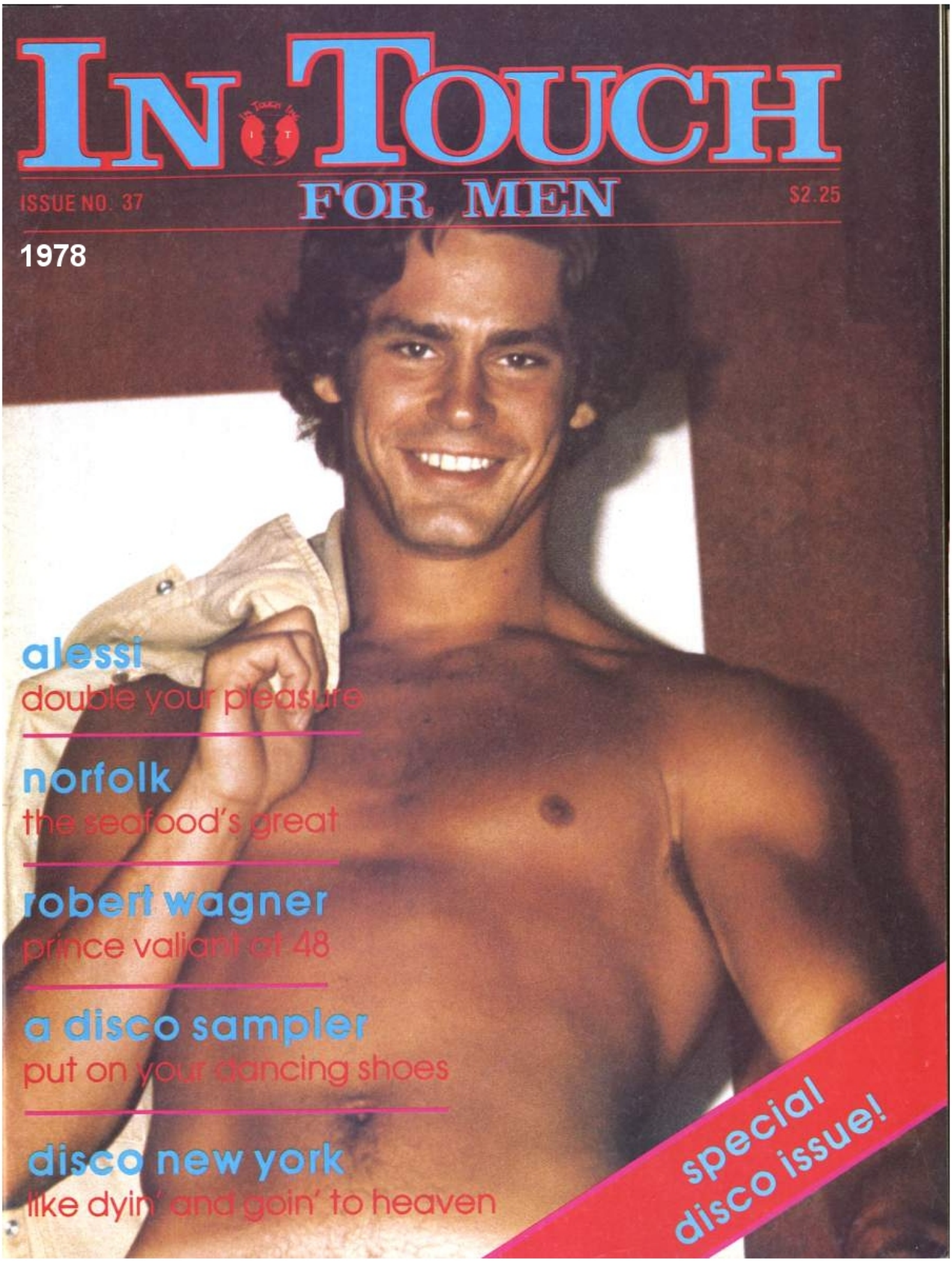
IN TOUCH FOR MEN

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Norfolk

by Larry White

"... even if Norfolk isn't Greenwich Village, you can still find plenty of good times and interesting people here if you know where to look."

Sailors and oysters. That's what most people think of when you mention Norfolk, Virginia. Hardly anyone thinks of the gay life, because this big Southern port has never been noted as a gay Mecca—and with good reason.

The reason is that this corner of Virginia is about fifteen years behind the times. Most new social movements take a decade or two to make an impression on the Norfolk area (also called "Tidewater Virginia"), and the gay movement is no exception. So at first glance, gay society here may seem closety, cliqueish, and dull by New York or L.A. standards.

But even if Norfolk isn't Greenwich Village, you can still find plenty of good times and interesting people here if you know where to look. And if you've never heard much about the pleasures of Norfolk area, maybe it's partly because some folks here think they have a good thing and don't want too many outsiders to find out about it.

Actually, what most out-of-staters call "Norfolk" is a cluster of several cities around Hampton Roads, the big harbor at the southern end of Chesapeake Bay. On the south side of the harbor are Norfolk, with its huge naval base; the big resort city of Virginia Beach; and Suffolk, Portsmouth, and Chesapeake, dull towns without much to recommend them to the visitor. Across Hampton Roads via a toll-free bridge/tunnel are Hampton and Newport News, and half-hour's drive west on Interstate 64 from Hampton takes you to the restored colonial capital, Williamsburg. It's a big area, and you'll probably need a car, because public transportation here isn't much to speak of.



Newport News is one of the Tidewater cities servicing navy-oriented Norfolk.

So much for geography. What about the people?

First of all, don't prejudge Tidewater residents by what you may have heard before. Hampton Roads still suffers from the reputation it earned during World War II, when the locals, then mostly redneck farmers and fishermen, treated the soldiers and sailors as something less than human. Remember that legendary sign, "Sailors and Dogs Keep Off the Grass"? The legend started here.

But attitudes have changed in Tidewater since then. Once suspicious of outsiders, residents of the Norfolk area have learned to welcome (if only for the



Hampton Roads' coliseum symbolizes the Norfolk area's current progressive trend.

money they bring) the hordes of tourists, merchant sailors, and military personnel who visit Hampton Roads every year, and in the last thirty years Norfolk has grown from a dingy backwater into a modern, cosmopolitan city by Southern standards.

The straight majority's views on gay life are changing here, too. Ensign Vernon Berg and T/Sgt. Leonard Matlovich, who both came out publicly while stationed at bases in the Hampton Roads area, showed local residents that gays could still be clean-cut American boys. And while people around the harbor still aren't really comfortable with the idea of equal rights for homosexuals (they proved that by filling Norfolk's convention center to overflowing for Anita Bryant's "New Creation Crusade" last year), most of them seem willing to admit that gays might not pose a threat to children, national security, and the laws of nature. Gay-baiting has never been the popular sport here that it has been in some other Southern states and except for some howls from born-again Christians, there has been little open opposition to the gay rights movement in this part of Virginia.

Having struck a truce of sorts with the straight community, Norfolk's gays are more visible today than ever before. Norfolk has a gay hotline, several gay groups at local colleges and universities, and a Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus which provides counseling for homosexuals. Some gay periodicals are available at local newsstands; and media coverage of Hampton Roads' homosexuals, while still not extensive, has expanded greatly in the last five years. *Metro*, Norfolk's lively urban magazine, has given the gay community a favorable press, and even the conservative local papers have been fairly discreet in their criticism of gay lifestyles.

But Tidewater's gay people still keep a relatively low profile, compared to many homosexuals in many other U.S. cities, for several reasons.

First, the gay community is still badly fragmented by race and gender prejudices, which have made it difficult to form a strong gay citizens' group. "We need something—a citizens' lobby or a newspaper or something—that will give the gay community a single, loud voice here," a Newport News woman said recenty. "Otherwise we'll continue to be just a diffuse bunch of individuals, speaking with many voices."

Second, local gays see what happened in Miami and other cities when gays have tried to assert their rights, and are afraid to rock the boat. A display of gay solidarity and strength, Tidewater's homosexuals fear, might inspire born-again Christians, with their tremendous wealth and influence in the media, to try to make Tidewater another Miami.

Finally, bars have to keep a very low profile because Virginia law makes it a crime to serve a drink to a known homosexual. So many gays are unaware of the major bars and are cut off from fellowship with other homosexuals. As a result, gay society here remains largely invisible, even to lifelong residents of the area.

But even if Tidewater's gay society is hard to locate at times, there's still plenty to do and see in the area. First things first. What about bars?

The most popular places are **Mickey's Tavern** (135 Brooke Ave., downtown Norfolk), the **Ritz Tavern** (131 Brooke Ave., near Mickey's), the **Nickelodeon** (118 W. City Hall Ave., downtown Norfolk) and the **Cue Club** (4601 Killam Ave., Norfolk, near old Dominion University). The Nickelodeon is a restaurant-bar serving food, beer, and wine, with dancing. There's a $1.00 cover charge on weekends. Mickey's and the Ritz are cruising bars offering beer and no dancing; the latter is Western in character, the former butch. (These three establishments may not be at their current addresses much longer; the Norfolk Redevelopment Authority is thinking of having them torn down, along with some other buildings in the downtown section, as part of its plan to revitalize the inner city.)

At present the owners are trying to keep the city from making them move, but the future of the bars is still uncertain. The owners do plan to relocate in Norfolk if forced to leave their present locations, but that shouldn't happen until the fall sometime. So if you're in Norfolk after October 1 or so, ask around. The Cue is a large disco/lounge with a generally young clientele, and serves beer and food. If you hear reports of a gay disco/restaurant in Williamsburg, forget it; the place went straight two years ago.

Cruising areas change with the seasons. Summer cruising is probably best around 21st St. in Virginia Beach (one source calls it *"the* spot"), Buckroe Beach in Hampton, and Yorktown Beach on the York River near Williamsburg. Cruising also seems fair-to-good along Buckroe Beach during the winter, if you don't mind a chill wind blowing in off the water. But during the cold season, most cruising moves indoors to the bars and enclosed shopping malls—though one source says the malls are "pretty unpromising ground" and "it's hard to pick anyone up there." Foreign sailors can make cruising in downtown Newport News interesting at any time of the year, but don't bother with the old bus station near the Victory Arch. It may have been cruisy in the past, but no more.

As for the cruisers with red lights on top, Hampton Roads gays have reported harassment from police on occasion, and sometimes you will find unusually large numbers of police cars parked along certain beaches. But on the whole, Tidewater's homosexuals don't seem too worried about police persecution, and there's no evidence of any organized anti-gay crusade on the part of the local cops. Plainclothesmen do appear in bars but are easy to recognize. Norfolk area gays report: "They still wear coats and ties."

When you're not socializing, you'll want to sleep. The **Holiday Inn Scope** in Norfolk is smack in the middle of the downtown area and is easy to reach via the Intersate. Also convenient is the long string of motels on Mercury Boulevard, just off Intersate 64 in Hampton. But an old Scotch miser sends this warning: don't stay at Virginia Beach during the summer unless you're prepared to pay through the nose and several other openings as well. Bills of $500 for a weekend at some Beach hotels aren't unheard of.

Now, don't misunderstand. By all means go to Virginia Beach if you're there in the summer. The ocean is lovely, surfing can be good, the sands are warm underfoot, and some of the people you meet there will live in your dreams the rest of your life. But the Beach is full of tourist traps and will consume all your money if you let it. The best plan is to probably make the Beach a one-day visit.

If you arrive at the Beach after nine a.m., parking can be hell. Try parking on one of the back streets, like Baltic or Arctic Ave., and walk a few blocks to the ocean. The closer you park to the Beach itself, the greater the chance you'll take a reserved parking space by accident and have to pay $50 to reclaim your car.

At the other end of Tidewater is Virginia's "colonial Triangle"—Williamsburg, Yorktown, and Jamestown. Restored by the Rockefellers forty years ago, Colonial Williamsburg occupies about a square mile of the town and includes a couple-dozen restored buildings, notably the Capitol and the Governor's Mansion (see if you can find the owl on the wallpaper). For the moment, admission is free to most attractions. But don't expect to find much gay life in Williamsburg—it's a small city.

There's more action along Yorktown Beach, a narrow strip of sand between a steel bridge and an oil refinery on the York River, about twenty-minutes' drive from Williamsburg on the Colonial Parkway. But except for the cruising, which is better in Newport News and Norfolk anyway, Yorktown doesn't have too much to recommend it. Parking is next to impossible in the tourist season; and if you enjoy lying on a beach and looking at an oil refinery, you might as well take your vacation in New Jersey. Check out Yorktown if you like, but don't spend too much time there. The same goes for Jamestown, unless you're into touring reconstructed forts and watching glassblowers make bottles.

Are there any places to *avoid* in Tide-

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