

STREET SCENE

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Queen Katheryne and King Edward bid a warm "Huzzah" or welcome as they greet festival-goers during the Grand Parade.

photos by GUY WARREN/staff photographer

Knight-time fun

Renaissance Festival offers joust about everything

By William Coutant
staff writer

A journey backward in time to a fun-loving age of discovery can be yours provided you "suspend your disbelief" and head for Holly, Mich.

If you can, you'll find knights jousting, jesters jesting and people speaking of dragons, damsels and magic.

You could consider the Michigan Renaissance Festival a sort of theme park in the raw. Situated on 200 acres in northwest Oakland County, the festival, in its 12th year, provides an impressive array of crafters, magic and stage acts, food and drink, and people just being a little silly. And being mischievous is the key to enjoying the outdoor event that runs for seven weekends from mid-August through the end of September.

"It's as much (fun) as you make it," said festival official Peggy Burkhard. "You have to live the dream."

Craft booths, featuring about 150 artists whose works have been juried for their authenticity, line the 16th Century streets under ample tree shade. Food booths feature modern favorites such as pizza and gyro sandwiches along with culinary delights of an earlier time: roasted turkey drumsticks, Scotch eggs and apple dumplings.

The 700-member staff, dressed in period costume, are bound to get you in a festive mood whether it be through a melodramatic farce on stage at the Swan Theatre, a

knights joust in full armor on horseback, or just a little ribbing as you walk along. Characters like Ded Bob, Magical Mystical Michael and Sir Ryssus help keep the mood light. And there's always an event on the grounds.

THERE'S EVEN an open air pub with entertainment that serves imported English beer and includes part of a real pub brought over from the old country. Cyril Lilly, an Englishman celebrating his birthday at Watneys Pub said it's quite authentic.

And while most visitors to the festival don't come quite as far, they seem to have just as much fun.

"My son challenged me (to dueling buckets)," said a somewhat damp Kathy Poole of Livonia. "I won. You don't often win with a kid," she added with a laugh. "They set the tone so that it's really fun."

And rain or shine, the festival goes on.

The event runs every Saturday and Sunday and Labor Day through the last weekend in September. Crowds for the opening weekend, which included a rainy Saturday, exceeded 20,000, most from Oakland County, Burkhard said. Yet the wide "streets" of the festival and large parking area make it easy to get around.

And many visitors are happy just to walk through the myriad of craft shops, which include weaving to glass blowing to the making of knight's armor. Others find it easy enough to stop at one of several stages to see a play, a puppet show or a magic act. And games for kids of all ages abound. What festival celebrating the 16th century in Europe would be complete without archery? Kids can joust on Fight the Knight, use their balance on Hunker Hauser and get all wet with Dueling Buckets.

ONE OF THE most popular events of all is the Joust. Three times a day, knights take arms, first on horseback, and then on foot, to win honor and glory before the king and his court. The lances break for real, but the knights survive intact, except for the verbal barbs of the crowd.

All kidding aside, the event coincides with the Harvest celebrations of earlier times. And for many actors, magicians and singers, it's a chance to display their talents.

Festival staff can be amateur actors to professional minstrels who play at the pub. And there are enough of them to keep visitors continually entertained.

And that's the festival's goal, to make sure those who enter this "kingdom" of a bygone era let go of their daily cares for an afternoon.

That quality of make-believe is an essential ingredient of the festival's success, says M'Arch McCarty, who along with his wife Janet serve as King Edward and Queen Katheryne.

"When I welcome visitors I say 'I am King Edward here, today, and you are whoever you want to be,'" said McCarty, who works as an actor throughout the year. "And it's true — for awhile."

The Michigan Renaissance Festival runs consecutive weekends, through Sept. 28-29, on Dixie Highway, one mile north of Mt. Holly. Hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission is \$9.95 for adults at the gate (\$8.75 in advance); \$4.95 for children at the gate (\$4 advance). For information, call 645-9640.



Sir Michael (left) and Sir William do battle with lances on horseback during the Joust at the Michigan Renaissance Festival. Sir Michael won the day, but not before a tough fight from Sir William.



Mistress Moana casts a menacing glance at festival goers as she and her fellow "Vulgarians" stir up trouble.