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Visitors escape into fantasy at Renaissance Faire

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SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL NEWS

(Original Publication: September 4, 2007)

About 9,000 visitors spent Labor Day among fairies and pirates at the New York Renaissance Faire, a 16th-century English wonderland nestled at Sterling Forest in Tuxedo.

It's impossible to tell many of the guests from the actors in this make-believe village, where dressing up is the norm. Some wear velvet gowns or thigh-length boots despite the heat. Or visitors can simply don a flower garland crown. The colorful costumes and flying banners add magic to a bustling marketplace of artisans, vendors and performing troupes.

Connecticut resident Donielle Allen, a maiden in blue velvet with surprising tiny black horns half-hidden by her long hair, said she hasn't missed the fair in 27 years.

"Take any notion you have of a fair and set it aside. This is one of a kind," she said.

Sherene Wallace, from Orange County, N.J., comes each year to enjoy what she said is a real-life experience so much better than a play.

Wallace, dressed in purple garb (she insisted it's not a costume if it's well-tailored), browsed one of several fair outfitters for decorative vests or beaded headwear to supplement her simple gown.

"What should you do here? You have to eat!" she said. "The roast turkey leg is the size of a small child, and there is funnel cake to die for."

Must-see events included the brief but dramatic jousting matches, rough-and-tumble live character chess, a magical maypole dance for young children and the beloved Dextre Tripp, a hilarious acrobat who barely blinks while juggling torches and chain saws.

One white-bearded, blue-robed visitor who wouldn't break character to give his name comes to every fair dressed as Merlin and captivates even the employees with his charm, said Liisa Lee Levine, the director of publicity who was at the information booth when she saw him coming.

"This is a meaningful place for a lot of visitors," said Levine, adding that the escape from everyday life is precious to guests with tough lives or lines of work, those who need a little magic.

It's also a fun place for families with young children. A sculpted dragon rises from the water near jugglers offering free juggling lessons and a minstrel on stilts singing to crowds below.

This was the first visit for Katherine Diaz, from Spring Valley, who brought her two daughters, Keyra, 3, and Yanelle, almost 2. They were all amazed by the spectacle.

"They love the costumes," she said. "Next year we are coming dressed up."

Perhaps they'll start at Rosie's Posies, owned by Betty Farrell, an original vendor at the fair, who has traveled from Maryland for 30 years. She sells authentic "chaplet" headwear of dried and silk flowers.

Authentic is how many describe their visit, whether they dress up, try ax throwing or find the off-color

jokes make them laugh aloud.
