

IN THE BOROUGHS: STATEN ISLAND

Snug Harbor spins its wheel of fortune

The Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden hopes two new attractions will lift its boats.

BY MARINE COLE

APRIL 21, 2014 10:15 A.M.

[LINK TO ARTICLE HERE](#)



This former dormitory will be reborn as the new home of the Staten Island Museum.

Like millions of tourists who visit New York City every year, Jens Bergstrom stepped onto the Staten Island Ferry on a sunny afternoon in the Battery recently with only one goal in mind: to get a better look at the Statue of Liberty and the Manhattan skyline.

"I heard I should just get off [the boat] and get right back on," said the Swedish tourist. "I've never heard anything about Staten Island."

Residents of the unsung borough are betting that will change in a little more than two years. That is when a 625-foot-high Ferris wheel and a 350,000-square-foot outlet mall are slated to open on the waterfront near the ferry terminal in St. George. Those attractions are expected to prompt as many as 7 million people a year to get off the ferry and to stay off long enough to enjoy themselves—and maybe even make their way 1.2 miles down the road to the borough's leading tourist destination.

There, they will find the Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden, an 83-acre preserve that features 26 historic Greek Revival- and Victorian-style buildings housing four museums and three performing-arts venues. There's also a farm and an acclaimed Chinese Scholar's Garden. True, several previous attempts to get more tourists through the iron gates out front at Snug Harbor have fallen flat, but locals truly believe this time will be different.

"I've waited my whole life for something like this," said Lynn Kelly, Snug Harbor's chief executive and a native of the island, speaking of the bounty of visitors she and others expect the wheel and mall to deliver. "We're going to be an overnight Statue of Liberty."

That would be a far cry from Snug Harbor's standing today. It draws about 250,000 visitors a year, roughly one-twentieth the number who flock to the torch-bearing lady in New York Harbor. Indeed, unless visitors are driving, getting to Snug Harbor can be a bit challenging. But starting in 2016, when the wheel begins to turn and the shops open, Ms. Kelly is banking that her attraction will land a piece of the action.

Island's 'jewel'

To get ready, Snug Harbor, which is run as a nonprofit organization on an annual operating budget of \$3.5 million, is already three years into a five-year business plan. Island officials are doing their bit as well. Snug Harbor will be included in the larger New York Wheel-led campaign promoting the coming attractions. What's more, one out of every three shuttle buses running from the ferry to the wheel and shops will continue on to Snug Harbor, augmenting the existing, somewhat erratic S40 bus service.

"We're going to go to every trade show around the world to promote how to spend a day on Staten Island," said Travis Noyes, chief marketing officer of the New York Wheel. Beyond the new draws coming into St. George, Mr. Noyes plugged Snug Harbor, calling it the longtime "jewel of Staten Island," one that has been held back by its tough-to-get-to locale.

The center was founded in the 1830s as Sailors' Snug Harbor, a home for retired merchant mariners, the last of whom moved out nearly 40 years ago. It was shortly thereafter that the Snug Harbor Cultural Center was incorporated on land now owned by the city, which also owns the landmarked buildings.

One of the main attractions, the Noble Maritime Collection, is one of the so-called front five central buildings, and includes everything from a houseboat studio to ship models from around the world. There is also a residency program that provides a studio and housing on the premises for emerging artists.

And arriving soon will be the 133-year-old Staten Island Museum, which currently operates its art conservation studio and archives at Snug Harbor. In late 2014, the museum, whose main facility is located near the ferry terminal, will expand into an 1879 Greek Revival building that the museum helped save from demolition back in the 1960s. It will feature new arts, natural-science and local history exhibitions.

'Catalyst' for exploration

"Our hope is that the wheel will be the catalyst to explore more of the area," said Cheryl Adolph, chief operating officer of the museum. For those who do visit, she also offers reassuring words: "I think there's a perception you'll be strapped and stranded if you come to Staten Island, but the ferry really runs 24 hours a day."

Local politicians are also excited about what's in store for Snug Harbor and the island in general. "Staten Island looks forward to a renaissance on its North Shore and welcoming visitors from around the world to discover its cultural and historic gems," said Staten Island Borough President James Oddo. "Snug Harbor Cultural Center is a hub of both history and culture."

With so much change in store, Staten Island is hoping it will start a new chapter in its history, and one where the tourists taking the ferry will actually stop rather than just turn around.

"The wheel will define this generation the way the bridge defined my parents' generation," said Ms. Kelly about the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, which was completed in 1964. "This is one of these moments."

A version of this article appears in the [April 21, 2014, print issue](#) of Crain's New York Business.