

Forget California, hit up the East Coast's bursting 'con' scene

By Kimberly Mollo —
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Our car slowed to a stop in a hotel parking lot in downtown Hartford, Connecticut, the July heat simmering off the pavement. As we climbed out and popped the trunk, taking backpacks and suitcases and coolers in hand, I turned my head toward the lobby doors.

There was a man dressed in a red shirt and hat, a pair of overalls and a bushy false mustache, closely followed by a woman sporting a bouncy, blond wig, a bejeweled crown and a huge, flowing, pink gown, puffed out around her legs thanks to a hoopskirt and petticoat. She was carrying a yellow plush star in her hand; he, a large red-and-white mushroom.

"Looks like Mario and Princess Peach made it this year," one of my friends remarked casually. We all headed inside.

If this scene sounds odd to you, you probably have never been to a comic book convention before. You may have heard of the biggest — and most famous — of them all, San Diego Comic-Con International (SDCC), which sees well over 100,000 attendees annually who come out to meet the A-list celebrity guests (think Jennifer Lawrence, Samuel L. Jackson and Robert Downey Jr.), attend panels, buy merchandise and meet fellow fans from all walks of life.

For many fans of comic books, video games, anime, fantasy, science fiction and other genres traditionally featured at conventions, SDCC is the pinnacle of nerd events. However, the East Coast is home to dozens of conventions that offer the same things people love about SDCC a little closer to home (and at a more affordable price).

A GEEK MECCA IN CONNECTICUT

Back to that Mario and Peach scene. That pair was among thousands who turned out to ConnectiCon 2015 at the Connecticut Convention Center, Hartford, from July 9-12. Run by volunteers, ConnectiCon has been bringing fans together since 2003. The convention bills itself as "New England's only massively, multi-



Photo by Caitlin Dwight

genre pop culture convention,” and has grown from 800 attendees in its inaugural year to over 12,000 today.

ConnectiCon, like SDCC, celebrates all things pop culture. Essentially, if something has a fan base, this convention showcases it in one way or another. And, yes, dressing up is a big part of it for many congoers. Thousands of people buy or create — or some combination of both — costumes to wear to the convention that represent a character. Cosplayers, as they are called, range from novices to seasoned craftsmen. Think prop weapons, armor and elaborate gowns — all homemade.

Not everyone who attends is a cosplayer, and by no means is it a requirement for having fun (although who doesn’t want to parade around as their favorite Game of Thrones character for a weekend?). There is plenty to do at ConnectiCon appealing to a wide range of interests.

This year, the convention featured question-and-answer sessions with celebrity guests like George Takei and Nichelle Nichols, a charity auction, an informal dance with a DJ, a “Nerd Prom,” a cosplay competition, special screenings, a hypnosis show and a game design workshop, among many, many other special events.

ConnectiCon also hosts an array of panels all weekend long, ranging from the seriously intellectual to the light and amusing. This year, guests could learn everything from how to conduct celebrity interviews to how to write sci-fi; they could ask questions of a few prolific fantasy authors about their craft; they could discuss gender roles and stereotypes in popular media; or, learn how to sew a cupcake.

For gamers, there is an incredible board game library at ConnectiCon, as well as card games, tabletop games and console games. Congoers could throw their hat in the ring during a gaming tournament or learn to play a new game during certain time slots throughout the weekend.

And, oh yeah, there’s also a Death Match. Have you ever seen Princess Peach and Jon Snow fight to the death while classic rock blares from the speakers of an auditorium and hundreds of fans cheer from their seats? If the answer’s no, you haven’t been to ConnectiCon.

Most people leave the convention not only with a weekend’s worth of great stories, but also with armfuls of swag. From backpacks and jewelry to art prints, swords, flasks, comic books, clothing and Japanese candy, chances are ConnectiCon’s massive dealers room and artist alley will have something you’ll get excited about.

If you missed ConnectiCon this year, what were you thinking? Don’t worry too much, though — it’ll be back next year. Organizers have already begun gearing up for ConnectiCon 2016, so block out July 7-10 on your calendar, visit connecticon.org for registration info and details, and I’ll see you in Hartford!

CONGOERS, ASSEMBLE!

So, are you in the mood to grab some friends, suit up and make your convention debut? Fortunately for you, there are plenty of upcoming opportunities for you to do just that within a short drive.

New Jersey's largest city also boasts a large — and ever-growing — convention for comic and pop culture enthusiasts young and old. Newark Comic Con touches down at the Robert Treat Hotel on Saturday, Sept. 12, bringing with it celebrity guests, artists and exhibitors, a fashion show and more.

From Oct. 8-11, the Javits Center in Manhattan will be overtaken by New York Comic Con (NYCC), a massive gathering of all things comic and pop culture. Celebrity guests include Nathan Fillion, Felicia Day and Danny Glover, among a slew of others. With an attendance of over 150,000 in 2014, NYCC has ensured the weekend is jam-packed with panels, special events, an artist alley and more fun attractions. Visit www.newyorkcomiccon.com for tickets and details.

For all the zombie fans in the house, don't fret: there's a convention in the Garden State you can run — or crawl, or shuffle — over to this year. Walker Stalker Con New York/New Jersey takes place Dec. 4-6 at the Meadowlands Exposition Center, Secaucus. Like most conventions, it serves as an entertaining event and also as a fan meetup, where people who share the same interests can have fun, new experiences together. So far, The Vampire Diaries stars Ian Somerhalder and Paul Wesley are set to make an appearance at Walker Stalker Con, and more guests are expected to come aboard. Check walkerstalkercon.com/newyorknewjersey for details.