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City of Portland is a Maine attraction

By Rick Hampson
USA TODAY

Scenic waterfront town harbors much for tourists to see and do, earning it a place on travel 'hot' lists

PORTLAND, Maine — In a state where tourism tilts hard toward the rural and the wild, this city is earning a reputation for pleasures more urbane than camping, fishing or leaf-peeping.

Portland is showing the rest of the state — a self-proclaimed "Vacationland" locked in a love-hate affair with s away" who pay the bills but clog the roads — that tourism can flourish 1) in months besides July and August a locals crazy.

Portland's attractions include gourmet restaurants, historic buildings, a picturesque waterfront, art galleries, microbreweries and coffee shops. Now, they've combined to land the city on Frommer's list of the top 12 world 2007, along with the likes of Zurich, Tokyo and the Caribbean's Virgin Gorda.

Outside New England, some were surprised the travel guide publisher would honor a place that, as Frommer's Regan puts it, "doesn't immediately spring to mind as a singular travel destination."

"People say to me, 'Why Portland?' " admits Barbara Whitten, director of the Greater Portland Convention and people are startled — 'Who knew?' It's like we're the underdog."

Not anymore.

"As far as the media go," Whitten says, "we're a little ..." — and here she employs a word seldom used to describe — "hot."

This coastal city of 66,000 is getting used to subjective but marketable accolades such as Frommer's. This year the "Healthiest Cities for Women" (*Self* magazine); one of 20 "Hottest Cities for Entrepreneurs" (*Inc.*); and one of 20 "Businesses and Careers" (*Forbes*).

Last year, Portland was named one of 10 "Dream Towns" by *Outside* magazine and one of America's 20 greatest *Times*. In recent years it also has ranked No. 7 among "the Best 100 Art Towns in America" (Countryman Press), "Adventure Towns" (*National Geographic Adventure* magazine); and "BikeTown USA" (*BikeTown* magazine).

"People want to know how we did it," Whitten says.

A quarter-century ago Portland was another fading New England industrial city. The downtown shopping district opening of the Maine Mall outside the city. Residential neighborhoods were sapped by suburban flight. The port cargo but attracted few visitors besides stray cats.

Portland's decline, however, bore the seeds of its revival. Relatively low land values spared many well-designed granite office buildings and warehouses from demolition. So the city sat there, waiting to be rediscovered.

Many of the pioneers were young people in finance, design, the arts and publishing who were tired of the cost of Boston. Some were entrepreneurs who needed only an Internet connection, an airport and plenty of frappuccino old commercial buildings were becoming luxury condos.

One turning point for tourism came in the early 1980s with the opening of DiMillo's Floating Restaurant on the waterfront. The businesses followed, and today the district — known as the Old Port — combines busy wharves and a lively tourist district.

Another occurred in the 1990s, when the Maine College of Art moved into the city's old public library and into what was Portland's leading department store. Now the college helps anchor the Downtown Arts District and its galleries.

Among other attractions:

•A minor league ballpark whose left field wall is a replica of the Green Monster at the Red Sox's Fenway Park. Citgo sign to match the one behind the real Monster in Boston's Kenmore Square.

•The Portland Observatory, a seven-story wooden tower built in 1807 on a hill overlooking the harbor. It allows visitors as soon as they entered the harbor and get crews to the docks to unload the cargo.

•The Portland Museum of Art, which has a 14th-century painting that may be by Leonardo da Vinci of a woman who looks just like the one in the *Mona Lisa* — only she isn't smiling.

Bob Witkowski, a transplanted Midwesterner and Portland history buff, says first-time visitors "tend to expect a big city or a fishing village. They get neither. But they get the best of both."

The result is a certain "wow" factor. "Portland's still like a hidden gem," says Dawn Clemens, a restaurant manager who moved from Portland, Ore., three years ago after discovering it on vacation. "It doesn't have such a reputation to live up to yet."

Its reputation is growing. Clemens says that last March some friends started looking for a hotel room for four consecutive nights in July and couldn't find one. At Fore Street, the critically acclaimed restaurant where she works, most diners are out-of-towners who reserve days or weeks in advance.

Portland is not for everyone. The Old Port wharves, for instance, "have the fishing nets out there, the warehouses, the stray cats that live off the fish," Clemens says. "We're not like the other waterfront cities on the East Coast, where everything is nice."

Also, zoning discourages national chain stores in the Old Port. Clemens says some tourists miss "that name recognition of Crate and Barrel or Restoration Hardware." Unless they find such stores, she says, these tourists don't "feel they've arrived at the center of something."

To others, Portland's quiriness is a plus. "It's not all gentrified and prettified," says Sarah Ferris of Boston, who visited last month. "You feel like this is a real place, not some shopping mall or a theme park. It's authentic."

Portland's variety also explains its popularity with visitors, says David Vail, an economist at nearby Bowdoin College. "Portland is a hub for visitors who want to explore lots of different things. Baby boomers with discretionary time and income are neither hard adventurers nor sedentary beachgoers. They look for lots of attractions."

Using Portland as a base, they can explore Maine's wooded mountainous interior; take ferries to the many islands in Casco Bay; hit the beaches to the south; or shop the outlets in Freeport, home of mail-order giant L.L. Bean.

And Portland's not *that* cold. It's farther south than Eugene, Ore.; in January the average high is 31 degrees, only 8 degrees lower than in New York City.

Best of all, from Portland's point of view, tourism doesn't hurt. Charles Colgan, a South Portland resident and associate director of Maine's Center for Tourism Research, says Portland and tourism are a better fit than elsewhere in Maine, where in summer some small communities are overwhelmed by visiting throngs.

In Portland, tourists and locals don't have to step on each other. "Different parts of the city are well-defined," Colgan says. "The tourists go to Commercial Street and the Old Port, and that area is distinct from the downtown business corridor where local people go. Each group has its own zone."

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