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August 23, 2010

Food, fine design, easy access — part of the charm of Portland, Maine

By Christine Tibbetts/The Tifton Gazette
CNHI

TIFTON — What! No lobster?

Lobster didn't dominate my dinner tables in Portland, Maine, three nights in June. Certainly is a famous local food, and plentiful, but chefs and cooks and eating-out neighborhood people were serving up all sorts of other specialties too and that's what I wanted to try.

Chunky chowder with seafood from Casco Bay at Eve's Garden in the Harbor Hotel. Asparagus bisque there too. Wild Maine mussels in star anise cream.

Baked beans and brown bread topped with a baked egg at the locals-gather-here Front Room on Congress Street. Ginger mint tea at the foot sanctuary.



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Autumn leaves are a grand reason to visit Maine in the fall and so is the Oct. 21-23 Harvest on the Harbor food and wine event with local and organic food and spirits.

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Maine blueberries in muffins and pancakes and handfuls. So many chefs and food artisans, brewers and spirit makers that Portland devotes an October festival to Maine food and wine.

For a culinary holiday, consider "Harvest on the Harbor" Oct. 21 – 23.

Small markets downtown with breads and bakery goodies, fresh fruit, cheeses and wines nestled in among the houses, shops, museums, and gardens along easy-to-walk streets.

Easy city I think Portland is to plan a picnic, especially if you like to relax in beautiful gardens.

Summer flowers are everywhere, gigantic lush peonies and pansies in every hue. These folks rejoice in the light and warmth of their short warm-weather season.

Practical, right-to-the-point pleasant people: that's who I found in Portland plus two small Maine towns.

A windjammer sailing adventure triggered the trip north so discovering Rockland, Camden and the Maine gateway city Portland became a bonus.

Portland propelled me to Europe on an easy afternoon walk with architecture reminiscent of a British countryside city center.

Modern buildings too and volunteer Bob King in the Observatory Museum urged me to visit the just-renovated public library, including the Maine sculptors exhibit.

Can't say that's advice I hear often but his info about the last maritime signal tower in America was so interesting I trusted him.

Makes sense that cities with deep ports but no view of the open ocean needed a way to signal the ships and Portland's 1807 tower survived.

Privately owned until given to the city in 1937 and renovated in 1939 as a WPA project, the Observatory Museum it is today gives visitors with good stair-climbing legs a view all the way to the White Mountains of Vermont.

Water matters in Portland with Casco Bay to the east, the deep-water estuary to the Fore River on the west and the bustling Portland Harbor anchoring the south.

This is the real deal, a working harbor. Sure, shops and eating places too, but the mood is productive and that can mean hearty coffee and fresh seafood.

I stayed in the handsome Harbor Hotel with easy waterfront access and launching points for a variety of walking tours—my own or the guided kind.

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My travel buddy Syd Blackmarr and I strolled a lot, starting with breakfast at the Casco Bay end of Congress Street, wanting to poke our noses in every interesting spot.

Second day we discovered Norm Forgey with Maine Day Trip and hopped in his comfy car to learn more about what we had seen and what we missed and absorb some of his abundant "Maine is so interesting" knowledge.

That works in Portland and all around the state because Forgey likes day trips and likes personalizing them to particular interests.

A favorite day journey of his connects the Winslow Homer and Edward Hopper paintings in the Portland Museum of Art with houses on the rocky Maine coast where the artists actually lived and painted.

Maine artists are abundant in this museum, famous as Hopper, Homer, the Wyeth family, Robert Indiana, Mary Cassatt and Louise Nevelson plus some not-known-to-me Mainers with interesting works.

The Portland Museum of Art recently acquired Winslow Homer's studio at Prouts Neck, 12 miles south of the city, and they're restoring it as it was during his life, 1836 – 1910.

What a pleasure to actually see those crashing waves on the rocky Maine coast and see his paintings of them. Homer is credited with transforming American coastal painting.

I travel to transform myself.

Ulysses S. Grant is in this museum too, a taller-than-life sculpture intended for the U. S. Capitol but rejected saying he looked too battle weary.

How could he not?

Lots of people were in the Museum of Art, just like in the library. Local people I think, appreciating community. For me, that makes travel better, being in the places that reflect and intrigue the ones who live there.

Right next door is the Children's Museum, bursting with energy and happy families. Syd and I hightailed it to the top floor for the Camera Obscura, a popular 15th century device that actually dates back to 500 BC.

Louisa Donelson, Children's Museum visitor guide, says it's one of only a handful in the U.S. and certainly my first.

I'd read about Camera Obscura in "Girl with the Pearl Earring," a tale about artist Jan Vermeer but never thought I'd use one. Portland's distinctive that way.

Here's the deal: best panorama view of the city in a room without windows. A real image appears through a small hole or lens into a darkened chamber.

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Vermeer used one to paint his portraits. Portland Children's Museum uses it to show the city scenes outside and teach all kinds of architecture, photography, optics, city planning and other lessons.

I simply liked it.

Wish I'd gotten in the Museum of African Culture on Brown Street, but showed up too late—intriguing art in the windows indicating feminine spirit traditions: mothers and grandmothers, queens and queen mothers, princesses, the feminine ocean.

Much of what I found and admired is on Congress and Free streets, basically parallel, and only two blocks north of my Harbor Hotel. Portland is a sensible walking city.

Soakology, however, my wonderful walking-by-it discovery, isn't on any street. Number 30 City Center is the address and it's a pedestrian walkway, no cars on this short stretch.

Who doesn't need a foot sanctuary, even without knowing such a place exists? Hope I stumble across another one in my journeys.

Teahouse on the first floor, familiar and exotic brews, chilled, steamed and steeped. Soups and cheeses too, plus chocolates and cookies so stay awhile upstairs.

Downstairs, the lights dim, and in front of every overstuffed chair and sofa are enormous ceramic pots, generous for my size tens. Some comfy chairs are tucked away in curtained corners for those shy about their feet. Men and women.

Healing massage at Soakology, not nail polish. Omega 3 and flax seed. Seaweed and spirulina mud. Neem and date seed. Deep lavender. Maine woods remedy.

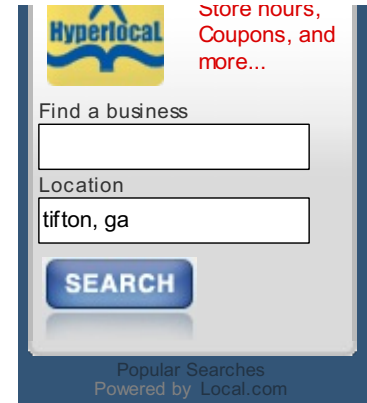
Ayurvedic assessment and massage too, the ancient healing art of India.

Longfellow Book Store is next door, one of many bookstores in this lively city with its popular library.

Longfellow himself is in evidence too with tours of his childhood home on, you guessed, it Congress Street. Fantastic gardens out back, another good Portland picnic spot with comfortable benches. Even if history tours aren't your cup of tea, I'd recommend a Portland visit for the gardens adjoining so many historic churches, museums and homes.

Might take a book of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poems to read in the garden. "Evangeline" I remembered and tour guide James Horrigan taught me something new.

"Nathaniel Hawthorne had the idea for the epic poem about the Acadian people in Nova Scotia moving to New France, now Louisiana, and he told his friend Longfellow.



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“Longfellow wrote it himself and gained almost-instant fame,” Horrigan said.

Some friend, I grumbled to myself.

The Wadsworth-Longfellow House is decorated with original furnishings and family memorabilia, not always the norm on historic home tours.

Victoria Mansion, also walkable in the opposite direction from Harbor Hotel, is filled with 90 percent of its original contents.

That means 1860 in an Italian villa style for multi-millionaires Ruggles Sylvester and Olive Morse. Lavish just begins to describe this place.

Follow Portland’s curves and angles, wide streets, promenades and water overlooks and stop often to taste the local cuisine.

Talk to people too. Mainers respond happily, sharing information and acting interested in their visitors.

Don’t really know what I expected on my first visit to Maine but it felt just right, like Maine should.



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August 23, 2010 1 Photo

Poison plants: ID them just in case



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The Georgia Poison Control Center often receives questions about the dangers of mushrooms or houseplants, said Gaylord Lopez, the center's director. But when someone calls about the toxicity of any plant, the answers to a series of questions determine how much exposure someone has had to the plant. The information is then compared to a plant database to see if signs or symptoms match the toxicity. Lopez advises homeowners to identify the plants in their landscape and label them for easy identification. This information can prove life-saving if the plant is ever eaten.



August 15, 2010 1 Photo

Alaska: Bigger and wilder when seen from a small ship



Halibut filled my dinner plate one night in Alaska, while the bear settled for sedge grass. Big brown coastal bear. How can I be so sure? He was easy to spot outside my window on a small ship anchored in a quiet cove in Alaska's Inside Passage. Didn't even need binoculars.

July 31, 2010 1 Photo

Rockland, Maine: A living gallery of art, architecture and fine dining



Nooks, crannies and peninsulas extend Maine's rocky coastline into amazing zigzags of discovery, perfect for seeing from a sailing schooner.

July 10, 2010 1 Photo

6 nights on a schooner



Heave ho mates! Unfurl the sail. I hardly knew my muscles strained, helping to sail a National Landmark schooner in Maine's great big Penobscot Bay. sunny, cold and

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name's greatness. Onlookers say, sunny, cool and windy in early June. Credit the sea chanteurs for mesmerizing me.

July 4, 2010 1 Photo

Chateau Elan: Charm and elegance in friendly ways



Food is the focus when Executive Chef Mark Suennemann shares his philosophy about the eight restaurants at Chateau Elan, a winery and resort in the foothills of the North Georgia mountains, each eatery with a distinct personality.

June 26, 2010 1 Photo

Marietta: Georgia historic sites vibrant with modern activities



Never knew I wanted to be a "Windy" until spending an afternoon at the Gone With the Wind Museum in Marietta.

"Trekkie" I understand from all those years of Star Trek, but the epic Civil War era novel and movie hadn't grabbed me for groupie status.

Sure has pulled thousands of others to this vibrant community a tad north of Atlanta, caring passionately about Scarlett and Rhett and the life of Margaret Mitchell.

June 12, 2010 1 Photo

Antiquities in Georgia?



Stay for dinner when you check out the "Explorations in Antiquity" center in a pleasant Georgia community south west of Atlanta. It's a first-century-style meal.

June 6, 2010 1 Photo

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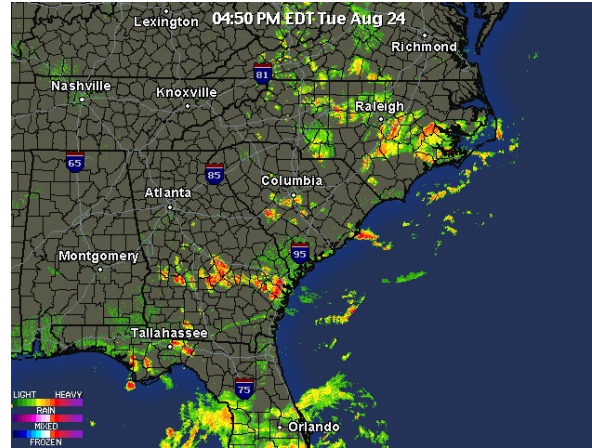
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