

# Travel

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*In this beguiling Pacific Northwest city of artisanal cafes, offbeat museums, funky neighborhoods and food carts from every corner of the world, the good life comes cheap.*

BY MATT GROSS

## FRUGAL PORTLAND

**E**VERYONE here looks great!" is not the kind of comment you hear often in Portland, Ore., where outfits seem chosen to match the cloudy skies, fabrics tend toward the waterproof, and anything with buttons counts as formal-wear.

Yet those were exactly the words that burst from a woman who brushed past me one night at Lizard Lounge, a clothing store in the upscale Pearl District of Portland. And she was right. The crowd that first Thursday in April — the first Thursday of each month has an evening of art-gallery openings and shopping parties — was startlingly attractive, and in a very Portland way: functional but chic. One woman wore a black bob and a silvery, thigh-length, probably impermeable trench coat. Fleece abounded, but was form-fitting. Quiksilver's hard-to-find Limited Collection

Portland is easy to see by bike. Your hotel may even include one with your room.

hung on the racks next to clothes by Nau, a local label whose jackets, polos and shorts lie on the sporty end of the fashion spectrum — or is that the fashionable end of the sporty spectrum?

One accessory, however, was ubiquitous: as breakdance crews windmilled and as the Portland legend Fogatron did his human beatbox routine, every hipster — male, female or otherwise — carried a plastic cup full of beer. Free beer.

And not just free beer but pretty good free beer. Next to the cash registers, barmen pumped kegs of hefeweizen and amber ale, both made by Widmer Brothers, one of the two oldest breweries in what has become the microbrew capital of America. (There are better beers in Portland, but compared with your usual party beer, Widmer's is premier cru.) People drank,

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# Frugal Portland

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refilled their cups and, eventually, with enough beer in their systems, bought expensive Nau gear — at a First Thursday 20 percent discount.

What this Frugal Traveler loved more than the free suds, however, was the utter normalcy. No one seemed surprised that drinks would be given away, let alone that they'd actually be worth drinking. And in that casual acceptance, I discerned a characteristic of Portland that would enchant me over the course of a week, as I explored restaurants and bars, artisanal cafes and mushrooming food carts, funky neighborhoods and weird little museums. Amid economic catastrophe — Oregon has the country's second-highest unemployment rate — there was a general indifference to wealth. In its place was a dedication to the things that really matter: hearty food and drink, cultural pursuits both high and low, days in the outdoors and evenings out with friends. It's the good life, and in Portland it still comes cheap.

Take the two-year-old Ace Hotel, where I stayed for much of my sojourn. This boutique reincarnation of what was once the mildly dingy Clyde Hotel is in the heart of downtown, steps from major public transit stops. It was comfortable beyond what I'm accustomed to, with richly rugged wool blankets from Portland's Pendleton Woolen Mills on the bed and crushed-pearl-and-charcoal soap-on-a-rope by the sink. And, at \$75 a night, it was eminently affordable, although I had to forgo an en suite bathroom and embrace the unexpected thrill of walking down the hall — in nothing but my Adidas and my Ace hooded bathrobe — to the sparkling shared (but private) showers.

But it was the freebies that seduced me. Stacks of of-the-moment magazines — Frank, Color, Tokion, ReadyMade — lay about to read on lobby couches or take to your room. Elegant Jorg & Olif bicycles were available free to hotel guests. At the adjacent Stumptown Coffee, powerful French press brews were free Monday mornings till Tax Day. Rarely do I really like to hang around hotels, but like a cosmopolitan version

of an all-inclusive Caribbean resort (the kind you swear to resent but wind up in a codependent relationship with), the Ace kept me in its warm, value-added embrace longer than I thought possible.

Eventually, though, I would break away and go off — by bike, by foot or by bus (a weeklong TriMet pass is \$22.50) — in search of sustenance, whether in sometimes stately, sometimes shabby downtown or over the Willamette River into the lazily gentrifying neighborhoods of the east side.

This was no easy task, because Portland is overflowing with great, affordable restaurants. In dozens of meals, I don't think I was ever truly disappointed with a single bite, nor did I ever leave hungry, nor did my friends and I ever spend more than \$25 a person. In fact, if I had any regrets, it was that I felt duty-bound not to repeat a restaurant visit no matter how much I liked a place and wanted to return.

This joyful stress would begin with the city's most important meal: breakfast. Despite its laid-back aura, Portland is an early-rising town, and its commuting cyclists need fuel for their morning rides. They could do worse than stop at Bunk Sandwiches, which in the six months since it opened has started a meat-and-other-things-on-bread renaissance by combining high-quality ingredients in innovative ways.

The house creations appear each day on a chalkboard near the doorway — an Oregon albacore tuna melt, a P.B.L.T. of pork belly, lettuce and green tomato pickles — but at 7 a.m. there's really only one choice, the classic breakfast sandwich (sausage patty, sharp Tillamook Cheddar and a fried egg on a poppy-seed hard roll, \$5). As is, it's stellar. But add anchovies (\$2), and it's something else entirely, the fishy saltiness amping up the sausage's sweetness and the tartness of the cheese. Seven bucks

may seem a lot, but for the best breakfast sandwich ever, it's a bargain.

Another morning, I met my friend Alison Williams Colman and her husband, Laurence Colman, at Broder, a Scandinavian brunch spot on a quintessentially Portland section of Southeast Clinton Street. (Bike lane? Check. Brewery? Check. Discount art-house cinema? Vintage stores? Punk rock record shops? Check, check, check!) Broder was packed, but the free coffee in the next-door waiting room kept us going until we could squeeze into a table and order some smoked-trout hash. When the \$41 check came, Alison surprised me by whipping out a \$25 coupon she'd bought for \$2 on Restaurant.com. The waiter accepted it without a peep (he got a big tip), and I marveled again at how well Portlanders live on so little.

Portland's food carts may be the best example of that. Carts have existed for roughly a decade, offering low-cost

lunchtime grub, but in the last couple of years they've exploded in numbers and ambition, with cuisines ranging from Mexican and Thai to Korean and Kazakh to Dutch waffles and Belgian fries. (A Russian cart even found brief fame as a destination on last season's "Amazing Race" finale, but it has since closed.)

Today, there are almost 400 carts around Portland, most of them clustered into "pods" that ring parking lots, and thanks to low start-up costs and Multnomah County's straightforward licensing and inspection regime, aspiring chefs can make their names without major investments. As a New Yorker I was jealous; as the Frugal Traveler, overjoyed at what I could find within a single pod. The slices (\$2 to \$3) at Give Pizza a Chance were excellent, with a thin inner crust, a thicker, chewy outer crust and fresh, brightly flavored toppings (like the tomatoes, basil, artichokes and onions on the "Compost"



MATT GROSS writes the Frugal Traveler blog, which is updated every

## WHERE EVEN RESTAURANTS HAVE WHEELS

### HOW TO GET THERE

Delta, JetBlue and Continental all fly nonstop from New York to Portland, with fares in mid-May starting around \$319, based on a recent Internet search. Delta and JetBlue fly out of Kennedy Airport; Continental out of Newark.

### HOW TO GET AROUND

Bicycles at the Ace Hotel are free to the first guests to claim them, but if you're staying elsewhere, you can rent cool three-speed Batavus bikes, plus panniers, for \$100 a week at Clever Cycles, 908 Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard, (503) 334-1560, [www.clevercycles.com](http://www.clevercycles.com). Unless you're a die-hard cyclist, it's worth investing in a public-transit pass, \$22.50 for seven days, which also includes transportation on the light-rail train ([www.trimet.org](http://www.trimet.org)) connecting the airport and downtown Portland.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Ace Hotel**, 1022 Southwest Stark Street, (503) 228-2277, [www.acehotel.com](http://www.acehotel.com). If you don't want to stay in a single room with a shared bath (\$95 for a weekend in May), standard doubles begin at \$140 a night for a weekend stay.

### WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

To learn about food carts, visit [www.foodcartspdx.com](http://www.foodcartspdx.com).  
**Stumptown Coffee**, multiple loca-

tions; [www.stumptowncoffee.com](http://www.stumptowncoffee.com).

**Bunk Sandwiches**, 621 Southeast Morrison Street; (503) 477-9515; [www.bunksandwiches.com](http://www.bunksandwiches.com).

**Broder**, 2508 Southeast Clinton Street; (503) 736-3333; [www.broderpdx.com](http://www.broderpdx.com).

**Barista**, 539 Northwest 13th Avenue; [www.baristapdx.com](http://www.baristapdx.com).

**Ten01**, 1001 Northwest Couch Street; (503) 226-3463; [www.ten-01.com](http://www.ten-01.com).

**Ping**, 102 Northwest Fourth Avenue; (503) 229-7464; [www.pingpdx.com](http://www.pingpdx.com).

**New Old Lompoc**, 1616 Northwest 23rd Avenue; (503) 225-1855; [www.newoldlompoc.com](http://www.newoldlompoc.com).

**Hopworks Urban Brewery**, 2944 Southeast Powell Boulevard; (503) 232-4677; [www.hopworksbeer.com](http://www.hopworksbeer.com).

**Por Qué No?**, 3524 North Mississippi Avenue; (503) 467-4149; [www.porquenotacos.com](http://www.porquenotacos.com).

**Pok Pok**, 3226 Southeast Division Street; (503) 232-1387; [www.pokpokpdx.com](http://www.pokpokpdx.com).

**Laurelthirst**, 2958 Northeast Glisan Street; (503) 232-1504; [www.laurelthirst.com](http://www.laurelthirst.com).

**Backspace**, 115 Northwest Fifth Avenue; (503) 248-2900; [www.backspace.bz](http://www.backspace.bz).

**Acropolis Steakhouse Plus**, 8325 Southeast McLoughlin Boulevard; (503) 231-9611.

slice). Next door, at Tábor, I followed the painted instructions to "Czech Out Czech Food" and fell in love with the schmitzowich (\$6.50), a fried pork or chicken cutlet bound to soft bread with ajvar (a red-pepper spread) and stinging horseradish sauce. Brunch Box, around the corner, was making its own English muffins, plus crazy burgers like the OMG! (\$6), a cheeseburger with egg, ham, SPAM and bacon; and the YouCanHasCheeseburger (\$5), a patty stuck between two Texas-toast grilled cheese sandwiches. (Bring Lipitor.)

One of the best things about food carts, in Portland and elsewhere, is getting to talk to the person who's cooking your meal. Ziba Ljucevic, who runs Ziba's Pitas, is one of the sweetest operators in all of Portland's pods. A Bosnian immigrant, she arrived in 2002 just after the Balkan wars, speaking almost no English but fluent in the culinary language of her homeland. Unlike Greek pitas, Ms. Ljucevic's are round, breadly pies of surpassing lightness, stuffed with ground meat, spinach, zucchini or (my favorite) eggs, cheese and sour cream. For \$5.95, she'll give you a quarter of each, plus cucumber salad and a puddle of ajvar, and if you chat with her, as I did, about regional pita variations among the former Yugoslav republics, she may throw in a free drink.

The food carts even have Portland's second-favorite beverage covered. Spella Caffé, next door to Ziba's, pulls what I deemed the best espresso in Portland, rich and mellow. At \$1.75, it's also the least expensive of the city's high-end coffee drinks. At Stumptown's several locations, the sharp, bitter and acidic shot costs \$2. It's meant to go with milk, they say; alas, I can't drink milk.

Meanwhile, at the three-month-old Barista, the champion barista Billy Wilson is trying something new. Instead of sticking with one roaster's beans, he puts Stumptown's, Intelligentia's and Ecco Caffé's (among others) all on the menu (at \$2.50 a shot), along with descriptions of their vastly different flavor profiles. Ecco's, for example, was "dark berry," and it did indeed remind me that coffee starts its life as a berry on a bush.

After breakfast, lunch and coffee, I put my insatiable hunger aside to explore both the well-known and obscure corners of the city. I invested \$4 in a ride on the aerial tram, a gondola that as-

cends from the banks of the Willamette to the hilltop Oregon Health and Science University, where I gazed out over the city's many bridges, its low-slung east-side neighborhoods and the peaks of Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens on the horizon. I browsed labyrinthine Powell's Books — Portland's unofficial library — for an hour with no intention of buying. I popped into the free Museum of Contemporary Craft to see Dar-

*At one stop, exotic dancers and a good, cheap steak.*

rel Morris's moving, large-scale embroidered "drawings" of funerals, a man in a suit and random people pointing.

I also went to the Vacuum Cleaner Museum. Housed in a corner of Stark's Vacuums, it's a free display of antique floor-cleaning devices, from pneumatic canisters to decades-old stand-up models that could almost go on sale today. And I learned that while William Hoover is generally considered the vacuum's inventor, the guys at Stark's see Daniel Hess's bellows-and-brushes device as the original. (Who knew?)

When I heard that Beau Breedlove, the former intern who at the age of 17 began an affair with Portland's mayor,

Sam Adams, was signing copies of *Unzipped* magazine, in which he appears 98 percent naked, I hurried to Fantasy, an adult store, dutifully bought the latest issue (\$8.99; no sales tax in Oregon!) and stood in line for my autograph — a piece of history.

And — out of necessity — I exercised. Often, I'd wake early for a run, jogging up through the blossoming cherry trees on the Willamette River's west bank to the Broadway drawbridge, or down the Eastbank Esplanade into the Springwater Corridor, a series of trails where the noise of the highways and industrial parks fell away, leaving me alone with the water, the trees and the geese. Once, I even rode the MAX Light Rail to Beaverton, where Nike's headquarters has a 1.9-mile track encircling it. Non-employees are technically forbidden, but unofficially this pleasant jog past reed-rimmed duck ponds is open to everyone. Plus, you can refuel at Nike's inexpensive cafeteria. Just don't wear Adidas running shorts, as I did. Even in informal Portland, that's a faux pas.

One Sunday afternoon, my high-school buddy Tee Cherry and I visited the Burnside Project, an improvised (and free) skateboard park that epitomizes the frugal Portland spirit. Eighteen years ago, this spot under the east side of the Burnside Bridge was nothing but used syringes and dirty mattresses until a few skaters decided to take over. In the ensuing years, the park became famous for its challenging terrain and incessant evolution. Every year, its

founders rebuilt it, and along the way learned the intricate (and valuable) art of pouring cement. Today it's a mecca for hard-core skaters, which Tee and I no longer are. Instead, we took our boards down the street to a nice ledge where falls meant dust and bruises rather than concussions and broken bones. Still, I felt, I'd paid my respects.

All that exertion justified the other indulgences, which would resume around 4 p.m. with happy hour. Portland requires that its restaurants serve a certain amount of food with their booze, so even the fanciest places offer high-end treats at a big discount. My friends and I ate briny-sweet Willapa Bay oysters (\$1 apiece) and short-rib macaroni and cheese (\$5) at *Penol*, one of the city's top restaurants; and at the pan-Asian *Ping*, in Portland's dilapidated Chinatown, we had Thai-style dried cuttlefish (paradoxically juicy) and Macanese pork-chop sandwiches.

Happy hour didn't always mean food. On Mondays, it meant \$2.50 pints of the wonderful smoked-malt *Lompoc Strong Draft*, at the New Old Lompoc tavern, and on Tuesdays, it meant \$3.50 IPAs at Hopworks Urban Brewery, an energy-

**ONLINE: VIDEO**

From Bosnian pitas to Cajun burgers, see how food carts are transforming Portland's culinary scene. [nytimes.com/travel](http://nytimes.com/travel)



FAR LEFT Adrienne Kirk in the lobby of the Ace Hotel. LEFT Setting up the menu at Dunk Sandwiches.



ABOVE Among the city's food carts are some that sell crepes and Belgian fries to late-night diners. LEFT Spella Caffé is known for its espresso.



LEFT The Lizard Lounge clothing store celebrates First Thursday with bands and free beer.

efficient brewpub that's a stop for cyclists on their way home from work.

Happy hour's only drawback was that it obviated a proper sit-down dinner. Only by strenuous effort did I make it to *Por Qué No?*, a colorful taqueria, and to *Pok Pok*, a Thai restaurant whose rendition of grilled boar collar was nearly as good as what I've eaten in Bangkok. Neither meal came to more than \$25 a person, tip included.

The rest of the time, I'd give up and go out. I played 50-cent rounds of *Addams Family* pinball and drank \$2.50 *Sessions* beer at *Ground Kontrol*, an '80s-style video arcade, then walked around the corner to *Backspace*, a techno-geeky cafe-bar where I heard an almost-great local band called *What's Up?*, which melded a cresting wave of sound with the burbling bleeps of eight-bit video game soundtracks. At the *Laur* rethrust pub, the bluegrass band *Jack-straw jammed*, and I wound up chatting with a white-haired man in a tie-dyed shirt. He was Richard Milson, known as *Millstone*, and five minutes into our conversation, apropos of nothing, he offered me the use of his woodland cabin by Mount Hood National Forest.

Finally, and because, as my friend Becky said, a visit to a Portland strip club is inevitable, I wound up one night at the *Acropolis Steakhouse Plus*, a Vegas-y joint with a \$3 cover charge that had been recommended by — of all people — my little sister. She liked it, however, not for the performers (who earned it his nickname, the *A Crop*) but for the ludicrously cheap steaks. My eight-ounce sirloin cost \$5.50 and came deliciously medium-rare. This being Portland, the meat was locally sourced, too, from cattle on the owner's ranch.

Weirdly enough, these busy nights would end early, and I'd be in bed shortly after midnight. In retrospect, this made perfect sense. Good living takes its toll on the body if not on the wallet, and we all need energy to face the next day's agenda of food, friends and frugality. And every evening, as I drifted off in my soft Ace Hotel bed, under the reassuring weight of that wool blanket, I would try to figure out how to answer a question I heard almost daily, from strangers and from old pals who saw how smoothly I'd settled into my Portland routine. "So," they'd ask, "when are you moving here?" I still don't know what to tell them. ■