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Photo: Leah Nash



TAKE ME AWAY

Welcome to Portland - where the beer is crafty, fine dining is dished up sans pretension and the silly season lives up to the name.

Story Martin Skegg

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The F--- Up (18-19 December), encourages everyone to join in, though the house band is as likely to play Wham! or Queen as a carol. During SantaCon (21 December) the city is taken over by hundreds of revellers dressed as Santa (as well as the odd Grinch), 'ho-ho-ho'ing from one bar to the next. Come decked out in your best version of 'Saint Nick' to take part. If brass instruments are your thing, the 29th Annual Tuba Christmas Concert (14 December) brings together 300 players to belt out seasonal selections in Pioneer Courthouse Square.

P

ortland isn't like most other US cities. It has a compact, European-style feel. It takes its public transport seriously, and is home to one of the largest urban forests in the country. Its food and drink scene rivals those of cities twice its size and some of the most stunning scenery in the Pacific Northwest sits on its doorstep.

It also holds an annual naked bike ride, the largest in the world.

This is a city with a reputation for idiosyncrasy - 'Keep Portland Weird' is its unofficial motto. Here you can find a guy riding a unicycle dressed in a kilt and a Darth Vader mask playing flaming bagpipes, a carpet at the airport with its own Instagram account, bike polo matches in the park, a vegan strip club and toy horses tethered to metal rings on the pavement. A strong streak of individuality pervades the lifestyles of its inhabitants. It is one reason people move to and visit Portland - that and the tax-free shopping.

SEASONAL SHENANIGANS

Come to Portland during the festive season and you'll find suitably unorthodox celebrations alongside more pedestrian activities such as tree lightings and carol concerts. The 'holiday-adjacent' alternative festive singalong, Cheer

NOT SO FINE DINING

Portland is also one of the country's foremost food and drink cities, punching well above its weight given its relative size (the 25th-most-populous municipality in the US).

On a budget? Explore some of the 500 food carts dotted around the city serving cuisine from all corners of the globe.

At the top end, don't expect the white tablecloth trappings of fine dining - eating out is generally a casual affair. James Beard Award winner Naomi Pomeroy offers a chef's menu served at communal tables at Beast, while Portland luminary Vitaly Paley helped pioneer Pacific Northwest cooking at his restaurant in a simple townhouse. Paley has been known to create his exceedingly seasonal menus (including dessert) around a single ingredient, such as radishes.

Recently, chefs have taken to opening secondary spots that are more playful, more approachable and lighter on the wallet. »

Photo: Courtesy of Pioneer Courthouse Square

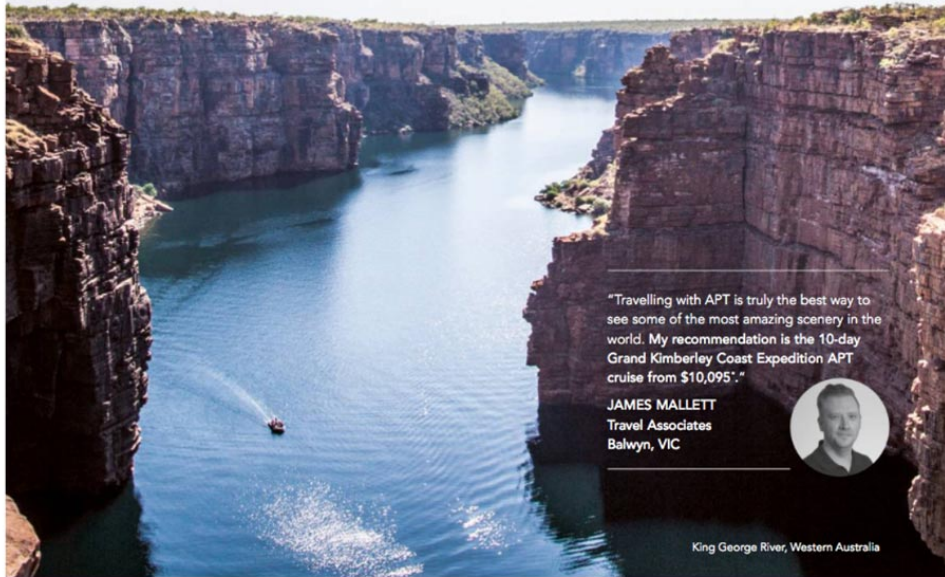
Above The Tuba Christmas Concert brings free festive cheer to the downtown community hub Pioneer Courthouse Square.

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Photo: Leah Nash

OK Omens is an informal offshoot of fine dining stalwart Castagna. Classic dishes are enthusiastically re-imagined, such as the Late Night Spicy Girlfriend Spaghetti with its lick of Thai chilli. The wine list, meanwhile, is the friendliest in town (where else do you get wine shots and tasting notes such as "like squeezing caramelised nectarine juice over your ex-lover's body while listening to Ziggy Stardust"?). Similarly, chef Gabriel Rucker (of highbrow French venue Le Pigeon) offers inventive dishes from morning to night at casual bistro Canard (try the pancakes in duck gravy for an indulgent brunch).

FEAST AT THE MARKETS

Portland is known for its food markets - the biggest is the bustling downtown Farmer's Market (every Saturday, 9am-2pm). Expect to spot a prominent chef or two hunting for ingredients for that evening's menu from the 100 or so vendors selling seasonal produce and craft foods, along with live music. If you prefer to be more hands on with your food, the Proletariat Butchery offers classes in tackling a whole lamb or pig.

The Portland Saturday Market is the nation's oldest outdoor market, operating since 1974. Here you'll find all kinds of crafted goods, from jewellery made from skateboards to cannabis salt soaks and stuffed puppets. The market's Holiday Spirits Fest (21-22 December) offers an opportunity to taste spirits from local distilleries, each of which presents a signature cocktail.

Of myriad holiday markets, the most distinctive belongs to a brewing company. Baerlic's WoodWorker Holiday Market (7 December) celebrates all things to do with wood - from axes and cutting boards to foods and spirits aged in wood. Meanwhile, Renegade Portland (21-22 December) is packed with local artists, makers and designers selling their wares.

PINTS AND PINBALL MACHINES

Portland has long been synonymous with beer and boasts 70-plus breweries. In summer there seems to be a beer festival every week, but the Holiday Ale Festival (4-8 December) is a winter fixture. Taste more than 50 robust beers including seasonal releases such as Imperial Gingersnap Milk Stout, The Hydronym (communion-inspired grape- and cracker-flavored porter) and Cinnamon Babka (a milkshake IPA).

You'll also find many bars getting into the spirit. The best deck their walls for the holidays and offer seasonally appropriate drinks to a playlist of festive melodies. The PDX Nog-Off brings together top bartenders who compete to make the best eggnog cocktail (yes, it's a thing).

Portland events happen come rain or shine, and if you come during the festive season be prepared for rain. (Hate the rain? July to September is >



Top to bottom Consult foodcartspartland.com (<http://foodcartspartland.com>)

Vintage and the quirky is embraced in Portland; wood-aged beer, whiskey and barley wine are all poured at the WoodWorker Market.



<http://virginaustralia.com>

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TAKE ME AWAY

mostly precipitation free.) Fortunately, there is plenty to do on showery days. Ground Kontrol arcade offers more than 90 original electronic games and the largest pinball machine collection in the Northwest. If museums are more your speed, the Freakybuttrue Peculiarium offers an eclectic mix of horror, humour and general gross stuff, while the Zymoglyphic Museum houses artefacts from a place that doesn't exist. Or you could just go look at vacuums in the vacuum museum. Unless, of course, you fancy going to the roller derby and watching 2018 world champions, the Rose City Rollers.

GET OUT OF TOWN

The good news is that, out of doors, winters are generally mild. Average snowfall is only about 8cm a year - any whiff of a snowstorm will have locals ditching their cars, taking the day off and talking of a 'snowpocalypse'. For visitors, that



Left to right: Mount Hood offers one of the longest snow seasons across the US; Huber's iconic Spanish coffee is served with a dose of fire-wielding showmanship.

means it's relatively easy to take advantage of the wintry playgrounds outside Portland.




A 1.5-hour drive south-east of the city is Mount Hood, a 3500m volcano home to six winter sports areas. Timberline is perhaps the most famous thanks to its iconic 1937 lodge, which featured in cult movie *The Shining* ("Here's Johnny!"). As well as skiing (with night runs available on weekends), Timberline Lodge gets into the holiday spirit with special dinners, holiday crafts, scavenger hunts and beer and wine tastings.

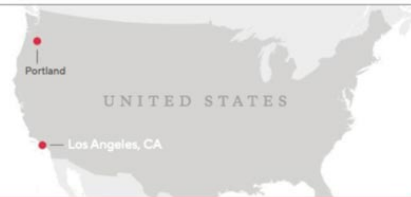
On the eastern side of the mountain lies the largest ski resort, Mount Hood Meadows, complete with a Nordic centre and snowshoe tours, plus a full December calendar including breakfast with Santa (22-23 December). Craft brewers head up the mountain to pour seasonal ales for the Winter Brew Fest (14 December).

If the weather plays nice, take a drive along the Columbia River Gorge. Each bend on the 1200m-deep canyon opens up a new vista.

Then head back to the city for a warming Spanish coffee at the legendary Huber's bar before watching the night fall across downtown from around the indoor fireplace at Tope, a rooftop bar and restaurant atop the Hoxton hotel. Now that's festive cheer, Portland-style.

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