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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

A Traveler's Guide to Oregon City, aka 'Portland Without the Weird'

One of the Pacific Northwest's most historic cities is blazing new trails. Here's where to eat well, drink plentifully, shop and kayak in the increasingly hip Oregon City

By *Kathleen Squires*

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I SAT ON THE sunny patio of the Oregon City Brewery Co. flummoxed by the vast menu. Should I try a Pipe Dream smoked beer described as “liquid bacon,” or the Plumbelievable! sour ale, brewed with Oregon plums and boysenberries (and which apparently “glows with an incandescent pink-purplish hue”) or one of the other 40-some offerings. I might expect to find such exuberant excess in beer-obsessed Portland, but I was 13 miles south in Oregon City. Better known in recent years, if known at all, as a struggling lumber town and an early American historical site, Oregon City is setting fresh tracks.



Oregon City Brewing Co. serves 40-odd types of beer, from barrel-aged to bottled. PHOTO: CLAYTON COTTERELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Described by local boosters as Portland without the weird (or the price tag), Oregon City still exists mostly within Portlandia's shadow. That wasn't always the case. The Hudson Bay Company established the city on the intersection of the Willamette and Clackamas Rivers in 1829 as a fur-trading center. In 1844, it became the first officially incorporated city west of the Rockies. Once the Oregon Territory was formed in 1848, Oregon City became its capital. In 1851 that title passed over to Salem, and Oregon City grew into a center for lumber, paper, flour and wool mills.

' We slid along the piers where barking sea lions sunbathed. '

History buffs, along with elementary-schoolers on forced marches, learn all about the city's glory days at

the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, which turned out to be far more interesting than its unimaginative name ominously suggested. Giant bow frames mimicking covered wagons tower over the center's three rustic buildings. Inside, "interpreters" in period garb (bonnets and all) enthusiastically illuminate the history of the land-hungry pioneers who followed the 2,170-mile Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri, to its terminus at Oregon City. Interactive exhibits show how to properly prepare and pack a wagon (150 pounds of bacon was an essential) and what you'd find in a pioneer tool kit. As I greeted my "interpreter," she handed me a Mason jar filled with cream. "Shake it as we walk through the exhibits," she instructed. "And you'll end up making butter in the pioneer way." Less apt to cause sore arms was the actual pioneer way—hanging cans of cream off the rolling, rattling wagons to agitate the contents into butter.

A mile down the road from the interpretive center lies Oregon City's second most famous site: the Municipal Elevator, connecting the downtown riverside to the midtown bluff. Originally built in 1915, it replaced 722 onerous steps, and was rebuilt in a more modern style in 1955.

A Traveler's Guide to Oregon City

Taking in the attractions, old and new, of one of the oldest cities west of the Rockies



At the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. CLAYTON COTTERELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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A 15-second ride lifted me to the city's best vantage point, where I took in the Willamette River, with the curved Arch Bridge to my right, the

mighty Willamette Falls to my left and fir-covered hills beyond. Just outside the observation deck I strolled the McLoughlin Promenade about a half-mile to the Museum of Oregon Territory. Exhibits there focus on the traders, pioneers and indigenous people of the area, via a compact collection of petroglyphs and arrowheads, and a recreation of a turn-of-the-century pharmacy.

While its history and its nerdily named landmarks distinguish Oregon City from Portland, the former clearly emulates the latter's worship of all things artisanal.



Tony Iyke customizes suits at Designs by THOR. PHOTO: CLAYTON COTTERELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Among the host of new shops in town (more than 300 businesses were issued this year alone) is the year-and-a-half-old Designs by THOR on Main

Street, where Nigerian-born clothing designer Tony Iyke specializes in bespoke suits for men and women. A few storefronts away is Denim Salvage, which sells made-to-measure new and recycled jeans. "I see a lot of new businesses doing well," said Mr. Iyke, crediting a rise in day-trippers. "There is a vibe about Oregon City that people like a lot. It's more laid back. People come here from Portland for that, to escape the big city and hang out."

And with Oregon City's gentler rents, more Portlanders seem to be coming to stay. Ulises Alvarez, a sourdough fanatic at the year-and-a-half-old Grano bakery, just off Main Street, honed his skills at Tabor Bread in Portland. Olympia Provisions, the popular Portland-based charcuterie company, runs the kitchen at the Oregon City Brewery Co.

Not all of Oregon City's tastiest options are imported. Tony's Smoke House and Fish Market, a few blocks from Main Street, has been a locally loved spot for fried fish and smoked sockeye salmon since 1936.



Tony Petrich, one of the fifth-generation of the family-run Tony's Smoke House and Cannery. PHOTO: CLAYTON COTTERELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Six breweries have opened locally within the last five years, starting with Feckin Brewing in the Canemah neighborhood in 2013. It brews in the Irish tradition, although offerings like the Top O' the Feckin Morning, an imperial milk porter brewed with vanilla beans, cold-brewed coffee and steel-cut oats is closer to something found in PDX than in Dublin. The attached smokehouse features smoked turkey drumsticks and two axe-throwing lanes, a tribute to the city's logging past. Coin Toss Brewery on Fir Street promotes its goat yoga sessions at the nearby Beaver Lake Stables—where a participant can downward dog with a caprine creature on her back—capped off with a beer tasting. (Those who refer to Oregon City as Portland without the weird may not have gotten wind of these “goatga” classes.)

Taking a break from meals and beer flights, I wandered over to the river. On the banks of the Willamette River, eNRG Kayaking outfitted me and a group of about five others with a kayak, a paddle, a life vest and a guide, Sam Drevo, a former member of the U.S. Canoe and Kayak team. Gliding with Sam, I cozied up to Willamette Falls, the second largest waterfall by volume in the U.S. More squat than tall, it exhibits immense power, and it's easy to understand how those falls became a crucial hydroelectric force for the industry—largely paper mills—along the banks. We slid along the piers where barking sea lions sunbathed. On the opposite riverbank sat the decaying husks of one of the abandoned paper mills. Sam told us it would soon be converted into condominiums and that the derelict, overgrown area that abuts the mill would be spiffed up as part of a \$25 million redevelopment project, re-emerging as a sparkling riverside walking trail. Taking in the view from the water, I pictured the manicured footpath, slated to break ground in 2020, and the influx of tourists and residents—new pioneers—I imagine it will draw.

THE LOWDOWN // On the Oregon City Trail

Getting There



An abandoned paper mills on the banks of the Willamette River, opposite the Willamette Falls, the second largest waterfall by volume in the U.S. PHOTO: CLAYTON COTTERELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Oregon City is a 30-minute drive from Portland International Airport and 22 minutes by train from Portland's Union Station.

Staying There

Oregon City has a long way to go in terms of luxury accommodation. Those who crave an upscale stay are best served in Portland, at hotels such as the newly renovated Heathman (*from \$150 a night, heathmanhotel.com*), the Sentinel (*from \$219 a night, sentinelhotel.com*), or Kimpton Hotel Monaco (*from \$234 a night, monaco-portland.com*). [Floatinghomevacations.com](http://floatinghomevacations.com) rents three comfortably furnished houseboats, right on the Willamette River, in town. (*\$400 a night for the Main Home, \$300 a night for the Bungalow and \$150 a night for the Minnow cottage*). Historic inn Sandes of Time Bed and Breakfast lies a scenic 10-minute drive along the Willamette River from Downtown Oregon City. (*From \$125 a night, sandesovertime.com*)



Almond cake at Grano PHOTO: CLAYTON COTTERELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Eating There

Since 1936, Tony's Smoke House and Fish Market is the spot for oysters and fried fish. Their smoked sockeye salmon makes for a great souvenir. 1316 Washington St., tonyssmokehouse.com. Nebbiolo draws aficionados of tapas, wine and craft cocktails. 800 Main St., nebbiolowinebar.com. Locals love Stone Cliff Inn for steaks and seafood. 17900 S. Clackamas River Dr., stonecliffinn.com. Due to zoning regulations, Oregon City isn't cluttered with food trucks and carts like Portland. The Perky

Pantry, tucked within the Hive Tap House, is one of the few, where Hive chef Melissa Downs

proffers Philly cheesesteaks, pierogis and other beer-appropriate eats. *13851 Beavercreek Rd., theperkypantryoc.com*. Grano Bakery and Market specializes in hand-shaped loaves known as manitas. Among the best options: the roasted potato, green chile, and cheddar version. *1500 Washington St., granobreads.com*. Fat Cupcake has have had such success with their sweet and savory cupcakes—don't miss the one with pesto, salami and provolone—that they recently opened a second branch in Portland. *fatcupcake.com, 19273 Molalla Ave.*

Drinking There

Scottish-themed Highland Stillhouse offers 60 varieties of whiskey and the entire pubby interior was shipped over from the UK. *201 S. Second St., highlandstillhouse.com*. McMenamins Pub occupies an historic turn-of-the-century church. *102 Ninth St. mcmenamins.com/oregon-city*. The tasting room of the winery Villa Catalana Cellars opens to the public on Saturdays, pouring their award-winning Pinots, Chardonnay, Grenache and more. *11900 S. Criteser Rd., villacatalanacellars.com*. Singer Hill Café serves Portland-born Stumptown Coffee amid verdant vertical gardens—indoors and outdoors. The café also doubles as an art gallery. *623 7th St., singerhill.com*. Trail Distilling's tasting room is decked out with gleaming antiques like a player piano and a '53 Chevy pickup. Their First City Rum recently won “best in category” at the American Distilling Institute's International Competition. *traildistilling.com, 21553 S. Highway 213.*

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