



A working waterfront, the Old Port also includes shopping, dining and entertainment.

With a population of 64,000, Portland has a rich history as a fisherman's and seafaring town. Walking the city, we found that it reflects the diverse creative interests of the state's fiercely independent populace.

"The city is ethnically diverse and very liberal," says Barbara Whitten, president of the Chamber of Commerce. Local arts and crafts are displayed at galleries along Exchange Street. On Congress, an old St. Lawrence Congregational Church that looks like a castle is being transformed into a house of theatrical drama. There's always a book store in sight in this self-proclaimed booklover's town, childhood home of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

On the Western Promenade stand many prestigious Victorian homes built by wealthy residents at the turn of the century. Sitting high on a ridge overlooking the Fore River to

the northwest with White Mountain in the background, they enhance the sense of history embodied by Portland. First settled in the early 17th century, the city of Portland was founded in 1786.



The historic Victoria Mansion, built in 1860, is open for tours.

Some of the beautiful older homes in the area have been converted into bed-and-breakfasts, like The Pomegranate Inn and The Danforth. The Victoria Mansion, completed in 1860, doesn't offer accommodations, but it's open for tours.

The Taste of the Earth

In Portland, independence is a virtue when it comes to food. "Nobody wants the chains," says Whitten. The impressive array of eateries includes cuisines from many cultures – Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, Italian, Irish – and local breweries. And one of Portland's finest restaurants, Fore Street, serves "... the taste of the earth," according to server Niles Cockrill.

We hiked through town to what's called the "Old Port," where we found vintage eateries such as Boone's (here since 1898) and Gilbert's Chowder House. At Gilbert's, we

The Portland Public Market offers local produce (below). One of Portland's older homes was converted into the Pomegranate Inn bed-and-breakfast (right).



tried a legendary lobster roll sandwich – a simple affair of boiled lobster tossed with mayo and celery served on a hot dog bun. Although simple, it's stunningly delicious.

If you're packing a picnic or stocking the larder of an RV or cabin, a great place to shop for supplies is the Portland Public Market just off Congress. You'll find local produce, including delicious Maine apples, wild blueberries, fresh lobster, an exotic array of cheeses and breads plus local libations. We bought

a sampler of goods here and enjoyed them in front of the fireplace and hot tub at the Merry Manor Best Western Inn in South Portland.

To complete the feast, we stopped by Colucci's Hilltop Market, a family-run convenient store with a hidden treasure inside. We'd come for a "real Italian" sandwich, recommended by Jane and Michael Stern in their road food column in *Gourmet Magazine* (April 2005). The sandwich, prepared by Jasmine Bragdon, did not disappoint. I've thought longingly of it many times since.



Maple sugar time brings out the traditional sleighs.

Other Diversions

After hoofing it around town, we rested awhile at Soak Foot Sanctuary and Teahouse, a sweet little tea shop with the added advantage of foot soaks and massages offered to extend the pleasure. Warm and welcoming, Soak is the brainchild of Roberta Alexander, offering such treats as tomato bisque, smoked salmon with goat cheese, lavender shortbread and chamomile chai tea.

Down the way is the L.L.Bean factory outlet. Maine is the home of the famous outdoor gear maker, born from the shoes created for hunters with leather for warmth and rubber soles to get through Maine's famous springtime "mud season."

Maine Maple Sunday

We happened to be lucky enough to be in town on Maine Maple Sunday, when 80 farms across the state open their doors to the public so everyone can learn how the clear, watery sap of maples is tapped from the trees and cooked down to the rich, amber hue we recognize as syrup. We sampled warm fresh syrup drizzled over fresh buckwheat pancakes at the Labreque family's Pumpkin Hill Sugar House in Gorham.



At Green Maple Farm, baby Keira is the seventh generation of the family that taps the trees. Mrs. Green served warm syrup over vanilla ice cream, but I poured some over fresh snow – just as I'd longed to since childhood.

Sugar sap varies in color (above). The Soak Foot Sanctuary and Teahouse has tempting snacks (right).



At Harris Farm in Dayton, visitors can ride a horse-drawn sleigh through the snowy forests or try cross-country skiing on this 500-acre dairy and tree farm where the Subaru Ski Fest is

held each year. Skis and gear are available in the "warming hut," where delicious hot chocolate made with milk fresh from the dairy is served. The farm sells fresh, hormone-free, glass-bottled milk, all-natural beef and maple syrup year round, and fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the summertime.

While exploring Portland, Maine and the surrounding area, I noticed a refreshing strain of independence that starts with personal responsibility. The people of the cities and farms in Maine have an admirable self-reliance that engenders a great sense of strength

and freedom.