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Whirlwind weekend: Rain or shine, Portland beckons

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By Lauren Viera, Chicago Tribune

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Why everyone in the world hasn't up and moved to Portland is a mystery.

Beyond being virtually pollution-free, surrounded by lush greenery and, at 568,300 people, a manageable size, it's home to the kinds of people many folks would want as neighbors: laid back, eco-conscious city dwellers who love quality restaurants and art galleries and are as game for an evening in with a bottle of pinot as a morning hike through the woods.

There's one defining characteristic associated with the City of Roses: rain. While sun worshipers may balk at the idea of visiting the Pacific Northwest at any time other than in its glorious 80-degree summers, Portland is arguably a year-round destination.

Head here in the fall and a light rain jacket will carry you through autumn leaf-covered streets to dozens of cafes in which to duck the drizzle. Visit Stumptown in the winter and a parka and an umbrella (though locals don't really use them) are a nice change from snow gear, especially when there's a full agenda: Trailblazers games, movies at McMenamins' brew-and-view theaters, tax-free shopping in Nob Hill and, if you've got time, day trips to the mountains, the coast or both.

Here's our Whirlwind Weekend in Portland.

• Friday:

Portland is divided into five districts -- Northeast, Northwest, Southwest/Downtown, Southeast and North Portland -- each with its own neighborhoods and personality. Your best bet for lodging is downtown. Recommended: the boutique Hotel Modera (515 SW Clay St.; 877-484-1084; www.hotelmodera.com), in the historic South Park Blocks. The gut-rehabbed Modera emerged last spring with a luxe lobby, spacious, souped-up guest rooms (starting at \$139) and a courtyard with native plants and shrubs furnished with inviting fire pits. Just east of PGE Park, Hotel deLuxe (729 SW 15th Ave.; 866-986-8085; www.hoteldeluxeportland.com) offers top-notch service in an award-winning renovated Art-Deco building. Luxury amenities such as the pillow menu complement comfortable, well-appointed rooms (starting at \$127) priced lower than they should be.

Most downtown hotels are within walking distance of Portland's trifecta of public transportation options: the light rail MAX, the TriMet bus and the streetcar, all of which are free when traveling within the high-traffic Fareless Square region. Catch the 12, 19 or 20 bus across the Burnside Bridge to your first amazing meal of the weekend: dinner at Le Pigeon (738 E. Burnside St.; 503-546-8796; www.lepigeon.com). When it comes to locally harvested, expertly prepared dishes, Portland rules -- and Le Pigeon is proof. It's exquisite. And tiny. Three communal tables are crammed around a large open kitchen, lined with front-row action bar seats. French bread and sea-salted Plugra butter whet the palate for the specialty here, squab, though rotations on the minimal menu include beef cheeks, a delectable squash tart and French-inspired classics.

As a post-dinner constitutional, head west back over the Burnside Bridge to Powell's City of Books (1005 W. Burnside St.; 800-878-7323; www.powells.com), the largest used/new bookstore in the world. There are 3,500 categories packed into 68,000 square feet. Linger all you want: Powell's is open until 11 p.m.

• Saturday:

Start in the Northwest and eat breakfast with the locals at Besaw's (2301 NW Savier St.; 503-228-2619; www.besaws.com), in Nob Hill. Standard egg and pantry dishes are the specialties at this 105-year-old joint, where impeccable service breeds customer loyalty. Post-breakfast, take time to stroll NW 23rd Avenue (aka "trendy-third"), which has become a shopping mecca in recent years. Or head into the woods. Portland is surrounded by them, but massive Washington Park features numerous landmarks in its 400-acre sprawl. Among the highlights are the International Rose Test Gardens (www.rosegardenstore.com), where 6,800 bushes are cared for year-round, and Pittock Mansion (3229 NW Pittock Dr.; 503-823-3623; www.pittockmansion.org), where 23 rooms have been pristinely restored with antiques from the namesake family that resided here during Portland's early 20th Century growth spurt. Downtown is the smallest park in the world: Tiny Mill Ends Park (SW Naito Parkway and Taylor Street), just 452 square inches.

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 Back up north near Powell's, work up an appetite wandering the Pearl District, full of galleries featuring local and international artists. Grab a bite at any number of Ads by Google coffee shops here or, for a change of scenery, catch the 14 Hawthorne bus over to the Southeast. Start with a classic lunch at Bread and Ink Cafe (3610 SE Hawthorne Blvd.; 503-239-4756; www.breadandinkcafe.com), a neighborhood standard since it opened in 1983. Don't skimp on desserts, especially if you visit during blackberry season. Saunter down Hawthorne Boulevard, known for its smattering of vintage and secondhand stores. Vinyl-philes shouldn't miss Crossroads Music (3130-B SE Hawthorne Blvd.; 503-232-1767; www.xro.com); others may want to catch a flick at the Bagdad Theater (3702 SE Hawthorne Blvd.; 503-236-9234; www.mcmenamins.com), one in the chain of Portland's eclectic brew-and-views owned by the local McMenamin brothers. Wash down the afternoon with a cup of bona fide Portland joe at Stumptown Coffee Roasters (3356 SE Belmont St.; 503-232-8889; www.stumptowncoffee.com). The Belmont location was the local chain's second, followed a handful of years later by its neighboring Annex (3352 SE Belmont; 503-467-4123), which hosts coffee cuppings (tastings) daily at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.

Toast the action-packed day with a delicious, locally grown dinner at Noble Rot (2724 SE Ankeny St.; 503-233-1999; www.noblerotpx.com). The casual atmosphere and affordable price points here (entrees average \$15) make the dishes all the richer, especially when paired with a slew of worldly wines.

• Sunday:

Get up early to beat the brunch crowd to Helsers' on Alberta (1538 NE Alberta St.; 503-281-1477; www.helsersonalberta.com), located in Northeast, an easy 25-minute ride from downtown on the 8 NE 15th Ave. bus. Helsers' is heaven on a plate, with old family recipes for Dutch Babies and potato pancakes. Take your time strolling east through the Alberta Arts District, where block after block of boutiques, cafes and galleries provide a slice of local culture. The vibe here is decidedly laid back and just a little funky; dogs are given just as much sidewalk space as strollers. Crafters shouldn't miss Close Knit (2140 NE Alberta; 503-288-4568; www.closeknitportland.com) and Bolt (2136 NE Alberta; 503-287-2658; www.boltfabricboutique.com), which keep Portland's do-it-yourself population sated.

Catch a cab down to SE Glisan Street for a leisurely lunch at Pambiche (2811 NE Glisan; 503-233-0511; www.pambiche.com), whose colorful exterior and heat lamps help transform autumnal Portland into Havana, at least for a meal. Cruise south down 28th Avenue to Burnside -- the city's north-south divider -- where a smattering of second-hand shops, cafes and bars form the hub of the Laurelhurst neighborhood. Its landmark is the Laurelhurst Theater (2735 E. Burnside St.; 503-232-5511; www.laurelhursttheater.com), where \$3 second-run films play alongside themed events. If you've got time to kill before dinner, head to Queen Bee Creations (1847 E. Burnside; 503-232-1755; www.queenbee-creations.com), the studio/store where the company's signature vinyl handbags and accessories are made by hand.

It's worth trekking back up to Alberta to dine at Alberta Oyster Bar & Grill (2926 NE Alberta St.; 503-284-9600; www.albertaoyster.com), where oysters on the half-shell (from the Pacific Northwest, of course) are only the beginning. The Northwest-by-way-of-Louisiana cuisine includes pan-fried skate wing with lobster cream and porcini-rubbed squab with wild mushrooms-and-carrot puree. It'll be yet another flawless meal, but that's par for the course in this town, where just one weekend isn't enough to sample it all.

WHEN IN TOWN

Bring a rain jacket -- Drizzle is inevitable here, and autumn and winter host frequent showers and storms. Hooded rain jackets are standard fashion and are less cumbersome than an umbrella.

Drink locally -- Coffee and beer are Portland institutions, but Starbucks and Budweiser hardly qualify. Try Stumptown and Widmer for starters.

A note about pumping gas -- Gas attendants are a fixture throughout Oregon, where self-service gasoline is banned. Sit back, relax and let someone else do the pumping.

Getting there -- Portland is in northwestern Oregon, and is serviced by Portland International Airport (PDX).

From PDX, downtown Portland is accessible via the city's light rail (MAX) system for \$2.30 one way, and travel time is just under an hour.

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