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Portland, Maine is all about lobster. It is hard to imagine that this crustacean was once considered the poor man's food, but it is true — lobsters wash on the shores of Portland after a storm and would be used primarily as fertilizers and bait. But with the advent of land transportation, lobsters were brought inland in the mid-1800s, and as the demand for lobsters increased, so did the price. Today, the city has many restaurants, almost all of which offer lobster (in one form or another) on their menus. But Portland has more to offer than a bunch of crustaceans. The New England coastal port has a vibrant waterfront, an abundance of Victorian architecture and many historic lighthouses. Nestled on a picturesque seascape, the city is perched on a peninsula that stretches into Casco Bay, protected from the Atlantic Ocean. The romantic film *Message in a Bottle* was shot in this seaside town, and the famous Portland-born poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called Portland a Jewel by the Sea in one of his poems. The historic port was once an important shipbuilding centre, as well as one of the busiest fishing ports in the Atlantic since the 18th century. Its success as a port made it a prime target for the British during the War of 1812 and also for the Confederates during the Civil War. The coastline and islands are still dotted with forts that were built to protect the city. Ironically, during an Independence Day celebration in 1866, a firecracker ignited a fire that quickly spread across the eastern end of the city, destroying 1,800 buildings. The city quickly rebuilt, resulting in beautiful Victorian architecture, and today the Old Port (sometimes called the Old Port Stock Exchange) is a bustling seaport with a high concentration of quality eating and drinking establishments. With less than 65,000 inhabitants, Portland is compact enough for visitors to fully explore the city — tourists can stroll along the Commercial Street waterfront, walk the cobbled streets of the restored Old Port neighborhood, or visit a historic building or two. What will you most remember about a visit to Portland? Will it be the lobster traps stacked on the wharf, the smell of sea air combined with the chatter of the seagulls or a visit to a historic attraction? If you're like the majority of visitors, a delicious lobster lunch can be your tastiest memory of this New England port. Portland, Maine Attractions Maine's oldest lighthouse, built during George Washington's presidency. Portland Head Light is located on the shores of Cape Elizabeth. To the 80-foot tower was illuminated by 16 whale oil lamps. Today, there are a number of interpretive exhibitions at the museum on site. Climb the 103 steps to the top of the Portland Observatory and enjoy views of Portland and Casco Bay. This signalling tower is the only remaining wooden marine signal station in the United States. It was built in 1807 and is currently listed on the National Register of Monuments. Monuments. a ride on a historic narrow-gauge steam train aboard the Maine Narrow Gauge Railroad. Passengers can enjoy the view of casco bay while climbing along the waterfront by the East Portland Promenade. Originally built in 1858 for a wealthy New Orleans hotelier, the Villa-style Victoria Mansion Italian villa features graceful verandas, a four-storey tower and a sumptuous interior. The house was named in honour of Queen Victoria of Great Britain when it was converted into a museum in 1941. Visitors can visit the property, which still has 90 percent of its original content such as gas fixtures, elaborate murals and exquisite woodwork. Built in 1785, Wadsworth-Longfellow House is the childhood home of the famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It was the first all-brick dwelling in Portland and now features a collection of Maine historical artifacts. Located next to Wadsworth-Longfellow House, the Maine Historical Society Museum houses exhibits of works of art and artifacts that bring Maine's history to life, from children's toys to traditional furniture. Want to see Portland by bike? Cycle Mania, located a few blocks from the Old Port, offers day or week rentals. Take the 15-minute ferry ride aboard Casco Bay Lines from Maine State Pier to Peaks Island. Once there, you can rent a bike from Brad's Recycled Bike Shop, or take a guided kayak tour with Maine Island Kayak Company to explore Casco Bay's protected waterways — paddling in front of forts, lighthouses and seal-covered ledges. The Portland Fish Exchange is a fresh seafood auction that takes place Sunday through Thursday at 11 a.m. at the Portland Fish Pier Complex near the Casco Bay Bridge. Commercial fishing vessels are unloaded early in the morning and buyers arrive throughout the morning to inspect the catch of the day. Visitors can watch the auction take place with the auctioneer soliciting bids for each species and the size of the seafood. Located about 45 minutes south of Portland, the charming coastal village of Kennebunkport features several federal and Victorian-style houses built by wealthy merchants and sea captains in the 1700s and 1800s. Today it is considered one of the most expensive holiday areas in the Northeast (the Bush family has a home here). Visitors can explore the small area of art galleries, seafood restaurants and souvenir shops. Portland, Maine Restaurants According to the Maine Restaurant Association, Portland is home to more than 200 restaurants. Although many restaurants are located in the city centre, some vouchers are located on the outskirts and The detour. Seafood is a staple food, with lobster being the star. Almost all restaurants have a lobster roll, which is essentially freshly picked meat from lobster brushed with sweet butter and served on a toasted roll with mayonnaise. Other traditional dishes include whole lobster boiled or steamed under seaweed to a seaside lobster cooking. For a truly Portland seafood experience, head to Portland Portland Company, specialized in you-know-what — lobster. Big appetites can order Downeast Feast, which includes lobster, steamers (Steamed clams from Maine), corn on the cob, cabbage salad and baked potatoes or french fries. Located in a converted ferry-car on Portland's waterfront, Dimillo's on the Water offers fresh seafood with an Italian style. Choose from items like lobster roll, Maine fried shrimp and Maine Crab Club, as well as a number of traditional Italian dishes such as parmigiana chicken. While dining, you can watch the sights and sounds of Portland Harbour from the outdoor terraces or enjoy the water view of every window in the dining room. Serving American comfort food using local ingredients, the Front Room offers classics such as Reuben sandwich, simmered barbecue bnsket or cookies and sauce. The cozy restaurant has warm woodwork and plenty of windows overlooking the picturesque East Promenade. Eat where locals eat at Becky's On Hobson's Wharf. Here you will see a mix of shoreline workers sitting at the long counter, elbow to shoulder with tourists in the know. This diner-style restaurant serves generous breakfasts based on local ingredients, such as their French toast baked with fresh Italian bread. And the extensive lunch menu includes items ranging from the ubiquitous lobster roll to a peanut butter and jelly sandwich (or peanut butter and bacon!), as well as typical dishes like breakfasts and burgers all day long. Duckfat is a European-style deep fryer and sandwich shop at reasonable prices. Their Belgian fries are cooked in duck fat for a unique flavour and served in a paper cone, and the milkshakes are made from locally produced ice cream. For an exciting dining experience, 555 offers a brunch menu that is far from just bacon and eggs. Try the traitor's eggs — poached eggs served with lobster meat and lemon hollandaise sauce. The Maine Restaurant Association named owner and chef Steve Corry the 2011 chef of the year. Combine sophistication, a garden setting and cleverly presented meals, and you have Eve in the garden. Located in the Portland Harbor Hotel, the restaurant offers outdoor seating in the courtyard near the fountain or inside the contemporary dining room. Menu items include lobster ravioli with butternut squash and grilled quail with figs and honey. In Casco Bay, the Peaks Island Inn is owned by shipyard and its pub offers views of the Portland skyline. Choose from menu choices such as burgers, wraps or Buffalo fried Maine prawns — beer-battered shrimp served with a blue cheese dip and spicy Buffalo sauce. On the rocky shores of Cape Elizabeth, next to the famous Portland Head Light, is the lobster hut at Two Lights. Enjoy selections of inexpensive but fresh menus at picnic tables that overlook the surf, or eat inside the dining room, which features simple furnishings and large picture windows. Shopping in Portland, Maine The Old Port area is a fun place to browse shops and specialty shops. If you're looking for classic Portland souvenirs, look for anything that celebrates Maine's lobsters, lighthouses or shipping industry. Porte 4 sells fine jewelry with nautical designs such as 18K gold sailboat and flagship pendants. For unusual and historic nautical artifacts, visit China Sea Marine Trading Company. Another unique souvenir is the water-resistant tote bag made in Maine from recycled sails. The company's headquarters are located on the Portland waterfront at 25 Custom House Wharf. Intervening to fill the void left by the Portland public market, which folded in 2006, the Public Market House is the place to indulge in local gourmet foods, fresh bread and Maine beer. Shopping die-hards will not want to miss a trip to nearby Freeport. The well-known shopping destination includes the flagship L.L. Bean store, which is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In addition to the merchandise, the store also has a 24-foot aquarium on the river bed living with fish and turtles native to Maine. Looking for antiques? Check MaineAntiques.org for dealer lists in and around Portland. Written by Renee Ruggero Ruggero

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