

July 30, 2004

JOURNEYS; 36 Hours | Ogunquit, Me.

By SETH SHERWOOD

THEY came, they saw, they painted. During the early 20th century, the rugged beauty of the Ogunquit coast drew fledgling artists like Edward Hopper and Marsden Hartley, who created some of their formative works while staying in the area. The painters Robert Henri, George Bellows and Walt Kuhn also passed through. While Ogunquit may no longer be a bohemian artists colony, the port town still offers the sublime seascapes that established its reputation as one of Maine's most picturesque spots. About 90 minutes from Boston, Ogunquit is less flashy than the Bush bastion of Kennebunkport nearby, but it contains the same inviting blend of Down East charm and quiet sophistication. Wooden seafood shacks share the terrain with the state's top restaurants, and the historic harbor shelters weathered fishing vessels alongside fancy private boats. SETH SHERWOOD

Friday

7 p.m.

1. See the Sea

To view the lovely southern Maine coast by boat, hop on the good ship Finestkind's one-hour cocktail cruise (207-646-5227; \$11 adults, \$7 children). It leaves from the dock next to Barnacle Billy's restaurant in Perkins Cove, a narrow neighborhood bounded by the Atlantic on one side and the town's picturesque harbor on the other. As you glide over the swells, you'll see the massive Bald Head Cliff, the sandy expanse of Ogunquit Beach and other natural formations, all illuminated by the gold light of sunset -- and perhaps by a few mixed drinks (\$5 to \$7). Back on shore, follow the sweet scent to Perkins Cove Candies (103 Oarweek Road, 207-646-7243), where thick blocks of homemade fudge (\$8.40 a pound) and bins of blue-pink-yellow saltwater taffy (\$5 a pound) are perennial favorites.

8 p.m.

2. Get Cracking

Lobster joints in Perkins Cove are abundant -- and often quite crowded. For the most laid-back, low-key experience, head to the Lobster Shack (110 Perkins Cove Road, 207-646-2941) to feast on perhaps the only meal in the Western World that's eaten with a nutcracker and disposable bib. Nothing goes with a lobster (\$13 to \$14 a pound) better than steamed clams (\$14.50 a quart) and a cold Maine-brewed Shipyard Ale (\$3.50). The pine tables and historical photographs create a homey New England vibe.

9 p.m.

3. Head Into Port

Across the street, the ocean view at Hurricane (111 Perkins Cove Road, 207-646-6348) is gorgeous, and the dessert menu is often equally breathtaking. Try the mocha crème brûlée (\$7) or the vanilla bean cheesecake, which has a ginger shortbread crust and is topped with strawberry sauce (\$7). The two-page menu of ports, Cognacs, sherries and dessert wines is similarly impressive. Selections include Cockburn 10-year tawny port (\$8 a glass) and 150-year-old Grand Marnier (\$30 a glass).

Saturday

9:30 a.m.

4. That's Amore

The popular Amore Breakfast (178 Shore Road, 207-646-6661) has several signature eggs benedict dishes. The archly named Be Still My Heart (\$8.95) piles German potato pancakes with poached eggs, bacon, sausage and melted cheese. The trumpeted house specialty, bananas Foster French toast (\$7.50) has pecan-coated cream cheese stuffing and a side of bananas sautéed in rum, making it a strong contender for the town's most decadent breakfast.

11 a.m.

5. Time for Beach Nuts

Stretching three and a half miles along the deep blue of the Atlantic, Ogunquit Beach is a New England rarity: a strip of soft white sand and wind-blown dunes that's almost entirely unspoiled by beachfront homes, restaurants or cheap amusements. Walking to the beach from your hotel will save you the steep summer parking fees (\$4 an hour), though you may want to rent an umbrella (\$10) or beach chairs (\$10) from the beachfront Norseman Resort. The bracing water -- 58 to 69 degrees in summer, will never be mistaken for the Caribbean, though few seem to care.

2 p.m.

6. Flo Knows Dogs

The uninitiated tend to drive right past this cult-favorite spot, mistaking the low roadside building for an abandoned shack. But for longtime residents and savvy travelers, Flo's Steamed Hot Dogs (Route 1 at Stacy Lane, Cape Neddick; no telephone) proves that meat shoved into slender casings can be sublime. It's not the dogs (\$1.75) per se that draw the crowds, nor is it even the supersoft steamed buns -- it's the special sauce. Dark and tangy, it is made from a highly secret recipe and is also sold by the jar (\$7.95). Chips and soft drinks round out the menu. Be sure to get your dogs with mayonaise, too, to bring out the sauce's sweetness. Everyone does.

3:30 p.m.

7. Beautiful Museum

"The most beautiful little museum in the world." That's one take on the Ogunquit Museum of American Art (543 Shore Road, 207-646-4909). It came in the 1950's from Francis Henry Taylor, then the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Overlooking the Atlantic from a craggy perch, the museum sits in a landscaped sculpture garden with a reflecting pool. What's inside isn't bad, either. Many works come from the founders of Ogunquit's early art scene -- Charles Woodbury, Hamilton Easter Field, Robert Laurent -- and there are also several excellent works by Marsden Hartley and Reginald Marsh as well. It is open through Oct. 15, when it closes for the season. Admission is \$5 for adults.

6 p.m.

8. Beautiful Dinner

Hidden about two miles from central Ogunquit, Arrows restaurant (Berwick Road, 207-361-1100) is Ogunquit's most romantic and elegant, hands down. The chefs and owners, Mark Gaier and Clark Frasier, trained at Stars restaurant in San Francisco, have created a menu of nouveau American cuisine filled with exotic ingredients in unusual combinations. Among the dishes offered recently was smoked duck breast marinated in cocoa and spices, served with seared greens, braised cherries and a clever cone made of wild mushrooms (\$42.95). A reservation is a good idea.

9 p.m.

9. On the Town

Though bars must stop serving at 1 a.m., Ogunquit's night-life scene is surprisingly active and crowded with an impressive range of options. A sporty tourist and local crowd packs Maxwell's Pub (243 Main Street,

207-646-2345), below, which offers back-slapping and boisterous karaoke every evening. Piano-fueled sing-alongs can become just as spirited over on the second floor of the Front Porch (9 Shore Road, 207-646-3976), where the crowd is slanted toward older gays. The trendiest gay nightspot is just down the street at Insideout (237 Main Street, 207-646-6655). And travelers of all persuasions sip cosmos and beer at Five-O (50 Shore Road, 207-646-5001), the town's coolest cocktail lounge.

Sunday

10 a.m.

10. A Watery Walk

You may want to set up your easel and paints once you get a glimpse of the wind-swept ocean views along the walking path known as the Marginal Way. Tracing the Atlantic coastline from Perkins Cove to just below the town center, the mile-long trail passes emerald tidal pools, rocky outcroppings and inlets bobbing with gray gulls. The path opens onto a series of small sand-and-rock nooks known as the Little Beaches. You can reach them by concrete staircases that descend from the path.

Noon

11. Get Centered

Stroll up Shore Road into the nearby town center, the hub of Ogunquit shopping. The astute eye of Chris Caraviello assures that his Van Ward Gallery (49 Shore Road, 207-646-0554) is stocked with some of the best avant-garde painting from Ogunquit and surrounding communities, including works by Charles Woodbury. Colorful works with a more populist appeal can be found at Art and Soul (23 Shore Road, 207-646-2751), which also stocks funky trinkets and whimsical decorative objects. The art of the T-shirt is on display at Atlantic Software (37 Shore Road, 207-646-6777), a clothing and souvenir shop that's a good bet for Maine and lobster knickknacks.

THE BASICS

Visiting Ogunquit

Portland, Me., about 40 miles northeast of Ogunquit, has the closest major airport. Boston is about 75 miles away. Amtrak's Downeaster line (www.thedowneaster.com, 800-872-7245) offers rail service from North Station in Boston to nearby Wells, Me., for \$17 one way.

The lone resort on Ogunquit Beach, the Norseman Resort (135 Beach Street, 800-822-7024), is steps away from the sand. Its 95 rooms are \$90 to \$300 in summer. It closes for winter on Nov. 13 and reopens on April 1.

The Riverside Motel (50 Riverside Lane, 207-646-2741) overlooks the harbor. Its 38 rooms are \$110 to \$175 in summer and include a continental breakfast. It closes on Oct. 17 and reopens the first week of May.

The elegant Nellie Littlefield House (27 Shore Road, 207-646-1692), a bed-and-breakfast in a 19th-century house in the town center, has eight rooms for \$165 to \$220 through Labor Day. The rooms are all in period décor; two have ocean views. It is closed from Oct. 24 to May 1.