

In South Portland, spectacular sunrises are the main event

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

One morning in August, as I waited for the sun to rise in South Portland, Maine, I remembered going to the ballet as a young girl. In the moments between the lights dimming and the curtain rising, I would study the movements and shadows in the sliver between the bottom of the curtain and the stage, trying to guess where — and how — the dancers would be standing when the scene was revealed.

In Maine, the dark horizon slowly blushed pink above the water, then turned a fiery orange — a sliver filled with anticipation and magic. I waited expectantly and tried to predict exactly where the sun would appear. Once it did, my calculations were all but forgotten. The warm light shone on the water, the lighthouse, my eyelashes. The dance of a new day had begun.

South Portland, located across the harbor from Portland, Maine's largest city, is in many ways a contrast to its sister city — the fabulous one to the north known by foodies and fishermen. SoPo, as it's called, is a city unto itself, a former shipbuilding center with a working waterfront that feels like a beach town. It's quiet and understated, celebrated for its quintessentially New

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From its perch beside the Atlantic, Portland Head Light has some of the best sunrise views along Maine's coast.

In SoPo, waterfront sunrise views are never too far away

PORTLAND FROM F1

England villages, scenic bike trails, famous lighthouses along the rocky coastline, old military forts, and better bang for a visitor's buck.

I first visited a few years ago and managed to time my trip during winter's first significant snowfall. My friend Shanna, who lives in SoPo's historic Ferry Village, suggested I catch a sunset at one of the picturesque lighthouses. Bundled up in my car, I watched the sun dip extravagantly into the Atlantic Ocean and knew I'd come back when it was warmer.

When I returned in August, I had blissfully few plans — an even match for a city with few conventional attractions. That may not sound like a selling point, but after a busy few weeks on the road, I was relieved for a place where minimal FOMO left me time to wander and linger.

In that vein, I decided to spend my three days on the eastern side of the city, hugging the water. I scheduled only two things each day — wildly predictable events, free of crowds and costs. Twice a day, I made a date with the sun.

"Sunsets here are bananas," one local told me, and I nodded knowingly. Thanks to the way Portland Harbor and Casco Bay curve around South Portland, you're never far from a sunrise or sunset over water, and they're pretty magnificent.

My first morning, I jogged from Shanna's house along the Greenbelt Walkway (a 5.6-mile section of the East Coast Greenway) to Portland Breakwater Light, the squat lighthouse better known as Bug Light. Standing on the rocky breakwater, I looked out to the ocean. I wasn't alone in the park; several locals sat in their cars, all of us watching the colorful buildup and waiting. The moment arrived, and before long, we carried on with our respective days.

While Shanna and her family were at work and day care, I explored, starting in Ferry Village, once home to a sardine cannery. I discovered the Knitting Nook, a delightful yarn shop and cafe with Sunday brunch and weekly trivia and LGBTQ nights; and Lulu, a sweet and compact ceramics shop next to a pottery studio.

Knightville is the most "downtown" of South Portland's villages. After lunching at Taco Trio, I strolled up Ocean Street, a short strip of shops and popular restaurants like Verbena and Cia Cafe. The Lamp Repair Shop makes funky lamps from repurposed materials like table fans, an Erector Set and a Thermos, and Foulmouthed Brewing offers interesting libations and a weekly trivia night.

The street dead-ends at Thomas Knight Park at the base of the



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Visitors line up for lobster rolls at a food truck in Fort Williams Park in Cape Elizabeth, home to the George Washington-commissioned Portland Head Light. Spring Point Inn, on the waterfront campus of Southern Maine Community College in South Portland, serves as a hospitality training center for SMCC students. With healthy bagel sandwiches and "super toast," 158 Pickett Street Cafe is an ideal spot to fuel up after watching a sunrise at Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse.

Casco Bay Bridge, a car and pedestrian link to Portland. (If you hear locals speak of the "new bridge," it's this one, built 22 years ago.)

The opening of Big Babe's Tavern in Knightville later this year will be a boon for SoPo, filling a live-music void. I met up with owner Ginger Cote, a tattooed percussionist who earned her chops in Nashville and who told me the tavern will offer roots-based music, a Saturday kids jam, comfort food, a tequila-focused cocktail menu and \$1 to \$2 canned beer specials. Upstairs, Cote will open an inn with five rooms, a couple of which have killer sunset views.

The following morning, I walked to Southern Maine Com-

munity College. SMCC's campus is the former site of Fort Preble — which protected Portland Harbor from 1808 through World War II. In the dim early light, I navigated a dramatic, 900-foot granite breakwater to Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse. Concentrating on each step, stealing glances at the horizon, I moved cautiously across stones the size of kiddie pools.

A dog ran on the beach, and a lone fisherman cast his line off the rocks. The sun took her time, hiding behind clouds, eventually rising with a glimmer and a wink, I think, from a spot I wasn't expecting.

Spring Point Inn, next to SMCC's auto tech and HVAC training centers, is a waterfront

eight-room inn and hospitality training center with peak rates of \$160 to \$200. Staffed by students, the inn (built in 1902 as officers quarters) offers spectacular views of downtown Portland, the shipping channel and two lighthouses. From their bed (or, in one room, from the bathtub), guests can enjoy round-the-clock activity on Casco Bay: cruise ships, sailboats, container ships and Coast Guard vessels. Rooms are modestly furnished and decorated — more conference center than boutique — and the fact that the hotel is student-run means sometimes the bedspreads aren't exactly straight. But I'll take it for the views, which rival those at the exquisite Inn by the Sea in Cape Elizabeth, where rooms can go for \$600 to \$2,200.

The Spring Point Shoreway Trail connects the campus to Bug Point and Willard Beach, a small public beach where residents go to get their sand fix. Some of SoPo's top restaurants are nearby, along Cottage Road, including Otto, Enio's Eatery, David's 388, and Elsmere BBQ and Wood Grill. Don't miss Scratch Baking Co., where locals elbow their way in to get salt bagels before they're gone.

That night, Shanna and I ordered drinks outside at a surprisingly pleasant and neighborhood-y bowling alley and restaurant (which will have new ownership in early 2020, Sea Dog Brewing Co.), where we caught the end of the sunset and the last songs of a solo guitarist. (Also try Saltwater Grille for sunset viewing.) Looking up, I enjoyed a sky full of stars and considered where I'd watch my final sunrise.

Portland Head Light, the most famous of the local lighthouses, sits on the Atlantic just south of town in Cape Elizabeth. During summer days, the parking lots are packed, and you can expect a line at the truck that sells lobster rolls. But in the moments before daybreak, I found only a handful of visitors standing on the cliff walk, some with tripods, others steadying their iPhones. The iconic lighthouse, commissioned by George Washington in the late 1700s, is the state's oldest.

Beyond the lighthouse, the sky was ablaze. A boat seemed to skate across the water, just below the horizon. More spectators arrived, and water crashed against the rocks. As the first arc of sun appeared, I felt a pang of disappointment, knowing the majestic colors would soon fade. The curtain would rise; the day would begin.

I watched for another few minutes, then turned and walked away, the sun warm on my back.

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If you go

WHERE TO STAY
Spring Point Inn at Southern Maine Community College

2 Fort Rd.
207-741-5672

smccme.edu/business-community/spring-point-inn/

Doubling as a hospitality training center for college students, the inn (also called the Peter A. McKernan Hospitality Center) has eight rooms with private baths and spectacular ocean and lighthouse views. Request Room 102 for views

of both Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse and Portland Head Light. Starting from \$100 per night in winter, \$160 per night in summer. Parking and continental breakfast prepared by students included.

Portland Sheraton at Sable Oaks

200 Sable Oaks Dr.
207-871-8000

marriott.com/hotels/travel/pwmsi-portland-sheraton-at-sable-oaks

On the heels of a \$12 million renovation completed in June, this

former Marriott property near the Maine Mall is now a Sheraton with a new fitness center and restaurant. City Farmhouse serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. Amenities include an indoor pool, complimentary parking and shuttle service within a three-mile radius, including the airport. Rooms from \$129.

WHERE TO EAT
David's 388

388 Cottage Rd.
207-347-7388

davidsrestaurant.com/davids-388

Award-winning chef and owner David Turin, who also owns David's and David's Opus Ten in Portland, opened this restaurant in 2007, and it has become a favorite gathering place and date night spot for SoPo residents. The small space (with four seats at the chef's counter) is informal and welcoming, with a full bar, a 70-bottle wine list and a wonderful menu (including a classic lobster roll) that changes seasonally. Open Sunday through Thursday 5 to 9 p.m. and Friday and Saturday 5 to 10 p.m. for dinner. Open weekends 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. for brunch. Main courses from \$15.

Taco Trio

119 Ocean St.
207-767-9055

taco-trio.com

It's worth the trip just for the robust salsa bar, which often includes fresh mango and cilantro. Find authentic fare including enchiladas, sopes, quesadillas and tamales, plus traditional horchata, made with milk, coconut, ground rice and brown sugar. Open daily 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. for lunch and dinner, closed Sunday; go early to avoid lines. Tacos from \$4.



THE WASHINGTON POST

158 Pickett Street Cafe

158 Benjamin W. Pickett St.
207-799-8998

facebook.com/158pickettstreet/

A stone's throw from the SMCC campus, this cafe is the perfect spot to celebrate after a sunrise. Breakfast and lunch include delights like omelets, healthy bagel sandwiches, pimento cheese, and "super toast" with beet cream cheese. In the winter, warm up by the gas stove. Open daily 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Breakfast sandwiches start at \$4.25, omelets at \$7.50.

Foulmouthed Brewing

15 Ocean St.
207-618-6977

foulmouthedbrewing.com

Located in an old auto garage, the brewery creates libations with ingredients like rhubarb and cherries. The dinner menu includes a burger, falafel and "fish o'fillet." Every Tuesday is Geeks Who Drink trivia night. Open Monday through Thursday 3 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday noon to

10 p.m., and Sunday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Pints start at \$6, sandwiches at \$12.

WHAT TO DO
Portland Breakwater Light (Bug Light)

40 Madison St.

southportland.org/departments/parks-recreation-aquatics/pools/parks-department/parks-trails-beaches/bug-light-park/

A favorite spot for sunrises and sunsets, this park is also home to the Liberty Ship Memorial, commemorating the thousands of workers who built hundreds of emergency cargo vessels here during World War II. Bug Light isn't open to the public, but you can go on Maine Open Lighthouse Day (Sept. 12, 2020), an annual event when the public can visit and climb a couple dozen lighthouses across the state. Bug Light Park open daily dawn to dusk.

Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse

2 Fort Rd.

springpointlight.org

Located on the picturesque campus of Southern Maine Community College, formerly Fort Preble, the lighthouse sits at the end of a dramatic 900-foot granite breakwater. Watch sunrises from the bunker or, if you're adventurous, from next to the lighthouse. The Maine Lighthouse Ride (Sept. 12, 2020) is a 100-, 62-, 40- or 25-mile annual bike ride that begins here and passes as many as nine lighthouses along the coast. Open for tours most Tuesdays and Thursdays, plus some weekends, between Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends. Free admission.

Portland Head Light

1000 Shore Rd., Cape Elizabeth

207-799-2661

portlandheadlight.com

The most famous of Maine's lighthouses, commissioned by George Washington, is said to be the most photographed lighthouse in the nation — particularly popular at sunrise and sunset. Beach to Beacon (Aug. 1, 2020), a popular 10K along the coast in Cape Elizabeth, was founded by 1984 Olympic marathon winner and local Joan Benoit Samuelson and ends at Portland Head Light. The lighthouse isn't open to the public, but you can visit on Maine Open Lighthouse Day. Fort Williams Park, where the lighthouse is located, is open year-round from sunrise to sunset. Free admission.

Portland Players

420 Cottage Rd.
207-799-7337

portlandplayers.org

At the state's oldest community theater, you can catch shows like "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," which starts playing Nov. 29. Adult tickets \$20, \$15 students and children.

Mad Horse Theatre

24 Mosher St.
207-747-4148

madhorse.com

The theater is located in an old schoolhouse and focuses on contemporary plays. "Mary Jane," a play about family and illness, starts Nov. 7. Tickets \$23; students and seniors \$20.

INFORMATION

visitportland.com/explore-the-area/area-towns/south-portland

M.K.

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