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- LIISA ATVA SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Crave unpretentious charm? Escape to Astoria

Hip, artsy town less than a six-hour drive from Vancouver

We were four well travelled women seeking a weekend fling within driving distance of Vancouver — preferably an unpretentious, charming, older character with a youthful vigour.



Astoria, Ore., exudes vintage charm, from the Cannery Pier Hotel, above, to the local trolley.

Astoria, Ore., met all our requirements. Although we'd passed through Astoria before, on separate vacations to the Oregon coast, surprisingly, none of us had stopped to visit. The lure this time was an authentic working town that wasn't too touristy, clams and oysters, the bridge, pie — maybe even the elusive Finnish rice pies. OK, maybe I was the only one fantasizing about biting into a warm canoe-shaped rye crust filled with milk-simmered rice, a thrill that eludes my non-Finnish friends, one of whom described the experience as akin to eating mukluks.

We were into the pie even before we got to Astoria. The Berry Patch Restaurant, 24 kilometres before Astoria on Highway 30, offered so many varieties that it was difficult to pick just one. We settled on three between the four of us. The winner was one of their most popular, the

Marionberry Cream, a sugar cookie crust topped with 10 centimetres of a whipped cream concoction and marionberries. With a complex flavour described as the cabernet of blackberries, the marionberry, developed in Oregon, boasts a lineage of raspberries and wild blackberries. This being an American restaurant, rice pies, however, were not on the menu.

We rolled into Astoria, an unexpected urban pocket of 10,000, in the northwestern corner of Oregon with the mighty Columbia River on one side, the Pacific Ocean a few kilometres ahead and flanked by hills of Douglas fir, spruce and hemlock.

Founded over 200 years ago, Astoria is one of the oldest American settlements west of the Rockies. Once called Little San Francisco, the city's fortunes were built not on gold but from a river rich with salmon and forests flush with timber. The prospect of jobs attracted immigrants, including many Finns and Chinese, who soon became part of the fabric of the city. Fish canneries multiplied along the river, wood churches, businesses and Victorian houses sprouted on the steep hills behind.

The city's fortunes came and went. The fisheries and lumber markets collapsed, yet people stayed. The population, with a few dips and spikes, is the same as in 1910. Astoria's new economy is focused on tourism — it's now a port of call for cruise ships — culture and light manufacturing. Downtown galleries, microbreweries and nouveau restaurants intermingle with grittier enterprises and empty lots. Astoria is hip and artsy, but not yet overdone.

We stayed at the Cannery Pier Hotel, a tasteful revitalization that perfectly captures the old and the new Astoria. Built on a 180-metre dock — the site of the former Union Fisherman's Co-op cannery — this upscale boutique hotel features exposed wood beams, metal trusses and clawfoot tubs, combined with luxurious modern touches including a spa with an authentic Finnish sauna. The sauna is perhaps a nod to the heritage of the Union Co-op, which was formed in 1897 by 200 fishermen, mostly Finnish, and was once the biggest cannery in Astoria.

The balcony of our room jutted over the water — like being on a cruise ship — and offered a prime view of the busy Columbia River, passing ships and freighters, the bridge and seagulls soaring overhead. The binoculars provided in the room were a welcome touch.

With Astoria's annual Tenor Guitar Gathering held that weekend, the hotel's daily wine and cheese parties were lively events with impromptu performances by visiting musicians. There was barely a need to leave the hotel, but we wanted to ride in the hotel's chauffeured vintage cars. Brandon, a former cowboy from Wyoming turned chauffeur, took us to town in the turquoise '58 Chevy Biscayne and the thunder blue '52 Cadillac.

Brandon hadn't heard of a Finnish restaurant, so I asked the first Finnish-looking person I saw, a Jon Voight look-alike. There had been a restaurant, he told me, but it had closed 30 years earlier and suggested I inquire at the Finn Ware store as to possible leads on riisi piirakkas, the rice pies. The store had a collection of Marimekko, Iitala, Aino Aalto and other Scandinavian-designed items to rival any big city but, alas, no baked goods.

The next day we drove across the Columbia River to Washington State on the 6.6-km long Astoria-Megler Bridge — the longest continuous truss bridge in North America. With an entrance that curved 90 degrees and sudden dip of 180 meters in the fog-shrouded middle, it was a roller coaster of a ride.

On our last day we toured the spit of land on the Washington side of the bridge, visited an oyster farm in Oysterville, strolled the beach and stopped in at a farmers market. Lunch at the Castaway, in the town of Long Beach, included oyster shooters, oyster burgers and chowder.



Sadly, I never did find rice pies, but I have a lead on them here in B.C. — a regular item, so I hear, at a bakery on a small island off the coast of northern Vancouver Island. The quest continues.

OREGON

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LISA ATYA
PHOTO BY THE SUN

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We were into the pie even before we got to Astoria. The Berry Patch Restaurant, 24 kilometres before Astoria on Highway 30, offered so many varieties that it was difficult to pick just one. We settled on three between the four of us. The winner was one of their most popular, the Marionberry Cream, a sugar cookie crust topped with 10 centimetres of a whipped cream concoction and marionberries. With a complex flavour described as the cabernet of blackberries, the marionberry, developed in Oregon, boasts a lineage of raspberries and wild blackberries. This being an American restaurant, rice pies, however, were not on the menu.

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