

4/April/Places with Heart  
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Word Count: 659

The cover of a recent edition of National Geographic Traveler magazine said in big red letters: “The Magic of the CITY,” followed by the subtitle “Celebrating the Urban Places that Captivate Us.” Below that were references to food lover’s Sydney, walking London, Montreal at play and shopping Shanghai. I was surprised to learn the developing world’s urban population has skyrocketed by three million people a week in the past 20 years and that more than half the world’s population lives in cities.

Though I’ve been to some captivating large cities in my life and lived in one for 15 years, I’m more drawn to the cover of Sunset magazine with the heading “20 Best Small Towns, Places to Dream, Play, and Connect.” The list of towns included some in our neck of the woods like Corvallis, Hood River and Astoria. Criteria for selection to the list included small towns that inspire dreams, possess a sense of connectedness, places where one can commute less, know their neighbors and follow their passions. “Not only is each in a breathtaking setting,” stated the article, “but each of these 20 also maintains that indefinable something else—call it heart—that makes you step onto a Main Street you’ve never seen before and say to yourself, “I’m home.”

Home. When I looked up the definition in Encarta World English Dictionary, I found words like belonging, origins, refuge, safety, security, at the heart of something, words that seem to describe life in our towns along the Oregon coast.

Many of us have plunked ourselves down here after a lifetime of big cities and call this place home. On KMUN's radio show last month, Michael Burkett, Kathie Hightower and I discussed reasons we felt many of us came to this area and why most of us stay. We were particularly interested in the preponderance of creative types who have settled here. The visual beauty of the area and proximity to water tops the list for me. It's a beauty that feeds our creative spirits and soothes our souls. I think we're looking for simpler peaceful lives, a slower pace and a place to pursue our dreams. I've always felt there's a sense we can still do something in a small town that hasn't yet been done. The success of last year's startup of the Manzanita Writers Series comes to mind--build it and they will come. Because artistic expression is often a solitary thing, we yearn for connection. Finally free from careers, many want to give back to the community; hence the huge volunteer component we have that makes our little towns move along as they do.

We've always had creative people along the coast as evidenced by the Cannon Beach Chorus, now in its 21<sup>st</sup> year, the Coaster Theatre Playhouse, in its 37<sup>th</sup> year and Sitka Art and Ecology Center celebrating 40 years. The Trash Art Show at Cart'm is entering its 11<sup>th</sup> year. Tillamook County Arts Network whose mission is to strengthen and encourage the visual, performing and literary arts formed in 2000; other non-profits followed such as Bay City Arts Center, Hoffman Center, and the Center for Contemplative Arts. It's been nothing short of a cultural renaissance, which has made the arts a visible part of the fabric of the north coast of Oregon.

Magazine editors can tell me about the richness of city life, about its food, shopping, places to play and indulge. But I'll take our small towns here on the Oregon Coast any day--simple places of beauty with heart, where we know our neighbors, and can follow our dreams.

On a recent airplane ride, a young girl next to me looked out the window at the billowy clouds and said to her mother,

"Mommy, it's pitch white out there. Are we in heaven?"

"No, honey" replied her mother, "they're just clouds."

If the little girl had asked me, I could've told her about heaven in some little towns along the Oregon coast.