

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



WHERE HIPSTER LODGE

MEETS NATURE’S PLAYGROUND

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BINGEN, Wash.

The Society Hotel, in name and feel, doesn’t exactly fit in with its surroundings, located in a mill town of about 720 people on the Washington-Oregon border. Yet it’s the perfect spot for out-of-towners when exploring Portland’s outdoor playground: Mt. Hood and the Columbia Gorge area just an hour west of the city in Oregon, and Mt. Adams and the White Salmon River area on the Washington side (the Columbia River marks the boundary between the two states here).

The hotel opened six months ago in a quiet neighborhood one block from the main street (known as the Lewis and Clark Highway). It blends historic preservation, community outreach, a variety of accommodations, and a metro hipster vibe.

We discovered this cool hotel on my husband’s work trip to the area and our kids instantly felt at home. The property served as a schoolhouse from 1938 until the late 1970s and was then abandoned for a decade. It sprung back to life in 1988 as a windsurfer’s hostel, offering cheap accommodations to those coming to ply the Columbia River’s notoriously choppy and windswept waters.

In 2017, Matt Siegel, co-owner of The Society Hotel in Portland, purchased the property with four other people and turned it into the cozy and nostalgic hotel it is today, a place where original slate blackboards and salvaged clocks still decorate the walls, an old classroom and library now serve as bunkhouses for guests, and the old

gymnasium hosts private and community events each month. And — for that “Portlandia” spin — a place where a beehive-shaped structure that’s built into the ground serves as a gathering spot for yoga, meditation, and sound-healing ceremonies. Because why not?

We poked our heads into that building, called The Sanctuary, and my kids enjoyed testing out their vocals — the space has deeply resonating acoustics — and marveling at the cupola above, which lets in natural light. The Sanctuary just started hosting events in October.

The property’s main building (once the schoolhouse) has 10 standard rooms — with names such as Home Economics, English, French, and Music — located in a hallway that’s lined with 16 tall lockers. Four of the rooms have a bathroom with sink, while the rest share unisex bathrooms. Each of the small and simple guestrooms has a custom-designed bed with space for storage underneath, custom-made soap from a Portland company, and plenty of hooks.

If you’ve ever stayed in a hostel, as we have, you will appreciate the hotel’s well-thought-out and impeccably clean bunk rooms. Two large rooms, once a classroom and school library, have eight beautifully engineered triple bunks with wide ladders that make accessing each level a breeze. Each bunk includes a lockable storage area in the headboard, handy shelves, and clean linens (no need to bring your own sleep sheet or bag). Anyone staying in a dorm can store his or her backpack and other luggage in big locked cubicles and hang out in the large common space and kitchenette area.

Step out back where the old ballfields used to be locat-

Beds and a ladder in one of the bunk rooms at the new Society Hotel Bingen on the Washington-Oregon border.

ed and you’ll find a circular structure with 20 modern “cabins.” Each one looks more like a tiny one- or two-bedroom apartment with a small bathroom, a dining area with a kitchenette, and a patio with its own picnic table and free-standing hammock. Our two-bedroom cabin was small — we wouldn’t want to be stuck here on a rainy day — but offered a good place for our crew to relax in between outdoor adventures.

The property’s highlight, however, was the breezy bathhouse located in a central courtyard by the cabins. Here, visitors can soak in an outdoor saltwater pool, a hot tub, and a plunge pool, or relax in the sauna or massage rooms. Our kids, 8 and 10, spent ages here, impressing other visitors as they continually slipped out of the 103-degree hot tub to dunk in the body-tingling 55-degree plunge pool.

“You’re so brave!” several women repeatedly told them.

The property emphasizes these communal spaces, hoping visitors will hang out at the bathhouse or around one of the outdoor gas firepits, flop on oversized chairs and couches in the hotel’s main lounge (a good place to enjoy a wine or latte from the onsite Library Café and Bar), play cornhole in the shade of locust trees, or gather at The Sanctuary.

We live within driving distance of the hotel, but you don’t need a rental car to get here if you’re coming from Portland: Hop on the Amtrak train (located four blocks from the hotel’s sister property) and enjoy the 90-minute, \$14 ride to Bingen. You’ll probably wish you had a car or bike once here, though (Turo, a car-sharing program, will start up in Hood River soon).

Bingen is a short drive from epic whitewater rafting and kayaking on the White Salmon River, and historic spots such as Bonneville Lock and Dam, and Lewis and Clark points of interest (head to the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center in The Dalles for more on that). It’s also right across from the town of Hood River — connected to it by a \$2 bridge over the Columbia River — which offers easy access to Mt. Hood (45 minutes away) for hiking and skiing, Post Canyon for mountain biking, some of the nation’s best windsurfing on the Columbia River, and “waterfall alley,” a 30-mile stretch between here and Portland that has nearly 100 stunning waterfalls. Hood River also has cool breweries and waterfront restaurants, kids’ playgrounds, one-of-a-kind ice cream shops and toy stores, and a laid-back vibe.

After a day of exploration, though, we liked heading back across the narrow bridge to Bingen to relax in our hammock, dunk in the hot tub and plunge pool, and read books in the library lounge where we met people from all over the world.

210 N. Cedar St, Bingen. 509-774-4437.
www.thesocietyhotel.com/bingen. Guestrooms: \$65-\$110; dorm bed: \$30-\$55, depending on the season.

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MICAH CRUVER



Guests can hang out at the spa and bathhouse that has a saltwater pool, plunge pool, and a hot tub.

HERE

DON’T MISS THIS HOLIDAY CLASSIC Catch one of this year’s final performances of the Boston Ballet’s production of “The Nutcracker” through Dec. 29. The two-hour show, choreographed by Mikko Nissinen, runs twice a day on Dec. 22, 24, and 26-29 (times vary). Enjoy the magical world of toy soldiers, dancing snowflakes, and the dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, set to music by Tchaikovsky. Performances take place at the Citizens Bank Opera House. Tickets start at \$37 per person; anyone age 2 to 22 gets 50 percent off select performances in sections A and B with the purchase of an adult ticket. 617-695-6955, www.bostonballet.org/nutcracker.

BOSTON EVENT CELEBRATES WINE Mark your calendar for the upcoming Boston Wine Festival, which features receptions, seminars, brunches, and dinners hosted by winemakers from around the world. The event, held at the Boston Harbor Hotel, starts off with the Grand Opening Reception on Jan. 10, when you can sample more than 60 wines and meet festival founder and executive chef Daniel Bruce. Old World/New World on Jan. 29 features an evening of comparing pinot noir varietals, while other events showcase wine from family-owned estates and new smaller wineries (don’t miss the Rising Stars Dinner, Feb. 8). Uncorked for a Cause on Feb. 28 supports the No Kid Hungry campaign. The festival runs through March 27. Tickets vary but start at \$110; purchase by Dec. 31 to be entered to win a one-night stay in the Boston Harbor



JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Hotel’s John Adams Presidential Suite (a \$15,000 value). 617-330-9355, www.bostonwinefestival.net.

THERE

TINY HOUSE ADVENTURE IN THE TETONS Living in a tiny home may seem like a dream experience, but have you tried it — for real? At Fireside Resort near Jackson Hole, Wyo., you can spend time in a tiny house and see if the size suits you. The boutique hotel, which offers the atmosphere of a wooded campground in the Teton wilderness, has 25 LEED-certified small homes that are reminiscent of the area’s original homesteader cabins. These, however, come with modern fireplaces, full kitchens, high-end amenities, and private decks. The four different-style cabins sleep anywhere from two to six people, but each one comes with its own private campfire, an attached

deck with a grill and picnic table, cozy beds with Tempur-Pedic mattresses and European-style duvets, and Wi-Fi. Then, if you like the experience, buy one of these tiny abodes at Wheelhaus.com or another style from Amazon.com — a good holiday gift to yourself. Rates start at \$250 per night. 307-733-1177, www.firesidejacksonhole.com.

EXPLORE ALASKA’S BREWERIES BY TRAIN Head to Alaska this winter and enjoy a Hops on the Rails brewery tour. The one-day round-trip tour pairs train and bus rides with a brewery tour by Big Swig Tours. Take the Aurora Winter Train from Anchorage to Talkeena and visit the Denali Brewing Company. A “hoperator” guide then rides back to Anchorage with guests, stopping for behind-the-scenes tours and tastings at four breweries along the way. (Tours run Saturdays in January and Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Satur-

days in February and March.) Or just ride the rails: Keep an eye for moose, caribou, and bald eagles, enjoy views of snow-capped mountains, and stop off to explore small communities and try to spot the aurora borealis. The Aurora Winter Train transports passengers northbound from Anchorage to Fairbanks on Saturdays and southbound on the same route Sundays throughout the winter. Midweek service runs on select days from Feb. 4 through March 25. 800-544-0552, www.alaskarailroad.com.

EVERYWHERE

SENSIBLE, STYLISH WINTER BOOTS Winter has arrived, but how are your feet holding up outdoors? LOWA has launched a collection of cold weather boots that will keep your toes toasty, your feet dry, and your soles from slipping around — and they look good, too. The women’s Alba II GTXs offer waterproof protection from the elements, yet they are remarkably lightweight, offer superb breathability, and can take a beating. These tall, insulated boots have grippy soles and a plush lining that’s made with a waterproof Gore-Tex membrane and polyester-wool material. Lace up the boots once and then use the hidden side zipper for easy access. Guys, check out the mid-cut Sassello GTX Mid boot, which has the same waterproof lining, a non-slip Vibram sole for traction on snow and ice, and insulation that keeps your feet warm even when the temps dip. Both boots have split leather and fabric uppers (with buffalo leather on the women’s boots, too). \$275 (Alba),

\$290 (Sassello). 800-335-5692, www.lowaboots.com.

LIGHTWEIGHT SYSTEM FOR SNOWBOARDERS Need a last-minute gift for your snowboarding adventurer? Burton’s Step On bindings and new lightweight compatible boots will make exploring the mountains extra fun — no more sitting down to strap in. The innovative bindings have two sturdy plastic lips in the toe area and a weight-bearing clip at the heel. The boots, including the new men’s Swath and women’s Felix boots, have two small metal toe clips and a plastic heel cleat that align with the bindings; just step on the binding to instantly secure each boot and then go. The board responds right away as you initiate turns, offering more control with less effort. A quick-release lever on the binding releases the boot. The super-lightweight boots also have double Boa closures that let you dial in the perfect fit and come with a handy backpack-style travel bag. \$249.95 bindings; \$369.95. 800-881-3138, www.burton.com.

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