

"THE GREAT TRAIN ESCAPE, RIDING THE RAILS IN THE CULTURAL CASADES"

Experienced travel writer Susan G. Hauser writes about her week-long trip through the Cultural Casades cities. Susan has spent 17 years writing about the Pacific Northwest for the *Wall Street Journal* and also writes for the *New York Times*, *Travel + Leisure*, *World Traveler* and other publications.

All aboard for the Cultural Casades! My bags were packed and I was ready to board Amtrak's *Casades* train for a journey along a cultural corridor linking the Pacific Northwest cities of [Portland](#), [Tacoma](#), [Seattle](#), [Eugene](#), and [Vancouver, B.C.](#)

My journey began at Portland's historic Union Station. Its landmark neon sign atop the 150-foot clock tower — flashing "Go By Train" — has long been an enticing beacon to adventure. Travelers have been experiencing tearful and joyful comings and goings here since 1896. As I boarded my train there was just one thing missing: a dashing 1940's movie idol to tearfully see me off. Yes, the Italian Renaissance-style depot is that romantic.

Fully restored in 1996, the depot is also home to [Wilf's Restaurant and Piano Bar](#), famous for its tableside preparation of Caesar salad. It also boasts a gloriously retro piano bar, something that has never fallen out of favor at this popular site. After my train departed, I imagined my dejected movie idol bellying up to the piano, requesting "Melancholy Baby," and staring soulfully into a glass of Willamette Valley Pinot gris.

As the train departed for Eugene, the southern tip of the Cultural Cascades, it crossed Portland's Steel Bridge and headed south along the Willamette River. Outside my window I saw joggers, walkers and bicyclists crossing the bridge and following the river along the 1.5-mile Eastbank Esplanade. With its 1,200-foot floating walkway, the esplanade offers an up-close and personal encounter with the river that winds through the heart of the city.

In addition to the river view, there are several pieces of public art, installed when the Eastbank Esplanade opened in May 2001. They are part of the area's Percent for Art program, which calls for 1.33 percent of all major construction budgets to be dedicated to art. My favorite work along the river is the metal and glass sculpture "Ghost Ship." At night it's illuminated, making it appear as though a spectral ship is sailing along the horizon.

As the train hummed along toward Eugene, I mused about the five themes that overlap the Cultural Casades: "On Stage" (performing arts); "On View" (galleries, museums and gardens); "On Fire" (pottery, ceramics and glass arts); "On the Table" (food and wine); and "On Board" (the Amtrak *Casades* experience I was currently enjoying).

In Eugene I sampled a cultural event of the "on stage" variety: the world-renowned [Oregon Bach Festival](#). I had the good fortune to catch the annual performance by the festival's Youth Choral Academy, made up of more than 80 handpicked high school singers from across the country. Their talent was electrifying.

Ever since German organist and conductor Helmuth Rilling visited Eugene to perform in 1970, the annual festival has evolved to become a two-week affair, with the 2004 event planned for June 25 to July 11.

After Eugene, it was north to Portland, where I found Bach on a less traditional stage: a pub. On the third Wednesday of each month (October-March), Chamber Music on Tap is held at [BridgePort Brewing Company](#), Oregon's oldest craft brewery. In a century-old warehouse turned microbrewery, members of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra perform, chat up the audience with tales of long-gone composers, and indulge in Q&A. The informal atmosphere is highlighted by the fact that most audience members enjoy the music while sipping ale and munching pizza.

Portlanders' calendars are full of regularly scheduled events that are "on view" and revolve around the arts. On the first Thursday of every month, [Old Town Portland](#) and the [Pearl District](#) (where a majority of the art galleries are located) explode in a celebration of art, music and food. Particularly during the summer months, the streets are packed with gallery-goers, who pause between galleries to check out street performers and sidewalk artists displaying their work. Diners at the area's many restaurants tend to request tables outdoors or near the windows, just to observe the flowing stream of humanity.

The [Portland Art Museum](#) also welcomes First Thursday celebrants, although this museum warrants more than just a quick browsing. A visit of several hours allows a viewing of the temporary exhibits, as well as the permanent galleries, such as the splendid Grand Ronde Center for Native American Art. There are more

than 375 works on view, representing art and artifacts from more than 200 indigenous groups in North America. The collection takes up the entire second floor of the new wing, a handsome addition to the 1932 building.

For the “on fire” aspect of my Portland cultural explorations, I decided to make a literal interpretation of the expression and enjoy a flaming Spanish coffee. So it was off to [Huber's](#), Portland's oldest restaurant (1879) and home to one of the town's most hip and happenin' bars.

When Huber's opened as a saloon (it takes its name from an early owner), the rugged customers could not have imagined today's scene: dapper waiters repeatedly setting rum aflame with a dramatic flourish, then artfully pouring from on high liqueurs and coffee into sugar-rimmed glasses, adding whipped cream as the finishing touch. In fact, Huber's Spanish coffee is ordered so frequently six nights a week, that Huber's is the nation's top user of Kahlua, one of the drink's main ingredients.

The fiery theatrics of my Spanish coffee were beautifully matched by the on-fire creations of [Portland's Bullseye Connection](#). Since 1974 Bullseye has been hand making colored glass, using the same methods developed in 17th century France. The exceptional quality attracts artists from around the world, some of whom come to teach classes at Bullseye's new facility, located next to its eastside factory. Their work, as well as that of other innovative glass artists, is displayed at the Bullseye Connection Gallery in the Pearl District.

Nearby in the Pearl is one of the best places to dive into an “on the table” culinary experience. I chose a brunch cooking class — featuring crab cakes benedict — at [In Good Taste](#), an upscale cooking school that also sells gourmet cookware (lemon zester, anyone?), cookbooks, wine and some food products. The inventory also includes several varieties of salt, which I discovered after Cooking School Director Ron Glanville raised my salt consciousness via a gourmet salt tutorial for my cooking class group.

Although the Pearl first gained popularity because of its art galleries, it's now a major eating and drinking destination, thanks to numerous terrific restaurants and brewpubs. Neighboring Nob Hill/Northwest Portland rivals the Pearl for great eateries. In fact, Northwest's 21st Avenue is nicknamed “Restaurant Row.” Strategically straddling the border between the Pearl and Northwest Portland is [Urban Wineworks](#), a city-center winery that offers tastings and allows visitors to mix their own personal blend of red wine.

Northwest libations also include world-class brandies made at a neighborhood distillery, [Clear Creek Distillery](#). By appointment, owner Stephen McCarthy offers facility tours followed by tastings of his grappa, single malt whisky and famous brandies made with local fruit.

A delicate glass of Eau de Vie de Poire Williams (brandy made from Williams, or Bartlett, pears) was the perfect ending to my spectacular tour of Portland. Although sad to leave, there were other cities waiting for me and an Amtrak *Casades* ticket with my name on it.

In Tacoma, the third stop on my Cultural Casades tour, “on fire” translated into something bigger and hotter than a Spanish coffee. Way bigger. Way hotter. It's the hot shop of the [Museum of Glass](#), where temperatures exceed 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit in the two furnaces and four glory holes used for glass blowing by resident artists. The hot shop is hard to miss; its huge, lopsided stainless steel cone has quickly become a local landmark.

Of course, Tacoma is the hometown of famous glass artist and now Seattle resident Dale Chihuly. This makes the town an important center for glass blowing, where the art is even taught at some high schools. Chihuly's fanciful works are on display inside Tacoma's historic Union Station (no longer a working train depot) and along the Bridge of Glass, so called because it has two large displays of Chihuly's work.

After a short ride on Amtrak from Tacoma to Seattle, I was in the mood for something “on stage.” I could have chosen to enjoy the [Seattle Opera](#) near the Space Needle at the beautiful new opera house, the Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, which re-opened in 2003 after a \$127 million facelift. But no, I was in the mood for something silly.

Nothing could be sillier than [Teatro ZinZanni](#). This bizarre dinner theater is staged in an actual tent, a *spiegel tent* (mirror tent) made in Belgium in 1910 and lined with sparkling mirrors and stained glass. The show is performed by a troupe of talented actors, musicians, gymnasts and clowns. Throughout the gourmet dinner, audience members found themselves in a whirlwind of funny and frenetic activity. By the time the last course was served, my face hurt from so much laughing.

The next morning I boarded the *Casades* train and continued north to Canada. Some passengers watched the free movies on the TV monitors in each comfortable car, but I found the view outside the window more engaging than any Oscar-winner. After enjoying the shoreline scenery for many miles, I spotted Vancouver, B.C. I would soon arrive at the northern tip of the Cultural Casades .

That evening I was in a tent again, this time one of two large performance tents for Vancouver's annual summer Shakespeare festival, [Bard on the Beach](#). I was in the 525-seat Mainstage Tent. On the same evening, there was another production in the neighboring 240-seat Studio Stage.

Behind the stage, a large oval tent window overlooked English Bay and the beach at Vanier Park. As the skillful actors drew the audience into the action of the engaging play, an occasional bird came into view, and sometimes a kite or two. The soaring birds and kites did not detract from the play; rather, the view of wispy clouds and the setting sun was a beautiful companion to Shakespeare's words.

The final curtain on the play also drew the curtain on my five-city expedition. Soon I'd be back home, loaded with great memories. One thing's for sure: The sound of a train whistle in the distance will always remind me of the sights, sounds, sensations and tastes of the Cultural Casades ... and maybe that handsome movie idol too.