

Crusty Jewel

An offbeat look at Florence

For many people, mentioning the Oregon Coast sends them into fond reveries of the beauty and drama they experienced on their summer adventures. Indeed, the coast and its communities offer countless opportunities for admiring the crashing waves, the mysterious forests and the clueless fogeys maneuvering their 80-foot RVs around hairpin turns.

Oregon's coastal crown is encrusted with such precious natural and cultural gems as Haystack Rock and the Oregon Coast Aquarium. Nestled among these dazzling jewels is the cubic zirconium of the crown: Florence. Not only is it an isolated backwater still wondering what to do now that the logging business has exterminated itself, it's overrun by old people who thought spending their golden years in a foggy, windy, tsunami-prone town sounded better in the magazine. If you enjoy vacations that challenge your sense of normalcy, visiting twilight zones of absurdity, and make you laugh at your own lunacy, read on for an insider's guide to avoid all that blowing sand from the dunes and other quirks about this special place.

Atop the attractions list you'll find in Florence is the newly renovated Safeway. Centrally located, the glowing red "S" beams through the fog and driving rain, beckoning

lost travelers and locals alike to the newly enlarged array of traditional and exotic foodstuffs. A grand reopening in spring 2006 kept the town buzzing for weeks before and after, not least because of the Starbucks café inside. Locals hailed this major step into the global corporate culture with pride.

But don't end your shopping experience there! Make sure to drive clear to the north end of town to the Fred Meyer. The real marvel at Freddie's is not what's inside, but outside; the parking lot is the windiest spot in town! Even when the air at the beach itself is perfectly calm, a bracing wind blows steadily day and night, sending loose carts careening into cars and driving sand into would-be shoppers' eyes. Bulldozers keep the dunes from burying the entire enterprise. Bring your goggles.

Finally, make sure to drop by the public library. This must-see attraction of Florence is a necessity for all the literate residents or those in just need of a clean bathroom. For a small town that disappoints in so many other ways, the well-stocked library is its one redeeming grace. In addition to serving to educate and entertain with media of all varieties, the library offers shelter from the rain and wind-blown sand.

Many towns on both coasts lure spring break students with parties and bars galore.



Working (sometimes) boats line Florence docks

TED TAYLOR

Florence, however, is a mecca of silver-haired maturity, evidenced by the legions of Lincoln Continentals parked haphazardly in the extensive handicap zones at every store or doctor's office. Any cultural event that does take place is over well before dark, and the venue undoubtedly has 911 on speed-dial.

Don't let the lack of stimulating activities deter you from visiting Florence, however. There's always the thrill of staying in a tsunami and earthquake zone! Without too much trouble, Mother Nature could flood the only eastbound road and take out the bridges to the north and south, effectively isolating the town from all communication, food, and gas supplies. Just think: you could live out your *Survivor* dreams without even leaving Lane County!

Finally, the climate is always a consideration in travel planning. Rest assured that Florence boasts a reliable one that rarely reaches any seasonal extremes, or even variations. Any time of year offers fog, rain and bone-chilling wind. A good supply of waterproof jackets is all you'll need in your suitcase.

Florence really is an amazing place. Not so much for what it offers, but what it lacks: interesting community activities, anyone not AARP-eligible and a decent pizza parlor. Think of Florence this way: Truckers' hats aren't a fad; they're family heirlooms. Pack your sense of humor when you put this tarnished gem of a destination on your next travel itinerary. **EW**

Lesley Woodruff is a world traveler and writer and former Lane County resident now living in sunny Newberg.

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