

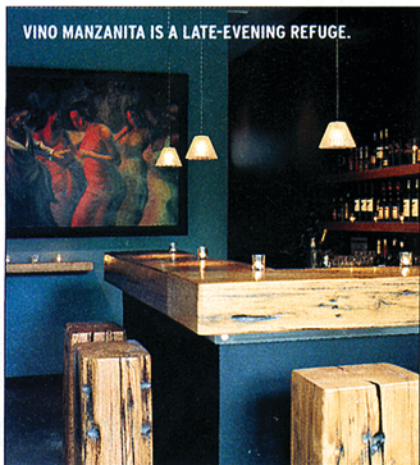
## DAY 1—NORTH COAST: MANZANITA AT SUNSET

For those who shun both crowds and ye olde saltwater taffy shoppes, the Oregon coast starts hitting its stride in tiny Manzanita (mile 43 W), just down the road from the Portland-weekender towns of arcade-y Seaside and nicer Cannon Beach. It's an easy place to miss, hiding just beyond an eye-popping set of lofty highway lookout points.

"Manzanita is locked between two state parks, so we can't get any bigger," promises the bartender at VINO Manzanita, a small wine bar run by the owners of Coast Cabins, my home for the night. "But if you haven't eaten dinner yet," she adds, "you're at risk in this town." Sure enough, the three restaurants she recommends (there aren't many more in town) are all closed on a Sunday evening just shy of 7 o'clock.

I pick up a sandwich at the corner grocery and walk a half-dozen blocks to one of the widest, emptiest beaches I've ever stood on. Head west from here into the impossibly open horizon and the first significant chunk of land you'll hit is Japan. I stare in wonder as a scarlet fireball empties itself into the cold, growling Pacific.

"That's the nicest sunset I've seen in a while," says an 80-year-old power walker as he strides by. The few figures on this massive beach soon dissipate into silhouettes, then faint sounds. A lone bark from a dog. A crackling driftwood fire. A crescent moon eventually takes shape, a gift for the chosen few on this magnificent beach. I make a note to keep Manzanita my little secret. (And yours.)



VINO MANZANITA IS A LATE-EVENING REFUGE.

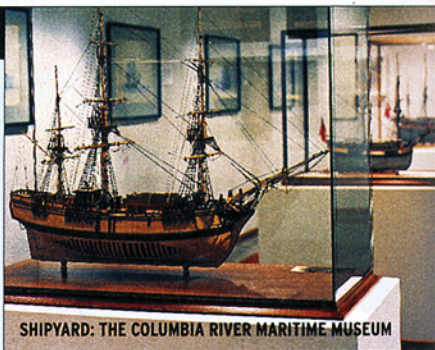
## IMPRESSIVE MILEAGE

**CHECK IT OFF:** On the water overlooking its subject, the Columbia River Maritime Museum (mile 0) is the flagship tourist attraction in Astoria, one of the Oregon coast's more underappreciated towns (even if you did see *The Ring 2*)—and home of the "We Ain't Quaint" bumper sticker. The facility features a wealth of Columbia-related exhibits, with emphasis on maritime action in the river's greatest gauntlet—the ferocious Columbia River Bar (a.k.a. the Graveyard of the Pacific).

**CHECK IT OUT:** Legend has it that a Spanish pirate treasure is buried somewhere on 1,700-foot Neahkahnie Mountain hulking over the Pacific in Oswald West State Park. An only slightly less well hidden payoff is the panorama from the top of 1.5-mile Neahkahnie Mountain Summit Trail (mile 41.5 E). Look for the gravel road turnoff (and pine-branch-cloaked "Mount Neahkahnie" sign) about two miles north of Manzanita. The trailhead is 0.6 miles up on the left. The hike takes 90 minutes round-trip at a reasonable clip.

**CHECK IN:** If a Bose entertainment system, Bang & Olufsen phone, fully loaded kitchen with a copy of *The Naked Chef*, heated towel rack and oversized shower head with lemon-grass shampoo doesn't meet your definition of "cabin," you'll quickly adjust at the Coast Cabins (mile 43 W). The quiet, classy enclave of five impeccably furnished units is just up the street from Manzanita Beach. Cabin #5 is the opus, a two-story suite with a stylish, earthy-toned Zen vibe and private outdoor hot tub.

**CHECK, PLEASE:** Manzanita locals call Wanda's Café & Bakery (mile 44.7 E) in neighboring Nehalem "the best breakfast in town out of town." The all-day eggs menu at this homey stop makes a tasty reward for climbing Mount Neahkahnie. Top honors go to the smoked-salmon-and-scallions omelet with dill cream cheese. Caveat: they only accept cash.



SHIPYARD: THE COLUMBIA RIVER MARITIME MUSEUM

## DAY 2—NORTH-CENTRAL COAST: WALKING WITH SHARKS

Like zoos, aquariums have their place. If the 15,000-creature Oregon Coast Aquarium (mile 142.2 E) was only about poking sea anemones in tide pools and chatting with volunteers about the mating habits of tufted puffins in the impressive outdoor aviary, we might suggest you "visit the aquarium" and leave it at that.

But it happens that the coolest 50 yards you'll walk anywhere on the Oregon coast are found inside the aquarium's Passages of the Deep section, an acrylic tunnel full of Pacific Northwest marine life swimming all around you. The final 25 steps venture through a habitat called "Open Sea," a euphemism for "shark-infested waters." Walking and breathing mere inches away from schools of huge, unblinking, open-mouthed ocean predators—which glide menacingly above and below, accompanied by an ethereal musical soundtrack—is a journey you have to take at least once. Or, if you're like me, back and forth several times.

GREAT WHITE WAY: OREGON AQUARIUM'S PASSAGE OF THE DEEP SPORTS THE COOLEST 50 YARDS FOUND ALONG THE OREGON COAST.

