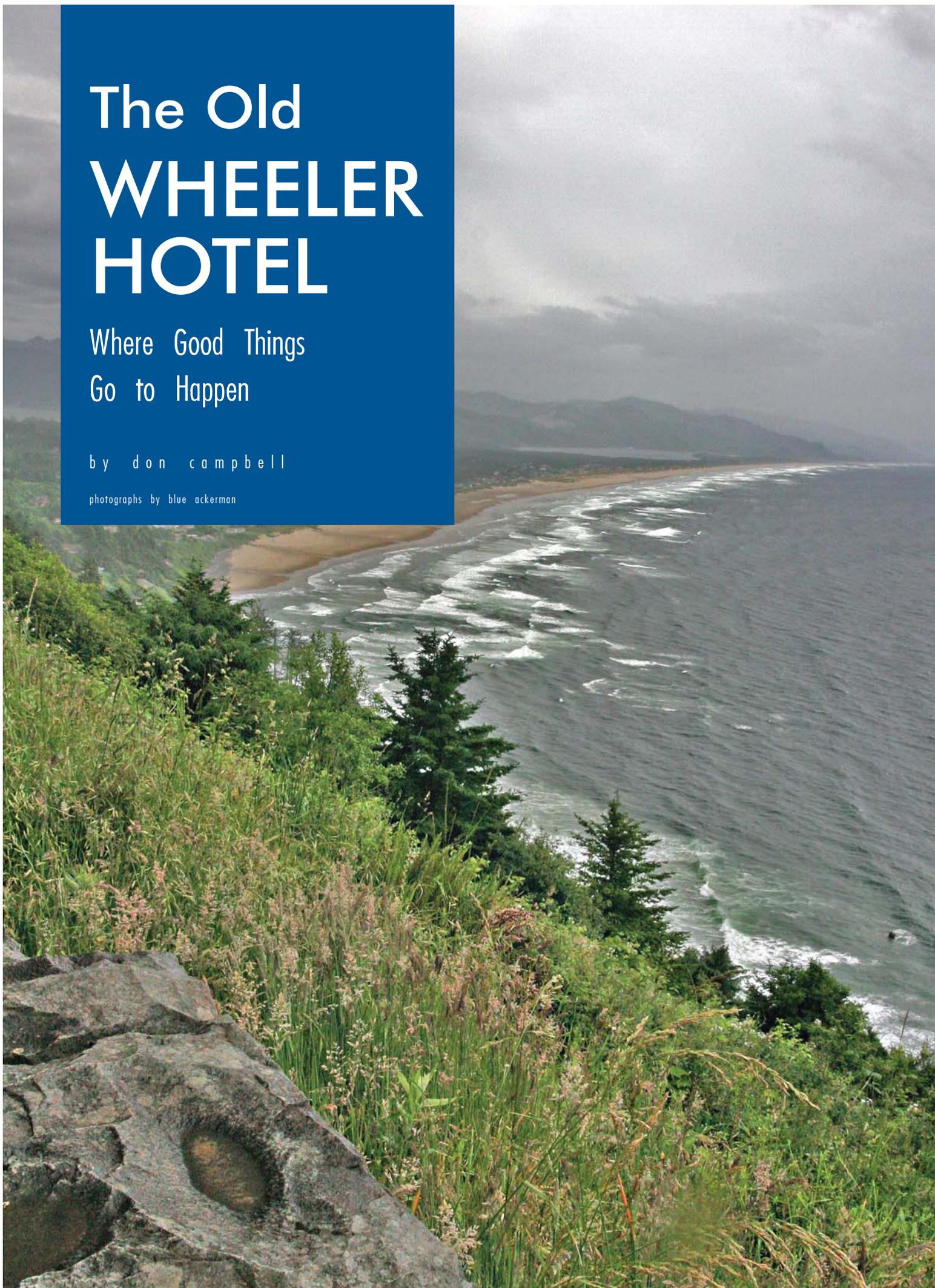


The Old WHEELER HOTEL

Where Good Things
Go to Happen

by don campbell

photographs by blue ackerman



BEYOND THE GORGE
c o a s t c o n n e c t i o n



a slate-gray sky hangs like dark wet gauze over the slackwater of Nehalem Bay.

The bay, teeming with aquatic life and verdant vegetation, is fed by the Nehalem River, which began its drip down from the peaks of the saw-toothed mountain range that culminates at the shoreline in the jutting nose of Neahkahnie Mountain, a tall cape of ominous grandeur to the north. By the time it faces off with the mighty Pacific, this expansive estuary has become a still-life study of the pastoral and idyllic, a postcard-perfect vista of the enigmatic Oregon Coast.



OLD WHEELER HOTEL

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Night chokes off the last light of an anemic sunset, and it's still. The boats are docked and Wheeler is quiet, save for the occasional truck that rumbles down Highway 101, a 25-mile-per-hour road here. The view from our Old Wheeler Hotel picture window spreads out in breath-robbing beauty.

Wheeler-population almost-400 on a good day-hunkers down, a seemingly groggy little village that time left in its dust. For nearly a century, a trip to Wheeler has meant a search for The Cure, and that's why we've come. We heard the rumors of its existence, and that of a strange vortex of cosmic causality known collectively in these parts as "Wheeler Moments," serendipitous and certifiable occurrences, coincidences and twists of fate that seem to happen here with some regularity.

BEYOND THE GORGE

c o a s t c o n n e c t i o n

Our innkeepers, Winston Laszlo and Maranne Doyle-Laszlo, have tucked us into our vintage room, fitting the hotel's turn-of-the-century heritage, and unlike a sterile national chain hotel. They tell us to rest easy, that there is plenty of time tomorrow to learn about the town, the building and how they came to resurrect the place.

But we can't wait. We're not necessarily bay people, preferring the roil and crash of waves and endless sandy beaches. But this place is different. While north-coast towns like Astoria, Seaside, Cannon Beach and Tillamook command most of the guidebook attention, it's the little burghs and villages along Hwy.101 that can pack more charm into a weekend than any of their larger brethren. Wheeler is such a place.

On our own, we discover that in 1911 the newly finished Pacific Railway connected Portland and C.H. Wheeler's bustling timber-and-seafood town, his cure for economic isolation. By 1914, Wheeler was the home of the West Coast's largest lumber mill and thrummed with seafood-packing plants.

By the '30s, dwindling timber production and the infamous Tillamook Burn forest fire forced a decline in Wheeler's population, but the quest for a new cure came with the Rinehart Arthritis Clinic, Dr. Harvey Rinehart's busy medical establishment that boasted dramatic results and flourished until the 1980s, when it closed its doors. Dr. Rinehart's grandson, Harry, still runs a clinic up the road.

The hotel occupies the very building where the Rinehart clinic existed. Coincidence? As we poke around the corridors of the hotel, warmly lit by scented candles, soothed by quiet music, and creaking with the

ghosts of old coastal characters, we don't think so. Just outside, we would peer into nearby book, antique and arts shops; eat the finest gourmet halibut and crab we've ever had, courtesy of culinary magician Mike Santo and his tiny Treasure Café (where'd we experience the first of our two Wheeler Moments-running into a long-lost friend); and then pile ourselves into a pillowy mountain of a down comforter and sleep the curative sleep we never get in the city.

HOW IT CAME TO BE

Winston and Maranne didn't so much find Wheeler, as Wheeler found them. They met in Denver, he an event producer, she a flight attendant. A newborn son brought a reevaluation of their future. They quit their jobs, packed household goods into storage, and boarded a 32-foot motor home to drive around America, looking for coastal water and a new place to live and raise a child.

After two and half years, they wandered into Wheeler for coffee in one of the only two businesses occupying the street-level portion of the hotel building. Maranne, a lover of fabric stores, soon found herself next door, in the only other business there. The building, in all its miserable decay from years of neglect, was for sale. In the first of their many subsequent Wheeler Moments, a flash of espresso-and-fabric serendipity brought opportunity and fate together.

"The universe was telling us something," says Maranne. "Something made us stop."

They bought the building six years ago and began the insane task of remodeling the upstairs, first five rooms and two commons areas, with

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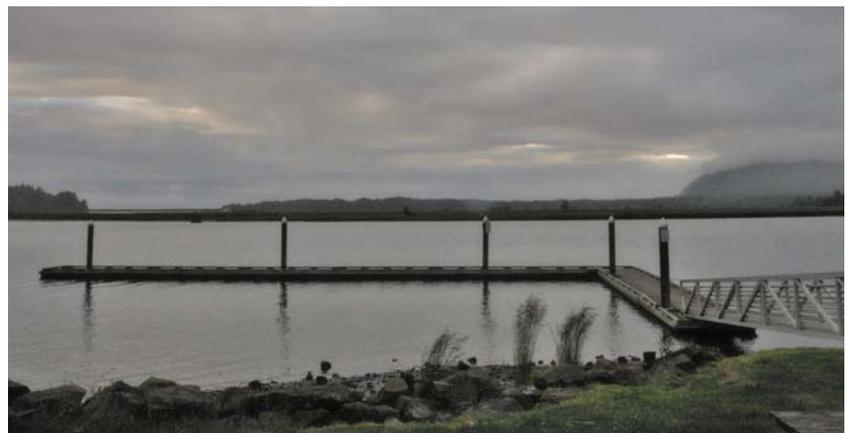
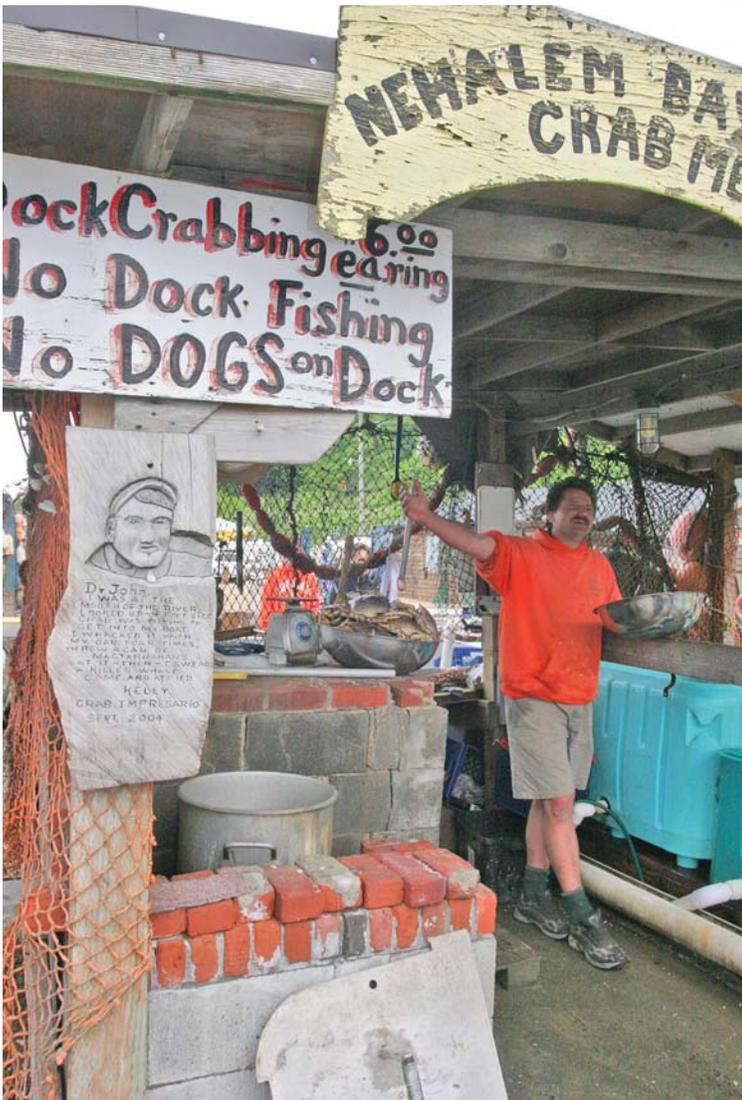
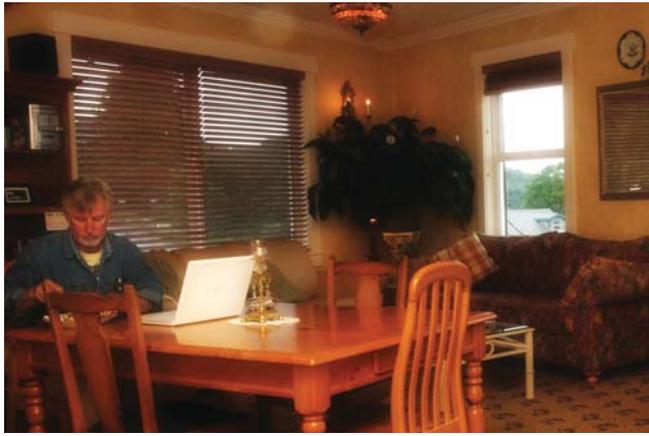
Wheeler on the Bay



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BEYOND THE GORGE

coast connection

two more guestrooms to come. "We're making it all up as we go along," says Winston.

As if graciousness and affordability weren't enough, the Laszlos fortify their guests with a casual breakfast served daily in the corner common room, giving the place more of a bed-and-breakfast feel. Other charms includes a free video library (they're movie buffs), a library, a newspaper at your door in the morning, a piano room (that may or may not be haunted), and modern amenities like high-speed internet access, satellite TV and DVD players in every room.

"We wanted to offer the stuff we want in a hotel," Winston adds.

All of the retail spaces downstairs are now inhabited - Creative Fabrics, the serpentine maze of City Center Antiques, the erudite sliver of Ekahni Books, River-Bay Café and Trillium.

And there's a bigger world of possibility within 20 miles in either direction. Little burgs like Nehalem and Manzanita offer dining and shopping. South, visit Rockaway Beach, Twin Rocks, Bar View,

Garibaldi, and Bay City, home of Pacific Oyster, an ecologically minded processing plant/café that will not only feed you fresh seafood, but will teach you how oysters are grown and the shells recycled as little oyster condos in Tillamook Bay.

Or take in the bustling cow town of Tillamook, home of the famous cheese. Visit the Bayocean Spit (once the home of a resort, now long absorbed by sand and sea), Cape Meares Lighthouse State Park (fabulous hiking and bird watching), and the tiny towns of Netarts and Oceanside. You'll be back in Wheeler easily before dark.

THE WEATHER AND OTHER THINGS

After enduring months of stormy glorp, these little burgs come alive in summer. Nearly every weekend is a fete or festival: jazz and salmon, kite and crab, reggae and blues, wine tastings (try the nearby Nehalem Bay Winery, a place of rustic charm and quirky character), open-air markets and general reverie.

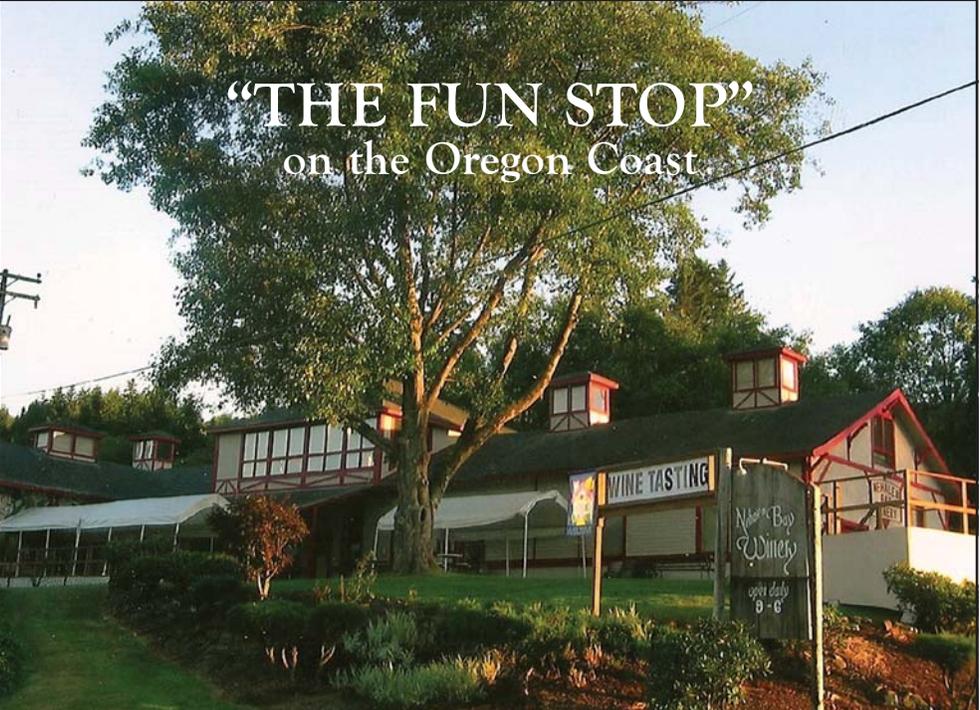
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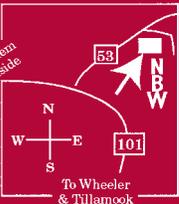
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garden-variety tourists go home, savvy travelers plan their trips then. Pleasant days and cool nights bring relief from the swelter of Indian summers found further inland. The locals, like Wheeler's Winston and Maranne, slow down a little bit in the fall. It's a little like the slack tide, neither moving in nor out. It's a moment of calm, of peace, of poise, readying for the next shift in wind, in tide, in weather.

"There's just something about the town that's charming," Winston says wistfully. "Like Lake Wobegon, it's the town that time forgot." Visit once, and it's a place that you won't.

Don Campbell is a freelance writer who calls both Mosier and Portland, Oregon home.