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Oh Oh Beach

It's an escape you need—a selfie for the soul.

BY OLIVIA GUNN KOTSISHEVSKAYA

**“W**HAT IS THIS PLACE?” A nuclear family of blondes presses its faces to the window of the Downeaster. *“Old Orchard Beach. Passengers for Old Orchard Beach,”* the attendant sings out in the doorway, beckoning the four of us to the exit as the train glides to the platform. After a fifteen-minute ride from Portland on the 6:15 p.m. departure to points south (not even enough time to make it to the bar car), we’ve arrived.

Stephan, Meaghan, my husband Fil, and I step off the train fully prepared to take on the night ahead. We all went to bed early, ate filling lunches, and mentally readied ourselves for six hours of OOB—six hours to check off each and every essential mo-



ment on the list from Palace Playland to midnight chili dogs, each balancing a fine line between the best and (sometimes even more fun) the worst decision of the evening.

**INSTAPERFECT**

**O**ur first stop is the **Pier Patio Pub** for an Old Orchard-style happy hour: steamers, Coronas, and a multi-vodka concoction dubbed “The Fish Bowl.” Bad decision number one? We’ll find out.

“All right, everyone in on this,” Stephan says as each of us snags a straw, bumping foreheads while trying for a decent selfie.

“I can’t do this. You’re too close.”

“You’ve touched every straw.”

“Smile.”

After two baskets of clams, we walk to the very end of **The Pier**, which, come sundown, transitions into the nightclub **Top of The Pier** with a DJ. For a moment, as the sun drops over the Electra Wheel and an

ocean breeze rushes past, an edge-of-the-world feeling settles over us.

It’s a snapshot for the soul—the four of us, Stephan and Meghan newly engaged, Fil and I newlyweds. I consider the many friends who’ve existed in this very moment since **The Pier’s** opening in 1898. Can you imagine the **Pier Casino Ballroom** in its heyday? Snazzy cocktail dresses and creased slacks galore! With featured acts like Duke Ellington and Sinatra, the mid-century presented an Old Orchard Beach that’s hard to fathom—especially as two barely legal girls donning barely there bikinis pose for their cache of Instagram strangers on the beach below.

**WILD CHILD**

“We have to ride the **Sea Viper**,” Meghan says as we make our way to the amusement park.

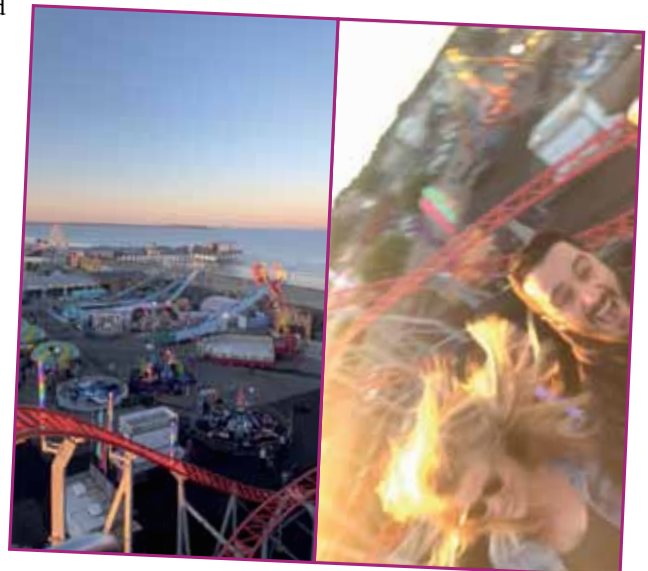
“It sounds dangerous.” I look up at the looming roller coaster.

“Stop. It’s brand new.” She

bee-lines it for the ticket booth.

Fil, ever-reassuring, pipes up, “You know, I’ve never put something together without missing at least one screw.”

The **Sea Viper** is a new Old Orchard Beach attraction. Standing 70 feet tall, the roller coaster is in no way the wildest ride I’ve taken, but I’m just not a thrills kind of girl. A spin on a wobbly bar stool after a shot or two is about as much as I need.



You may be looking for a nostalgic ride, but watch for the Bumper Car hooligans. Remember, you're not one of the sandlot kids anymore.



On the way over, we pass a sobbing child, light-up sneakers flashing as she bolts for it. "But I want to ride THAT one! It's not fair!" Her mother chases after her, assuring her the day will soon come. Back straightened, I step up the metal ramp. *For you, little one.*

The four of us line up, taking over the gate of the lead car as the riders before us pull in. "Hope you didn't eat your pier fries yet," a barrel-chested man laughs as he steps out. His wife rolls her eyes.

Before I know it, I'm stuck. The safety bar is down; the ride attendant double-checks. *Is he sure? Can he check again?*

"He seems distracted."

"He's not."

Too late, anyway. The cars are slowly pulled up the incline, inching us to our

FROM TOP: FILIPP KOTISHEVSKIY; COURTESY PHOTO; MEAGHAN MAURICE; FILIPP KOTISHEVSKIY; MEAGHAN MAURICE; STEPHAN BAILEY

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doom. Meaghan cackles. Stephan whoops. My traitor husband smiles.

“I hate this—AHHH!”

Side to side, I’m flopping like Raggedy Ann, white-knuckling the entire way. My company shrieks with laughter, squealing with every twist and turn. Oh, boy, what fun. Look at that, we nearly died. The cars come to a slow, dramatic halt, and my hair looks like I’ve just left a Quiet Riot concert.

“One more time?”

“How about a shot?”

**STRANGELAND**

**T**equila Frogs is next on the list. It’s closing in on 8 p.m. but the bar is mostly empty, so we don’t waste much time. After requesting four shots of tequila and housing an order of chips and salsa, it’s time to roll. We’ve got moles to whack and prizes to win, and Stephan has been pretty cocky about his gaming skills.

The arcade is by far the busiest area in Old Orchard. It’s an equalizing zone where grown men can be Evil Knivel on a sta-

tionary crotch rocket while 10-year-olds become pinball wizards.

After a brief game of Whac-A-Mole (that Stephan unashamedly cheats at), we make our way to the Skee-ball ramps. Here we all thrive. Among the dings, whistles, lights, and bells, the tickets pile up earning us one bouncy ball, 15 erasers, and a duck whistle for, well, duck whistling. We march on, satisfied with our bounty and ready to mix and mingle.

**THE NIGHT IS YOUNG**

The street energy has picked up, and crowds begin to form in front of the bars along E. Grand Avenue. Music from the deck of **Weekend at Bernie’s** lures us in, and, although no one among the patrons is actually dancing, there’s a general consensus on the floor that “No Diggity” is a great dance song.

We take to the deck for a bit of fresh air, our giant, aluminum Budweiser bottles in tow. No sooner do we score the perfect table does a group of middle-aged women sad-

**Bottoms Up**



dle up next to us—one clearly tipsier than the others.

“The kids call me Mama Kath.” She scans our foursome. “I can’t find my husband.”

Her friends mouth apologies over her shoulders while coaxing her back to the corner, but Mama Kath is content right where she is. Looks like we’ve made a new friend.

The bartender approaches with a tray of Jell-O shots.

“We’re going to do Jell-O shots,” I tell Kath. “Would you all like one as well?”

“I’ve no idea what that is.”

COURTESY BARTENDER AT TEQUILA FROGS

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## PORTLAND AFTER DARK



“We’ll take seven.”

Our motley crew encircles Mama Kath, and one of her friends leans in, making an Irish toast, accent and all. She ends with a snappy line about the fellas getting her home before down the hatch they go.

**A**t some point, Kath’s husband, Papa Dan, as the kids call him, arrives, and before we even think to ask for it, we’re gifted with the 30-minute version of their story. After another round, I’m past wondering why they’re exposing these intimate details of their lives. Instead, I’ve accepted that tonight they’ve escaped. They’ve escaped their home in New Hampshire, their three grown kids, their jobs, and here in Old Orchard Beach, away from it all, they can do Jell-O shots with a group of twenty-somethings and not be Mama Kath and Papa Dan.

### PURPLE HAZE

We all agree on one last round before heading back toward The Pier, and, according to our guide, Meaghan, we can’t not visit **The Brunswick**. Boasting the “largest ocean-front patio bar” in town, it’s a must.

We order our beers inside before pushing our way through the large crowd. Outside, the patio drinkers mill about in purple light and the cool ocean air gives everyone a new burst of energy. The plan was to grab a quick dinner here, but our rendezvous at Bernie’s went even longer than realized. It’s already after 10 p.m. The Brunswick has stopped serving dinner.

“I told you we should have eaten at The Pier.”

“I didn’t know it was this late.”

“I’m not missing out on a chili dog.”

We down the rest of our beers and set out across the beach in search of the greasiest food we can find. Ahead, I see two fig-

MEAGHAN MAURICE

ures standing in the dark. A familiar smell wafts through the air. If anyone knows where to find a chili dog, these two do.

“Hi, guys. How much further for food?” They laugh, not realizing the severity of my hunger. I’ve lost the others but push on.

### ONE FOR THE ROAD...

The sign glows heavenly. “Mile Long Franks” is written across the silhouette of a wiener dog. Beauty. I bask in its glow as the others emerge from the beach. Fil and I order two large chili dogs and a cup brimming with fries doused in cheese sauce. Meaghan and Stephan cross the street for a slice at **Bill’s Pizza**.

While I love a fine dining experience as much as anyone, this chili dog satisfies something deep in the pit of my gut that can’t be put into words. Forget farm-to-table, fresh catch of the day. This mile-long-dog is where it’s at, heartburn be damned. I



want another.

No longer hungry and tired, Meaghan and I consider one more round.

The guys go along for a minute or two before vetoing the idea. Apparently, one more round isn’t always necessary, a belief I’m still not quite convinced of. *I’m still a trashy twenty-something, guys. We’re at Old Orchard Beach. Life is short. The train isn’t here for another 40 minutes. The night is young.*

“And the Uber is here.”

The ride home is smooth enough that Meaghan and I fall asleep, leaving Fil and Stephan to regale our driver with stories of our night in OOB.

Back home, sand sprinkles across the floor and I take off my shoes to crawl into bed as Ferris wheels, Skee-balls, and chili dogs dance in my head. ■



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