



## Where New Yorkers Go To Be Happy

In the words of graphic designer Kate Howe.

**A**S SOON AS I could choose my place, I chose New York City. I elected to go to Columbia over Harvard or Stanford for the worldliness, the hustle, the grit, glamour, and brushes with greatness of New York City. Four years later, when the fresh-faced graduates of those and other institutions showed up, I felt part of the city—and undeniably superior.

In the years after college, I did move out of New York City, once for San Francisco, which turned out to be too parochial, and once for London, which...well that did give New York a run for its money. But settling back in Brooklyn after graduate school, I figured it was game-over. I would go on honing my version of life in the city—find my mate, buy and decorate an apartment, fur-

ther my career. Then think about children, and a weekend house, and further furthering my career. But life anywhere else did not seem plausible. If I complained about the price of real estate, or the exhaustion of the subway commute, or the waiting list for preschool, it was always with the understanding that those hardships were vastly preferable to living in the places without those hardships. I sometimes heard people discuss “getting out,” and I mentally put them in the Other category. They must not be that tough, I thought. And those poor souls in the suburbs of Long Island or Jersey.

Imagine my surprise then, when I was one-half of a decision to move up to Portland, Maine. It came upon us almost by chance. My husband applied for a job in

Portland and slowly became the chosen candidate. What had seemed a harmless gambit turned into a crazy, weighty, life-altering decision, the most difficult one of our adult lives. At first we thought, “Oh how charming. But of course we’ll stay in New York.” We made up our minds that way at least five or six times, only to be tempted during the night by fantasies of seaside meadows and ocean breezes; fantasies that our daughters could grow up knowing nature; and the biggest fantasy of all—that there might be another version of life out there, if only we were able to unwind enough to enjoy it.

On a last minute trip to check out Maine again, after the job decision was already overdue and we were wracked with indeci-

**“There is a tremendous loss of identity that comes with leaving New York.”**

—Kate Howe

sion, the honey light and sweeping vista of Ocean House Road leading into Cape Elizabeth undid me, and just like that, my life path turned and led out of New York City.

There is a tremendous loss of identity that comes with leaving New York. The city

that demands everything from its residents also returns much to them: endless stimulation for a sustained adrenaline high; an infinite string of glittering goals, the achievement of any one mysteriously leading to the appearance of a new one, like levels in a video game; and always the satisfaction that you are doing it harder, longer, bigger, and more intensely than anybody, anywhere else. Even if you're not winning in New York, just surviving there is surely better than winning anywhere else.

**W**hen you're proud of these things, when your small victories against all the concrete and all the people have become badges of honor, to move away is to lose a psychic armature that has been sustaining you. It is also to release all the unrealized dreams of the city and admit to yourself that they will never be. I will not be a late-blooming art star in Chelsea. My daughter will not be scouted on the street for young celebrity. Living in NYC, these were fantastical possibilities, but in Portland, Maine they are not.



I went through detox the first summer here, releasing the psychic layers and contortions, the ways I had adapted to the environment in New York. For the first time I noticed how prevalent my internal anxiety was, as it stood out in relief against the pretty, unbothered environment.

We've been here a year and a half now, and I have come to value something I never did in New York: ease. It's easy to get to a beautiful beach, and so we go several times a week after work. It's been easy to make

real friends, easy to get involved with groups and activities that are interesting to me, easy to find a magical school for my girls, easy to complete the errands of daily life. With that ease it has become possible to enjoy the things I do, instead of being distracted by the mental load of stress and strategizing. I have crawled out of my old skin of self-consciousness and comparison, and the new one underneath feels so much lighter.

There is a big community of former New Yorkers here in Portland, and it is growing rapidly. From the Airbnb hostess on our first trip, to the former Amex executive I met at the coffee shop this morning. People's individual reasons and experiences are of course different, but there is a collective relief and wonder at the beauty here, and sense of our good fortune to have found our way here. Portland is not perfect, but it has a special combination of small-town ease and a cultural life and quality of people that outstrip its size. New York will always be magnificent, but it is not an environment for happiness. For a New Yorker willing to be happy, Portland is pretty good.

KATE HOWE

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