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What Brings Us Here?

BY SARAH MOORE

New residents share the stories of how they came to call greater Portland home. We call it kismet.

GERMANS DESCRIBE *fernweh* as the yearning for another, far-off place unknown to you. During a long winter in London, longing for the ocean and a kinder city, and despite having never lived in America, I made the quick and weighty decision to leave London behind. Goodbye city noise and excitement, friends, impossible rent prices, and familiarity. Within two weeks I was standing at the Greyhound bus station in Portland, Maine, in the dead-silence after a blizzard, facing a new, blank page of my journey stretching as empty and white as the unplowed sheet of snow ahead.

In a state legendary for its vast dominions of pine trees, Portland is an urban destination restless in its development. As we grow larger and more diverse as a population, the city becomes more dynamic and desirable. But what is drawing these individuals from all over the world to our small city by the sea?

The destination may be the same, but our journeys are very different.

CONSTANT RAMBLER

Vikki Walker, 34, has seen a lot of the world, but after working for long stretches on the road with the likes of Madonna, Elton John, and Lady Gaga, the only place she wants to come back to is Portland, Maine.

“I fell into the music industry around 12 years ago by complete chance. I started out on a private catering team for big musical acts—I couldn’t cook a thing,” says Walker, who originates from a small town in the rolling farmlands of England. What followed



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was over a decade of near constant touring to every corner of the globe as a chef, assistant, backstage manager—you name it. It was during these travels that Vikki met her now-husband Kyle, a native of Vermont, while they were both working on tour with the English rock band Keane in 2010.

“The plan was that we’d try and coordinate jobs so we could travel together, but it didn’t really work out like that! We spent three years traveling in opposite directions around the globe. We’d grab time together whenever our paths crossed. A month here in Berlin, another there in Lisbon.” While the couple thrived on the nomadic, rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle, by 2013 they were ready to put down roots. “We’ve been very lucky to see so much of the world, but after a while it gets tiring living out of a suitcase all year.”

With no idea of where their dream home would be, the couple decided to take a road-trip across America in search of somewhere to call home. “We’d stop in these towns, go out and see how we felt there,” says Vikki. “We drove all along the West Coast, but nothing won us over.”

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been fortunate enough to see so many places in the world, I can honestly say that Casco Bay is one of the most beautiful places I've ever known."

By 2014, the pair had made the decision to escape the relentless demands of touring gigs. Kyle secured a job in merchandising for Mumford & Sons that allowed him to remain in the city, and the pair decided to pursue their dream of opening a bar. Maps opened its doors to Market Street in 2014. "The bar is our retirement plan! It's a way to anchor ourselves here."

The inviting underground bar is plastered with atlases, maps, and Kyle's extensive record collection as a nod to their former life on the road. The atmosphere eschews pretension—the majority of patrons are locals quietly drinking and listening to music. "There's something really personal about Maps. We've met so many wonderful people in Portland. The bar is almost like an extension of our living room—we just want to fill it with our friends and our stuff!"

Despite Vikki's attempts at retirement, she continues to field numerous job offers

It was a dark evening in the winter of 2013 when the couple pulled into Portland, Maine, on a whim. "Kyle had heard Portland had this great up-and-coming reputation, so we booked into the St. John's Inn one night and walked into town. I remember it was freezing. I think I wore every layer I owned all at once." Despite the chilly first impression, something stuck for the couple. "There was just

something here that drew us in. Plus, the excellent Mexican food at El Rayo helped seal the deal."

Inspired, the pair began house-hunting in earnest before Vikki's job pulled her away for a six-month world tour with Lady Gaga. "I came back to Maine in mid-summer, and I was just blown away by the city all over again. It sounds crazy, but I hadn't really appreciated the bay right on our doorstep. Having

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VOICES

from the music industry. “I swear I’m scaling back! There’s an upcoming gig with a big band, a very big Irish band, that I just couldn’t turn down,” she says coyly. (Think Bonobo without the bo.) “But even when I’m in one of my favorite cities in the world, I can’t wait to come home to Portland.”

LE GRAND VOYAGE

Afternoon light streams through the West-facing windows of Chez Okapi restaurant on St. John Street as owner **Raphael Kabata** prepares for the night ahead. “I’ve had the restaurant for a year now. It was hard to get going—I spent over a year searching for the right location. Portland’s real estate has become very competitive in the past few years, so it was a challenge. But the city has also become a lot

“In just the past five years I’ve seen Portland’s diversity grow so much.”

—Raphael Kabata

more open and diverse. There’s a lot more opportunity for immigrants these days,” says Raphael.

The 35-year-old former lawyer from the Democratic Republic of Congo left his homeland in 2011 to escape the conflict that has plagued the landlocked Central African country. “I left Congo and emigrated to Dallas, Texas. I was in Dallas for three months trying to get a job and a place to live, but without my work permit approved I couldn’t get job or an apartment. It was a hard time.”

Raphael reached out to some of his friends from the DRC who’d also emigrated for advice. “My friends encouraged me to come to Portland, Maine. They told me about an organization that would help you to get on your feet and start a life here. They said Portland was a good place to live and there were resources for immigrants. In my experience, places like this are rare.”

Raphael journeyed to Portland in March 2011 and spent a year in accommodation provided by General Assistance until his work permit was accepted and he could begin work. The language barrier proved a



challenge, as all the English classes on offer from General Assistance were at capacity. “I had to teach myself English. I was lucky to have a small but supportive community of Congolese friends around me. In just the past five years I’ve seen Portland’s diversity grow so much. Dallas has a huge amount of diversity—you can find every kind of nation-

ality there—but I didn’t feel at home in Texas. It was so big, and the people were unfriendly.” Dallas’s only redeeming feature was perhaps its more forgiving climate. “The first winter I spent in Maine, I thought I wouldn’t be able to stand the cold—but I’ve grown used to it!”

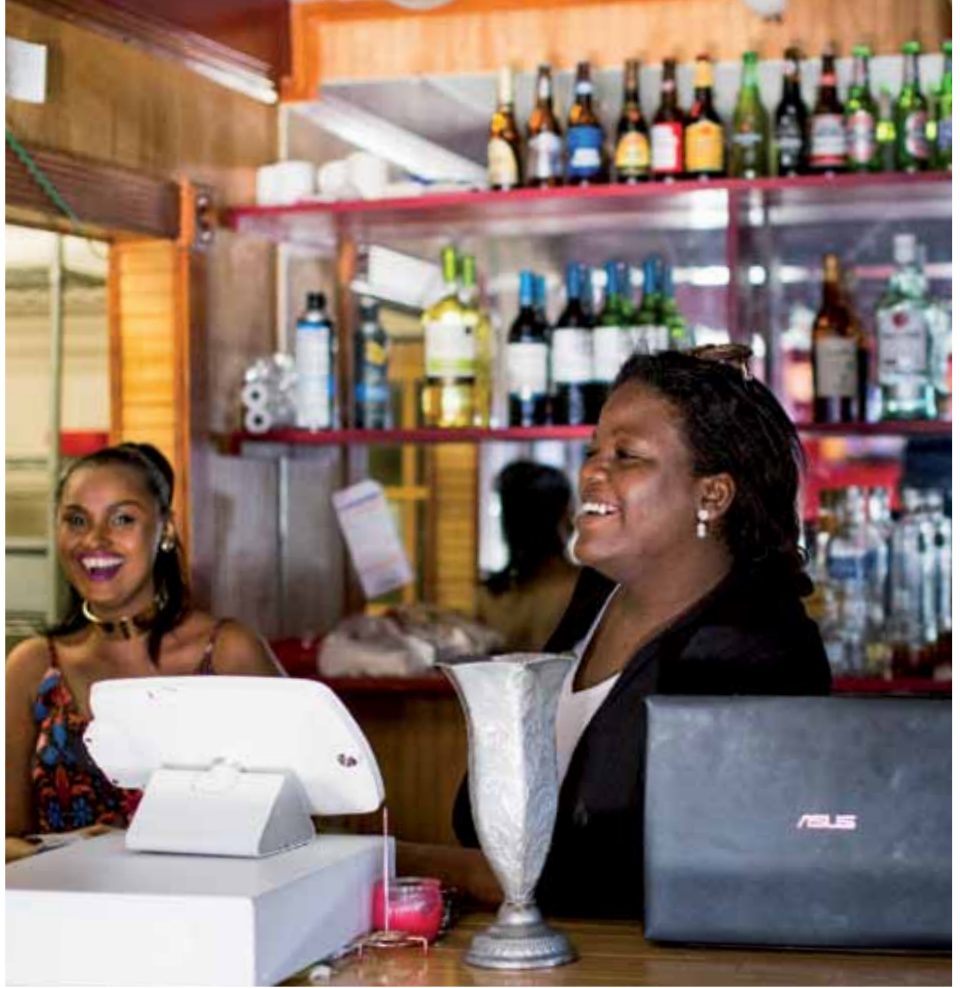
The idea of opening Chez Okapi (Okapi

is a mammal native to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the *chez* a nod to his Francophone roots) developed in Raphael’s mind as he warmed to Portland foodie culture. “I wanted to create a place where you can experience not only great, authentic African cuisine, but also to create a sense of African culture and community. I’ve met people

from Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi...but it's not just for Africans. I want locals to come here and share the experience. Portland is much more multicultural now. I want to see everyone mixing."

Business can be challenging, but Raphael is happy to have set up a restaurant in the city he now considers home. "After I'd worked for a few years and saved up for the restaurant, I could've moved anywhere in the country, but I chose Portland. I wanted to remain here," he says, glancing at his wife, Octavie. The couple were childhood friends growing up in Congo. Octavie moved to Pittsburgh 12 years ago, and the pair reconnected online when Raphael moved to Maine. Octavie made the decision to join Raphael in Portland in March of this year. "I've found Portland a really laid-back environment; it feels a lot more friendly than Pittsburgh ever did," she says.

"If the restaurant is successful I can see us staying here for the future," says Raphael. "I'd like to raise kids in Maine; it's a safe place; it's home. When people ask where I'm from I say, 'I'm a Mainer. I'm Mr. Portland!'"



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Where New Yorkers Go To Be Happy

In the words of graphic designer Kate Howe.

AS 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.

When 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 were 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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THE GOLDEN YEARS

When New Jersey native **Judy Strano, 67**, read an article in the *American Association of Retired People* in 2011 that listed Portland, Maine as a top city for relocating, she dismissed it off-hand: “Too cold.” Little did Judy know that just three years later she and her husband, Rich, would be clinging to the side of Fort Williams Lighthouse in the middle of a raging Nor’easter, blasted by the wind and rain—and loving every second. “It was like watching fireworks. It was a truly magical experience.”

The social worker of 30 years had spent her entire life in New Jersey, working, raising two children, even setting up her “Interesting Women Group” in Piscataway. However, Judy knew it was never too late for a fresh

In August 2014, Judy dragged her husband of 45 years “kicking and screaming” up to Maine.

start. “I thought that if I stayed in New Jersey, I’d find it hard to adjust to retirement. It’s such a busy, hectic place. I needed a change of scene.” The initial plan had been for the couple to relocate down south, but Judy couldn’t picture herself as a stereotypical Floridian retiree. The Stranos’ son, Kevin, had moved to Portland from Brooklyn with his wife several years earlier to raise their young daughter. The desire to be nearer to her family and the

thrill of adventure tugged Judy northward, and in August of 2014, Judy dragged her husband of 45 years “kicking and screaming” up to Maine. “We decided to rent an apartment. That way, if it didn’t work out we could just leave—no strings attached. Within just a couple of months I knew we were staying.”

Despite her gung-ho attitude, Judy had some reservations about leaving behind the place she’d known her entire life. “I was scared about making new friends in Portland. Meanwhile, I was saying goodbye to a group of lifelong friends back in Jersey.” Not one to linger in self-doubt, Judy joined two books clubs, the South Portland Recreation Center, Maine Audubon Society in Falmouth, and the Allen Avenue Unitarian Church. She even plans to launch a new chapter of the “Interesting Womens Group” here in Maine (her Jer-

Creating a Passion for Portland

Greater Portland Convention + Visitors Bureau does what people think “just happens.”

BY ROBERT WITKOWSKI

Imagine Portland without visitors filling our streets and businesses...

“With only 67,000 residents, this city couldn’t sustain the amazing restaurants, shops, attractions, and hotels that we all enjoy as locals,” says Lynn Tillotson, President + CEO of the Greater Portland Convention + Visitors Bureau (CVB). “With the enormous amount of national competition for vacation destinations we must be out there marketing Greater Portland to continue to drive visitation, which benefits our economy and the entire region.”

As Greater Portland’s official tourism marketing organization, the CVB has been promoting the growth and evolution of Maine’s largest metropolitan area since 1982. Their efforts lure millions of visitors, conferences, weddings, sporting events, and tour operators (along with their dollars) to the region—and *it’s working!* A media darling today, Portland is a vibrant, active, cultural, creative, and culinary destination known worldwide.

IT TAKES A CITY

The Greater Portland Convention + Visitors Bureau was created by area businesses who pooled their resources together to focus on promoting the region as a tourist destination.

“Without tax dollar support, we’ve always relied on community partners to fund tourism marketing,” says Tillotson. “Ninety percent of our marketing is done outside the state, and even internationally, attracting over 5.5 million visitors annually—it takes a village to accomplish this.”

The CVB’s effectiveness speaks for itself, infusing billions of dollars to Greater Portland’s economy, and landing Portland many accolades including the highly coveted TripAdvisor Travelers’ Choice™ Award, Top Ten Destinations on the Rise for 2016.



Maine’s largest metropolitan area has become the destination of choice for leisure and business travelers worldwide. Now a media darling, the Greater Portland area is increasingly honored in the ‘Top Ten’ rankings of travel and industry magazines, TV shows, and blogs.

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The CVB—widely known as VisitPortland online—embraces the digital age in getting out in front of visitors. #VisitPortland isn’t simply a hashtag, it is a battlecry for the CVB and its community, defining Greater Portland’s authenticity, creativity, and originality.

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sey chapter still meets monthly after 20 years).

“Two years on, and I’ve made the more dear friends in Portland,” Judy says. Retirement hasn’t necessarily meant a change of pace for the new Portlander, who starts each day with a walk to Bug Light Park and a swim at the recreation center, followed by voluntary work with Family Practice, Allen Avenue, and as a social worker to female students from immigrant families at South Portland High.

Judy frequently recalls the busy, stressful lifestyle she once led on the fringes of New York City. Was promise of the great outdoors part of Maine’s appeal? “My whole life I was a fan of the great indoors! I really wasn’t interested in nature and getting out and being active. Now we hike, go to the beach. I swim every day. I’m tan for the first time in my life!

“Coming to Portland gave me the opportunity to reinvent our lives. It has made retirement so exciting. Every day is a new adventure. We’ve probably seen more of Maine than most Mainers!”

The lifestyle change has not only proved invigorating, it’s also been healing. “You know, back when I was working, I walked with a cane. I suffered from sciatica, and I just didn’t feel good.” She sits poker-straight, slim, and full of vitality. “In part, the retirement has helped, but in a greater part, living in Maine has made me the healthiest I’ve been in years.”


The Stranos’ daughter Amy, a Unitarian minister in New York, insisted that her mother visit a counselor as a condition of the move. “She thought I’d grieve my friends and my life back in New Jersey,” Judy says. “And of course, in many ways I do! I went to the counselor, but after a couple of sessions he told me, ‘Judy, you’re going to be just fine!’”

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A PORT IN THE STORM

You can't always choose where you land. But after fleeing escalating violence in Mosul, Iraq, the **Abduljabbar family** has found Portland to be an accidental Shangri-la. Sanaa and Aymen Abduljabbar, along with their sons Salim and Salar, arrived here in March of 2010. The family was granted asylum from the United Nations after leaving their home in Mosul and spending several years moving around Turkey. "I didn't know anything about Portland before I arrived. My brother had been living in Quebec, so we wanted to be close enough to him." A roll of the dice landed the family in the Pine Tree State, where they were propelled into their new life as Mainers. "When we arrived in America, it was like being a newborn and opening your eyes for the first time. We felt like we knew nothing about life here. Luckily, Portland has been good to us," Sanaa says. "I've spoken with other friends who've come over from Iraq and have settled in other cities in America. They say they worry about family's safety. I've never felt that way here."

When Salim, then 12, first walked into Lincoln Middle School in 2010, he knew only a handful of English words. Six years on, the Deering Oaks High graduate is now starting his freshman year at Bowdoin and can even boast a TED Talk presentation to his name. Sanaa,



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“In Portland, you can keep your culture, your religion, your language. No one here will try and touch that.”

-Sanaa Abduljabbar



44, who taught biology to high schoolers in Iraq, impressed the importance of hard work on Salim and his younger brother, Salar, 15, from the moment they arrived. “I told them, ‘You’ll have to work twice as hard to prove yourself.’”

Salim admits he initially struggled with motivation during middle school. “I felt like no matter how hard I worked I’d always be at a disadvantage to the kids who’d lived here their entire lives. I stuck around with kids from similar immigrant backgrounds to myself.” Salim credits moving to Deering High, the most diverse high school north of Boston, and a summer spent with Seeds of Peace international camp in Otisfield to changing his mentality.

“I guess I realized I had this potential. All I had to do was work for it. I pushed myself in high school and made so many great friends. They made me feel like I was at home. They are my extended family in America.” Apart

from a maturity that’s rare in most 18-year-olds, there’s nothing to suggest that Salim is anything but your average Portland teenager, spending his high school weekends at house parties, in the Old Port, and driving to Scarborough Beach. However, he’s always aware of the duality in his identity. “I’m in this gap between being American and being Iraqi.” Is it a comfortable gap to inhabit? “Not really,” he says. “But I think perhaps it’s made me more thoughtful.”

Sanaa has made an effort to balance their American life with their cultural roots and Islamic beliefs. The Abduljabbar household is strictly Arabic speaking, and they eat food prepared in keeping with the family’s Iraqi/Kurdish heritage. Sanaa, who works as a Community Health Worker at the Maine Access Immigrant Network and as a Neighborhood Coordinator at The Opportunity Alliance, is quick to share her experience to the families she works with. “I always tell

them: You can keep your culture, your religion, your language. No one here will try and touch that!” Meanwhile, Sanaa’s husband Aymen, 47, works in manufacturing for L.L. Bean. “He’s involved with making Bean boots,” Sanaa says and laughs. “It’s the most Maine job ever!”

For the family, the simple pleasures of the sea, the greenery, and the surrounding natural beauty have made adjusting to their new life on the other side of the world from their home and family that much easier. “Portland is a small city, and there are so many tree and green spaces,” says Sanaa. “I would have hated living in a big city! We love taking our lunch to Deering Oaks or the beach. We plan to go up to Acadia National Park soon and explore. Iraq is my homeland and always will be, but Portland is home. We are happy here.”

They may not have chosen Portland, but they’ve thrived here. You could call it luck, hard work, fate—or all three. ■