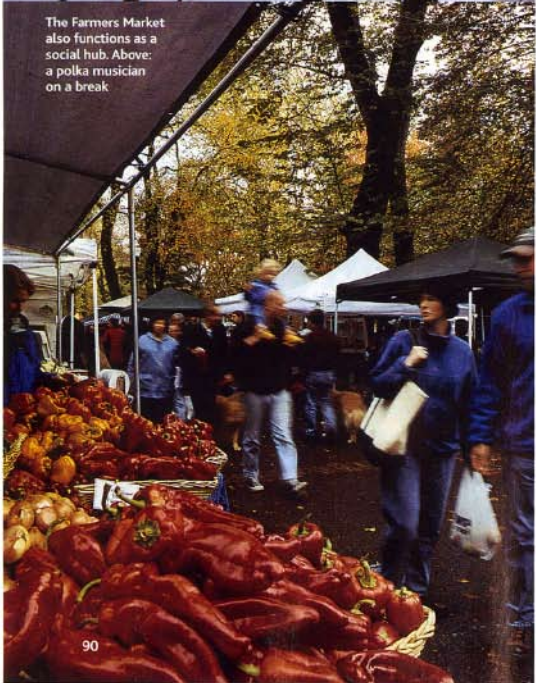


The Farmers Market also functions as a social hub. Above: a polka musician on a break



**W**hen I first heard Loretta Lynn sing, “Well, Portland, Oregon, and sloe gin fizz / If that ain’t love, then tell me what is,” I wanted to write her a letter. “Dear Loretta,” it would say. “Have you ever considered Havana, Cuba, and a bottle of rum? How about Madrid, Spain, and a lusty Rioja?” As far as I could tell, there was nothing particularly seductive about a city where plug-ins for electric cars were installed nine years ago, where the most prominent new building was made with recycled material, where you’d be hard pressed to find a street without a clearly marked bike lane.

There’s an admirable, almost intimidating conscientiousness to the way people in Portland live, which has little to do with sensual abandon. Not only does a spotless, fast, and cheap (\$1.70) light rail run from the airport to the middle of the city, but there was also a guardian angel posted near the ticket machine to facilitate the process. Forty minutes later, I was on the tree-lined, cobblestoned streets downtown. A policeman on a mountain bike directed me to the *Hotel Lucia*, where the staff offered me a tart green apple and plied me with maps and restaurant recommendations. Wandering around, I noticed kiosks stocked with brochures. They were manned by sidewalk ambassadors, armed with pocket PCs, posted specifically to answer tourists’ questions. It was like Disneyland with more overt politics.

But every time I thought I had Portland figured out, something came along and turned my theory upside-down. It can be as arch as it is earnest, as sophisticated as it is folksy, as obsessive as it is easygoing—and although it may lead with its utopian aspirations, it has plenty of dystopian secrets. Portland, I was surprised to learn, has more strip bars per capita than any other U.S. city.

Maybe Loretta was on to something.

**It started, as these things do,** with smart planning. Twenty-five years ago, the regional government created an urban growth boundary, confining new development to established neighborhoods in order to minimize sprawl. The result is a city unfettered by strip malls and prefab developments; instead, Portland is a patchwork of neighborhoods, each a sort of self-contained, distinctive ecosystem.

The Willamette (rhymes with “Damn it”) River snakes through the city, separating the east side from the west; Burnside Street divides north and south. Most of Portland’s traditional attractions are on the west side, including its downtown. At lunch hour, Pioneer Square—an amphitheater smack in the city’s center—is filled with professionals eating delicious tacos and Ethiopian food sold from hand-painted carts. But unlike so many American cities, downtown Portland continues to live and breathe at night and on weekends. Every other evening in Pioneer Square, weather permitting, there’s a symphony or a youth choir or an Italian cultural festival—or at the very least, a street musician banging noisily on plastic buckets.

## “Can a Place Be Too Perfect?”

by Kimberley Sevcik  
*Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel*  
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