

April, 2007

Top 10 Harbors

We share our favorite havens for boat-watching.

1. Gig Harbor, Washington

This lovely, slightly rustic town at the south end of Puget Sound lets you stay overnight in the harbor—on a docked houseboat. Once a busy center for commercial fishing, boatbuilding, and lumber, Gig Harbor lives a quieter life these days. It draws steady recreational-boat traffic, so lots of restaurants, shops, and land-based lodging cluster within walking distance of the docks. Mount Rainier makes a glorious backdrop; 888/843-9444 or gigharborguide.com.

2. Pillar Point Harbor, Half Moon Bay, California

This marina south of San Francisco strikes a perfect balance between the practical and the picturesque. The commercial fishing fleet remains strong—and provides great opportunities to buy Dungeness crab and other seafood right off the boat at bargain prices. Some terrific restaurants (Barbara's Fish Trap, Ketch Joanne, Princeton Seafood Company) and a relaxing inn (Pillar Point Inn) allow tourists to enjoy the views and the marine life; 650/726-8380 or halfmoonbaychamber.org.

3. Baltimore, Maryland

Back in the 1960s and '70s, Baltimore and Boston began transforming their blighted industrial waterfronts into places of fun. Many other old ports have followed in their ambitious path. Both Baltimore and Boston harbors now feature restaurants, hotels, shops, historic ship museums, and energy. We'll give the nod to Baltimore's Inner Harbor because of its fabulous National Aquarium (though we like Boston Harbor's New England Aquarium as well); 877/225-8466 or baltimore.org.

4. Camden, Maine

Boaters may grumble about navigating among all the anchored watercraft in Camden's long, narrow harbor. But that layout makes this a wonderful place for landlubbers to watch the bustle up close. Spectators can relax amid the greenery in beautiful Camden Harbor Park. They can savor some clam chowder or sip wine at one of the restaurants—including The Waterfront, Atlantica, and Bayview Lobster—that perch at the water's edge. And terrific shopping lies just a few steps away; 207/236-4404 or camdenme.org.

5. Port Washington, Wisconsin

Two lighthouses, pre-Civil War buildings, and great views of Lake Michigan make Port Washington a real charmer. A few miles north of Milwaukee, the town boomed as a commercial fishing port in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The marina now serves mostly pleasure boats and a sizable charter fishing fleet. Visitors can climb the deactivated circa-1860 light station, or walk a half mile along a breakwater to the striking (and functional) Art Deco lighthouse marking the harbor entry; 800/719-4881 or portwashingtonchamber.com.

6. Destin, Florida

Amid the high-rises, the outlandishly themed minigolf courses, and all the other resort-town enticements that have proliferated in the past couple of decades, the hardworking

heart of the “world’s luckiest fishing village” still beats at the harbor. Fine-dining restaurants and rollicking bars predominate these days, but Destin’s Old Florida heritage also lives on at such classic no-frills joints as Dewey Destin Seafood. Near the harbor entrance, just north of the bridge, boaters congregate at the submerged Crab Island for a continuous floating party that lasts all summer; 800/322-3319 or destin-fw.com.

7. Brookings-Harbor, Oregon

Harbor is an unincorporated community just southeast of Brookings—not to be confused with the Port of Brookings Harbor, which is a great place to visit if you’re a boater or a lover of seafood. The big commercial fleet supplies both retail seafood markets and a variety of restaurants. The heavy recreational-boat traffic provides many of the customers. Travelers on busy U.S. 101 also find this an excellent spot to rest and refuel, especially because of the moderate climate. Average temperatures stay between 40 and 70 year-round; 800/535-9469 or brookingsor.com.

8. Charleston, South Carolina

Charleston possesses so many historic attractions that some consider it a giant museum, frozen in time. In fact, dozens of huge, modern cargo ships load and unload here every day. The city provides lots of terrific vistas for watching them (as well as pretty sailboats and other more-playful vessels). Some of our favorites: Battery Park, Charleston Waterfront Park, and the wonderful South Carolina Aquarium; 800/774-0006 or charlestoncvb.com.

9. Noyo Harbor, California

The harbor sits under the big Highway 1 bridge on the south end of Fort Bragg—scenic in a rugged sort of way. Despite its industrial feel, thanks to the large commercial-fishing fleet, Noyo shelters some excellent seafood restaurants. Charter boats offer fishing, whale-watching, or sunset cruises. Several small inns and bed-and-breakfasts nestle in the hills overlooking the water; 707/961-6300 or fortbragg.com.

10. Ketchikan, Alaska

This rugged frontier town hadn’t changed all that much since Gold Rush days—until massive cruise ships started calling here a few years ago. The ship-borne influx of gentility (and money) smoothed out some of Ketchikan’s rough edges, though history still feels as palpable as the frequent rains. Totem Heritage Center, for example, displays totem poles retrieved from abandoned villages. Many buildings stand on pilings over the water, a consequence of steep hills and the lack of flat land. Those hills also contribute to the profound, soul-nourishing natural beauty that greets the eye in every direction; 800/770-3300 or visit-ketchikan.com.