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Short Trips: Portland walking tour hits the ghost trail

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

If you want to learn about the seamier, spooky side of Portland's rustic, riverfront history, there's a new tour that uncovers well-documented tales of horrible hauntings, sprinkled with murderous tales of mayhem.

The "Beyond Bizarre" tour, operated by Portland Walking Tours, combines the hustle and bustle of "The Blair Witch Project" with the technological tools of "Ghostbusters" in the pursuit of Portland's paranormal.

In other words, instead of sitting hushed in a tent with a flashlight telling ghost stories, tour leader David Schargel arms his charges with specter-detecting, electromagnetic field (EMF) meters, and leads them on a heart-quickenning hunt for a few of Stumptown's more famous apparitions.

Portland Walking Tour offers two ghostly versions: a family-friendly variety with less gore and an over-21 edition with heaping helpings of crimson-splattered crime stories and drink vouchers.

Both versions begin in the basement of what is claimed to be one of the most haunted buildings in the Northwest: the old Merchant Hotel on Northwest Davis and Second streets, now the location of Old Town Pizza. It has been whispered that a murdered prostitute named Nina wanders the establishment.

The story goes that one of the hotel's working women paid the ultimate price for informing on the illicit activities and was thrown down the elevator shaft. There are numerous anecdotes of her observing guests from the balcony and wandering the basement.

Therefore, it made perfect sense for us to begin our journey under the wooden floorboards of the restaurant. There Schargel warned us about the severity of our quest. "Today isn't about drama ... it's about *serious* investigations," he said, while handing an EMF meter to each participant. "When you sense something, point the EMF at it, press the button and see if there are fluctuations in the lights."

Light fluctuations mean either there is a spiritual presence of some sort or -- possibly -- just wiring or pipes nearby. Clearly we were covering all the bases.

Still, the tour is more fun when one can suspend disbelief and revel in Portland's colorful past.



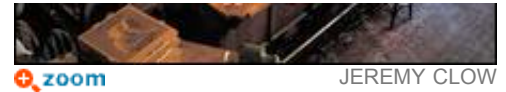
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JEREMY CLOW

Voodoo Doughnut, a strange and funky tour stop, serves as a pastry bakery and wedding chapel.



Having not encountered Nina, we emerged from the basement energized and eager to enter Portland's shadowy world. Our first stop was Hoodoo Antiques, a place supposedly hexed with "object hauntings," as the owner has wrestled with inexplicable alarms going off and discoveries that pictures and other objects had been moved.



It's whispered that the ghost of Nina, a murdered prostitute, haunts Old Town Pizza.

Undeterred by a light sprinkle outside, we trudge on to the Dixie Tavern where Schargel speaks of a haunting so eerie that even the security guards don't want to go into the basement late at night.

Next we enter Voodoo Doughnut, which serves as a pastry bakery and wedding chapel. Here our host demonstrates the finer points of voodoo by asking us to concentrate on someone we hate while he impaled a helpless, jelly-filled pastry with pretzel sticks -- further evidence that the tour is not for the faint of heart or humor-challenged.

"On the family tour, we stab the doughnut. On the 21-and-over tour, we'll cut ourselves," Schargel deadpanned. No one sought further elaboration.

During the next hour, I felt like a Cub Scout on a scavenger hunt as we skittered from corner to corner to stand on the very spot where something tragic occurred.

Ducking into Dan & Louie's Oyster Bar, we were faced with a great ship's wheel, inscribed with words indicating it was from the Brother Jonathan, wrecked July 30, 1865. We were told how the wheel was recovered, onshore, with the drowned second mate tied to it.

On the corner of Southwest Pine Street and Second Avenue, right in the middle of what was once Chinatown, Schargel said a woman named Gong Fa was "turned into a Pez dispenser" by an assailant with a knife.

Next it was on to Mama Mia, where the proprietor has wrestled with a ghost for years. The fine Italian restaurant resides over five connected shanghai tunnels, and opium was dealt out of the building back in the late 1800s. There was even a suicide in the basement.



From left, Sue Cannon, Erica Erland and Britta Vrosh stand on the spot where a murder occurred in the White Eagle's hallway. Ghost-tracking EMF meters flickered.

Today's owner, Lisa Schroeder, has spent bundles trying to rid the property of evil spirits: hiring a Native American shaman, applying feng shui to the interior design, and even hiring a clairvoyant, who warned her of an Asian spirit making mischief by "cooking her books."

At one point, Schargel snatched a cell phone from a member of our group and snapped a photo of a street corner -- the site of the old city jail, where lots of murders and psychic activity are reputed to have occurred. Looking closely, it appeared that we had a "visitor," but a heightened level of skepticism -- and a questioning eye -- might convince you otherwise.

It was a delicious way to ratchet up the mood for our final stop, the White Eagle Tavern in North Portland, a McMenamins Pub. We wanted to catch a ghostly glimpse of Rose or Sam, phantoms that have been haunting the hotel for decades. They have been blamed for strange sounds, doors unlocking and locking, and toilet paper roles flying from stall to stall.

After creeping up the creaking stairs, we took photos where the murder occurred and even felt tingles in our feet right on the spot. Our EMF meters even flickered ... faulty wiring?

"Every time I go to the White Eagle, something weird happens," Schargel said. "But I really can't say I believe in ghosts. I just have never had a personal experience."

Whether people are believers or skeptics, the tour provides an entertaining immersion into Portland's more violent and decadent history, and an appreciation for how the Chinese and Japanese immigrants lived.

"The tour isn't about dressing up in period costumes and walking around with a lantern, Schargel said. "Portland's stories are good enough to stand on their own."

IF YOU GO

Buy tickets in advance -- The 24-hour Portland Walking Tours information and ticket line is 503-774-4522. Additional information and online ticketing at portlandwalkingtours.com. Request "Beyond Bizarre," since there are several types of tours. Advance tickets are required to reserve ghost-hunting equipment.

Cost -- Tickets for the daily 7 p.m. tour are \$19 (\$17 when booked online), \$15 for senior/youth, \$5 for children, and tots are free. Tickets for the longer, 10 p.m. adults-only tour on Friday and Saturday are \$29 (which includes a drink voucher).

Length -- Family-friendly early tour lasts about two hours. The late-night, over-21 version lasts about 2 1/2 hours.

Arrive early -- All "Beyond Bizarre" tours start at Old Town Pizza, 226 N.W. Davis St. (between Northwest Second and Northwest Third avenues in Old Town Portland). A maximum of 20 are allowed and tours regularly sell out. Space is limited and tours begin promptly, so walkers are required to arrive at least 15 minutes before start time. If you come early enough, you can enjoy what some call the best pizza in Portland.

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