

Salem offers a weekend of activities beyond touring Oregon's capitol building



The lobby of the Elsinore Theatre, the gem of downtown Salem. (Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian/2010)



By [Terry Richard](#) | trichard@oregonian.com

Email the author | [Follow on Twitter](#)

on February 18, 2014 at 12:00 PM, updated February 18, 2014 at 12:05 PM

Who says there is nothing to do in Salem?

That, too often, is the snooty view of Portlanders, including yours truly. But wait, when you look more closely, Salem has plenty of things for visitors to see and enjoy.

Salem easily has enough visitor attractions to fill a weekend, as I discovered recently. Or, if you live on the south side of the Portland metro area, you could look at Salem as a less

crowded alternative than venturing into Oregon's biggest city for culture and entertainment.

Following are some [things for visitors to do in Salem](#) (that don't involve its role as the seat of state government; click to read about touring the [Oregon State Capitol](#)). Check in advance for open hours.

Elsinore Theatre: Salem's entertainment emporium is beautifully restored and proudly hosts national touring shows looking for smaller city venues, including "Hair" the musical on April 21 and the "Beatles Tribute" on May 10.

The theater also feature the state's largest Wurlitzer organ that is regularly used to accompany films from the silent movie era. The Wednesday Evening Film Series presents some of the best movies ever made, for a \$5 large-screen showing. The Elsinore is at 170 High St. S.E.; [elsinoretheatre.com](#).

Restaurant row: Salem isn't usually thought of as the culinary apex of Oregon, though it is surrounded by some of the most productive farm land in America. But the city does make it easy to find the best restaurants in town, because they are mostly clumped together on High Street next to the Elsinore Theater.

Look there for Croissant & Co. (day time deli), Da Vinci Ristorante (and wine bar), Twinsies (coffee and cupcakes), Jonathan's Steaks and Seafood (Cajun), Andaluz (tapas and wine) and La Capitale Brasserie (French bistro). And don't be surprised if you see a former governor heading inside (like I did with Barbara Roberts). These food palaces are in the 100 block on the east side of High Street; [travelsalem.com](#).

Hallie Ford Museum: The Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University has the third largest public art collection in Oregon, behind Portland Art Museum and the Schnitzer Museum of Art in Eugene. The Ford museum has significant collections of its own and also regularly features changing exhibits as well as Native America art, in partnership with the [Spirit Mountain Community Fund](#).



The Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Salem's Willamette

University

The museum is part of the attractive campus of the oldest university in the American West. Find it at 700 State St.; willamette.edu/arts/hfma/.

Salem Station: Salem has a small but clean and functional arrival and departure depot for Amtrak trains and buses, plus Greyhound buses. Now, with January's increase in Oregon Amtrak service, the station has three daily trains between Eugene and Portland. The city [Cherriots](#) provide connecting service around town and connecting even to Portland's edge at Wilsonville.

That said, it's unlikely a lot of tourists will visit Salem from Portland by train, but it's good to know you can get there that way, when you want. The station is at 500 13th St. S.E., at the east edge of downtown; amtrak.com.

Gilbert Village: The A.C. Gilbert Discovery Village is a giant play center for kids, though I met a Salem grandmother who recently celebrated her birthday there (with the grandkids in tow). The twin indoor play spaces are restored Queen Anne Victorian homes, while the outdoor playground features log and erector-set structures.

Kids can spend most of a day; more than a few Portland parents make the trip from Salem just to visit the village, which is at 116 Marion St. N.E. (inside Riverfront Park, beneath a bridge across the Willamette River); acgilbert.org.



Mission Mill: The Willamette Heritage Center unfortunately lacks a signature image strong enough to stick in the minds of most Portlanders (at least my mind). After I toured it, I left realizing that this is where the groundwork was laid for Oregon's becoming a state in 1859, as well as the site of one of the early significant industries that helped the state thrive.

The signature attraction is the Mission Mill Museum, part of the reason for the image problem (is it mission, is it mill or is it museum?). The former Methodist mission preserves the 1841 Jason Lee House, the oldest frame structure in the Northwest, while the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill is the preserved remnants of a very large and interesting 1889 woolen mill. Each serves as a museum. Look for the complex at 1313 Mill St. S.E.; willametteheritage.org.

Pioneer Cemetery: The world is filled with two types of people: those who enjoy walking in the peaceful setting of a well-cared-for cemetery, and those who don't. For those who do, some of Oregon's most influential citizens are buried in Pioneer Cemetery.

Look for the grave plot of the Asahel Bush family, one of Salem's early business leaders. Nearby is the grave of Samuel Royal Thurston, the man who gave his name to Thurston County, home to Olympia and the capital of Washington. Enter the cemetery off Hoyt Street from Commercial Street, the main route south out of downtown; salempioneer cemetery.org.

Mental museum: Formerly known as the Oregon Insane Asylum, the Oregon State Hospital has been remodeled and expanded over its 130 years of existence. The small

Museum of Mental Health, which opened in 2012, preserves some of the history and tells how those with mental illness were diagnosed and treated.

The museum also has an exhibit on the movie “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” which was partially filmed in the hospital (using inmates along with actors, including Jack Nicholson) and swept the top five Oscars in 1976. The museum is at 2600 Center St. N.E.; oshmuseum.org.

Riverfront Carousel: Amazingly, this classic carousel attracts 275,000 people to ride each year. Kids understandably love it, but then why are adults riding along, too? Looks like they are having just as much fun. The building that houses the carousel in Riverfront Park can be opened in summer to let in breezes from the nearby Willamette River. The carousel’s horses were hand carved and they twirl accompanied by flashing lights and old-time organ music. Find it at 101 Front St. N.E.; salemriverfrontcarousel.org.

Honeywood Winery: Licensed by the Oregon liquor agency shortly after the end of Prohibition, this 80-year-old winery claims to be the oldest in the state (Prohibition ended in 1934, anyone want to drink to that?). The winery maintains its long tradition of making non-grape wines and cordials from the best berries and fruits of Oregon, but nowadays sells them right alongside grape wines it makes including cabernet, chardonnay and Marechal Foch.

It also carries a wide selection of picnic and hospitality accoutrements, as well as dozens of processed food delicacies, including many made in Oregon. The address is 1325 Hines St. S.E.; honeywoodwinery.com.



Salem's Bush House Museum.

Salem Art: The Salem Art Association actively engages in the local arts scene by providing contemporary exhibits, as well as arts education for adults and youths. Its main annual event is the Salem Art Fair, scheduled July 18-20 (this year) and one of Oregon's largest. The association was founded in 1919 and uses the Bush Barn Art Center for its exhibits and store that feature the work of local artists. Look for it at 600 Mission St. S.E., salemart.org.

Bush Conservatory: While the Bush House Museum is closed for winter, visitors can still duck inside to see a vibrant display of tropical and desert-type plants in the 1882 Bush Conservatory greenhouse. The adjacent family home was finished in 1878 as the residence of the founding editor of the Oregon Statesman newspaper.

Tours of the Bush House resume in April, at 600 Mission St. S.E.; oregonlink.com/bush_house/.

Deepwood Estate: The ornate Queen Anne-style home, located at the edge of Bush's Pasture Park, is attractive for anyone who loves old, preserved homes set at the edge of a rambling garden. This one has stained glass windows, golden oak woodwork and light fixtures dating to its 1894 construction.

In addition to interior tours, the nonprofit group that maintains the house regularly offers afternoon tea, heritage lectures and educational workshops. The house is at 1116 Mission St. S.E., but the parking is off Lee Street; historicdeepwoodestate.org.

City parks: Salem embraces its setting on the Willamette River with three large parks: Riverfront adjacent to downtown on the east side, Wallace Marine for boaters and others on the west side and Minto-Brown Island for nature lovers on the east side. Minto-Brown also has a huge off-leash dog area.

Sometime this summer, the last funding hurdle should be cleared that will allow construction of a \$10 million bike/pedestrian bridge across a Willamette River slough at Minto-Brown Island, which will complete a link connecting 1,000 acres of city parks and 20 miles of off-street trails along the river; cityofsalem.net.

Lodging: Salem has plenty of national chain hotels, mostly near the Interstate 5 exits. The main center city hotel is the Grand Hotel, 201 Liberty St. S.E., 503-540-7800, [grandhotelsalem](http://grandhotelsalem.com); also, travelsalem.com.