

Medford's Golden Attractions

by Carlton Tajni



Halfway between Portland and San Francisco, the Rogue River Valley (aka Oregon's banana belt) has long been renown for fruit orchards, wineries and artisan products like cheese and chocolate. Now it's establishing a new claim to fame as a retirement haven.

"We're a well-kept secret," said Brigette Long, a 58-year-old native New Yorker who, with her husband Bill, moved to Medford from California a year ago. "This is actually our second retirement," she explained. "My husband and I retired from the telecom industry in the Bay Area 11 years ago. We thought we'd get away from the big-city congestion by moving to Ripon in the Central Valley [of California]. At the time it had a population of 13,000. We didn't realize it was one of the fastest growing areas in the United States."

After a decade the couple were looking for what she termed "a second stage" of retirement. "We just didn't want the flatlands anymore." As they contemplated where to go next, the Pacific Northwest never crossed their minds. "We thought it was all like Seattle and Portland. We knew we didn't want cold and humidity." At the urging of some of their Ripon neighbors who were also contemplating a move, the Longs visited Medford and immediately fell in love.

"We'd never really been here before and we've traveled extensively. We didn't realize the weather was so similar to northern California. It may be about 10 degrees cooler in the winter, but we certainly don't mind. We like having more of the four seasons."

Medford and the surrounding Rogue Valley typically benefit from at least 210 sunny days every year. Temperatures seldom drop below freezing in winter and rarely climb above 90 in summer.

"We love the mountains," Long continued. "We were able to find a spectacular view property up near Roxanne Mountain with hiking

trails galore right outside our door. There are wonderful state parks and of course we're so close to the great Rogue River. When we have out-of-town guests we always take them on a Hell Gate jet boat tour of the river. We just love to show off the natural beauty of the area. We also like to take them into the wine country for tastings. The wine maker is usually right there pouring his own wine and explaining it to you. Compared to what we have here, Napa is so overrated."

The area's cultural attractions also appealed to the Longs. "We lived in the Bay Area for a long time and we didn't have the same selection of restaurants and culture that exists just 15 minutes from our doorstep. Twelve months of the year there is something going on here."

The Britt Festival, a summer performing arts extravaganza set in historic Jacksonville, is among the Longs' favorites.

"We tell all our California friends that it doesn't get better than sitting outside at the Britt having a glass of Pinot Noir and listening to fabulous entertainment while you gaze up at the stars," Long said. This year's festival marks the



Singer Chris Isaak performs on stage at last year's Britt Festival.

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Britt's 48th season. It presents outstanding artists in jazz, bluegrass, pop, country and classical music performing in a naturally formed amphitheater on the 19th-century estate of photographer Peter Britt.

The entertainment options also appealed to Bill Stewart, an 80-year-old native Californian and retired Marine, and his wife Joy, 75. "My wife is just crazy for live theater," he explained. "In Medford we have the Oregon Shakespeare Festival right next door in Ashland. It's a relatively long season running from February until October and we've learned that if you go early or late [in the season] you get great discounts. We also have the Ginger Rogers Theater and two other smaller theaters—the Cabaret and the Carousel. There's always something to do. The Umpqua Bank has the 55-Alive Club and they plan day trips to Portland. We like to go there for live theater as well."



Medford blooms in spring

Like the Longs, the Stewarts are enjoying a "second retirement." Bill Stewart explained, "In 1986, we moved up to the gold country near Sonoma, California and were both docents in the

Columbia State Park. We enjoy the outdoors here as well. In the spring the plethora of color is marvelous. The rhododendrons and pear blossoms are just beautiful."

The Rogue Valley is also more economical than California, according to Stewart. "As a federal retiree, I don't pay any state income tax in Oregon and there's no sales tax, either," he said. Stewart, a heart patient, is also a big proponent of the quality of health care available in the area. "The Rogue Valley Medical Center is top-notch," he said.

Brigitte Long agreed. "We discovered that the medical facilities are fabulous. There are three major hospitals. The doctors are fabulous. Everything is very well organized. So much better than what we experienced in California. We weren't concerned about that when we moved here, but then we brought my mom out from New York. When she came she was using a wheelchair. I believe we might have lost her if she hadn't made the move." Now, her mother, Gerda Richter, 85, has "been reborn. She walks an hour every day, exercises at night after dinner, goes swimming in the summer, and hikes everywhere. The air quality is fabulous here. We have some of the best water in the country. It's a healthful place," Long said.

"We're big travelers," she continued. "We've been to 76 countries and there's no place we'd rather be. Last year we spent the entire year just enjoying this area. The Oregon Coast is one-and-a-half hours away. Portland is a five-hour drive, but we stop in Eugene for lunch; that's fun. We also go to Bend with its beautiful mountains and to Crater Lake, which is just spectacular. We expect to stay here the rest of our lives." ■