



The Best City in America

By Brent Becket

White birds ran through the Mill Pond mud. The salt mist riding the warming air smelled like steam from a fresh-boiled lobster pot, and everything glowed yellow in the bright sunlight. My first day back was going to be a limited edition day on the Seacoast.

September days with 80-degree temperatures in New Hampshire are applauded like lottery winnings shared by everyone. Walkers and joggers threaded the sidewalks, and business casual dress was everywhere. It was a Thursday, but it looked like Saturday.

Walking into Portsmouth on the brick and cobblestone is like stepping across the ruggedly arranged words of a Hemingway passage. Descriptive detail is mortared, hammered, etched, planted and painted into everything. I wandered a few side streets on my way into Market Square.

There were a lot of new twists on the old town. The Music Hall finally getting deserved attention; the steeple shined and polished. I remembered it tattered, worn, draped in moonlight and wrapped in fog. On this day, the new paint glared in the sunlight. Tables spilled out the front door of a new café and my secret parking spot had a new building on it.

It was a spirogyra of motion in the square. The scene was part Norman Rockwell and part Andy Warhol. There was a little blonde girl with an ice-cream cone, motorcycles rested at the curb like hitched horses, dogs were tied to tables and railings, men in loose ties tried to blend in with those lucky enough to not have anything to do. People were strewn on the benches, curbs and steps like laundry

— a hip town with a pop culture living in a historic shadow.

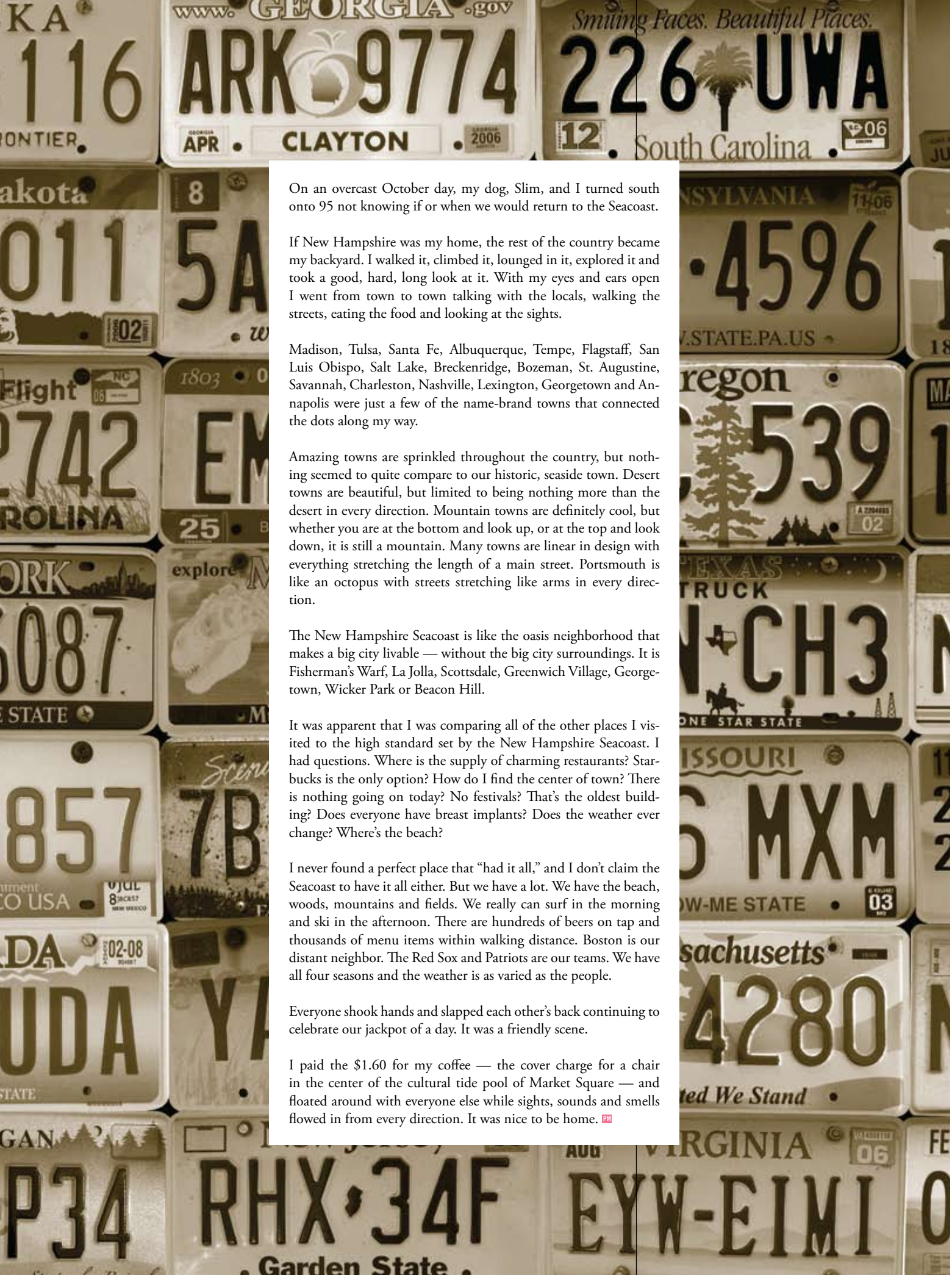
There was a diverse gathering. On one corner a girl played her guitar and on another a man tapped his xylophone. Hot dogs were grilling on a cart. There was a man wearing a kilt designed for construction work; a group protested the war and petitioned to have the president impeached. Coffee was everywhere.

The town spread out like a backyard patio with an ocean view. There wasn't a frown in sight.

It was this time last year when I packed my things and drove west as fast as I could, blasting through the Northeast like a dog through the back gate running for the hills. My goal: To find a new town to call home.

After 17 years of Seacoast living, my apathy for the area had me stalled like rush-hour traffic on the turnpike. I was completely disenchanted. The once invigorating smell of salt air had become that of low tide, the bricks and cobblestones made for hard walking, the weather seemed too cold and the people even colder. The need for change had become imminent.

I had been noticing various license plates advertising places from Canada to Mexico and all of the United States between. These aluminum stamps were luring me to places such as 'Scenic Idaho,' 'Big Sky,' 'The Land of Enchantment,' the 'Silver State' and 'The Greatest Show On Earth.' This stately propaganda was all I needed to instigate a challenge for a better place.



On an overcast October day, my dog, Slim, and I turned south onto 95 not knowing if or when we would return to the Seacoast.

If New Hampshire was my home, the rest of the country became my backyard. I walked it, climbed it, lounged in it, explored it and took a good, hard, long look at it. With my eyes and ears open I went from town to town talking with the locals, walking the streets, eating the food and looking at the sights.

Madison, Tulsa, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Tempe, Flagstaff, San Luis Obispo, Salt Lake, Breckenridge, Bozeman, St. Augustine, Savannah, Charleston, Nashville, Lexington, Georgetown and Annapolis were just a few of the name-brand towns that connected the dots along my way.

Amazing towns are sprinkled throughout the country, but nothing seemed to quite compare to our historic, seaside town. Desert towns are beautiful, but limited to being nothing more than the desert in every direction. Mountain towns are definitely cool, but whether you are at the bottom and look up, or at the top and look down, it is still a mountain. Many towns are linear in design with everything stretching the length of a main street. Portsmouth is like an octopus with streets stretching like arms in every direction.

The New Hampshire Seacoast is like the oasis neighborhood that makes a big city livable — without the big city surroundings. It is Fisherman's Warf, La Jolla, Scottsdale, Greenwich Village, Georgetown, Wicker Park or Beacon Hill.

It was apparent that I was comparing all of the other places I visited to the high standard set by the New Hampshire Seacoast. I had questions. Where is the supply of charming restaurants? Starbucks is the only option? How do I find the center of town? There is nothing going on today? No festivals? That's the oldest building? Does everyone have breast implants? Does the weather ever change? Where's the beach?

I never found a perfect place that "had it all," and I don't claim the Seacoast to have it all either. But we have a lot. We have the beach, woods, mountains and fields. We really can surf in the morning and ski in the afternoon. There are hundreds of beers on tap and thousands of menu items within walking distance. Boston is our distant neighbor. The Red Sox and Patriots are our teams. We have all four seasons and the weather is as varied as the people.

Everyone shook hands and slapped each other's back continuing to celebrate our jackpot of a day. It was a friendly scene.

I paid the \$1.60 for my coffee — the cover charge for a chair in the center of the cultural tide pool of Market Square — and floated around with everyone else while sights, sounds and smells flowed in from every direction. It was nice to be home. [PH](#)