

Northwest Small Towns: Visit Albany, Oregon

An opportunity arose for Walter and Thomas Monteith and they took advantage of it. In 1848, the two brothers purchased 320 acres of crazy-beautiful and fertile Oregon land for \$400.00, put a road through it, and established the town that would become Albany, Oregon.

Today, Albany is a delightful travel destination, with interesting history and architecture and a culinary scene that far exceeds what's expected for a town of 52,000. Albany, an hour and a half south of Portland, provides a chance to enjoy small town life at its best. The Willamette Valley town sits at the confluence of the Willamette and Calapooia Rivers, and offers a full calendar of outdoor concerts, arts fairs, movie nights, bike tours, wine walks, brew fests, historic home tours, and antique fairs. Nearby Corvallis, home of Oregon State University, only extends the offerings of things to do.

Leave behind big city traffic and tensions. Albany's close proximity to Portland, Eugene, and coastal towns make it a great day- or weekend-trip, but truly, spend even more time if you can. My recent four-day trip left me knowing there was more to see and do.

Albany's Historic Districts

Albany's four historic districts comprise a surprisingly wide range of architectural styles. There are more than 800 historic homes and commercial buildings, as well as three museums and historical churches to explore.

Thirteen classic architectural home styles are represented in Albany. Most of these are right in the downtown area, but all exist within about a 100 block radius. Queen Anne, Federal, Craftsman Bungalow, American Renaissance, Foursquare, Italianate, and more are here.



Take a walking tour or attend the annual historic homes and garden tour. Front porch plaques denote homes that have participated in the tours at some point in the event's 37 years.

I've always appreciated downtowns that retain their older buildings; Albany's won my heart. There are some great old buildings downtown, many of which have been renovated and are in use by the town's shops and restaurants. (And just the right number awaiting new life to make me consider rolling up my sleeves and being a bit like the Monteith brothers.)

Linn County is home to nine of Oregon's covered bridges, and five of these are in or very close to Albany. Pick up a map and take a self-guided tour.

Monteith House

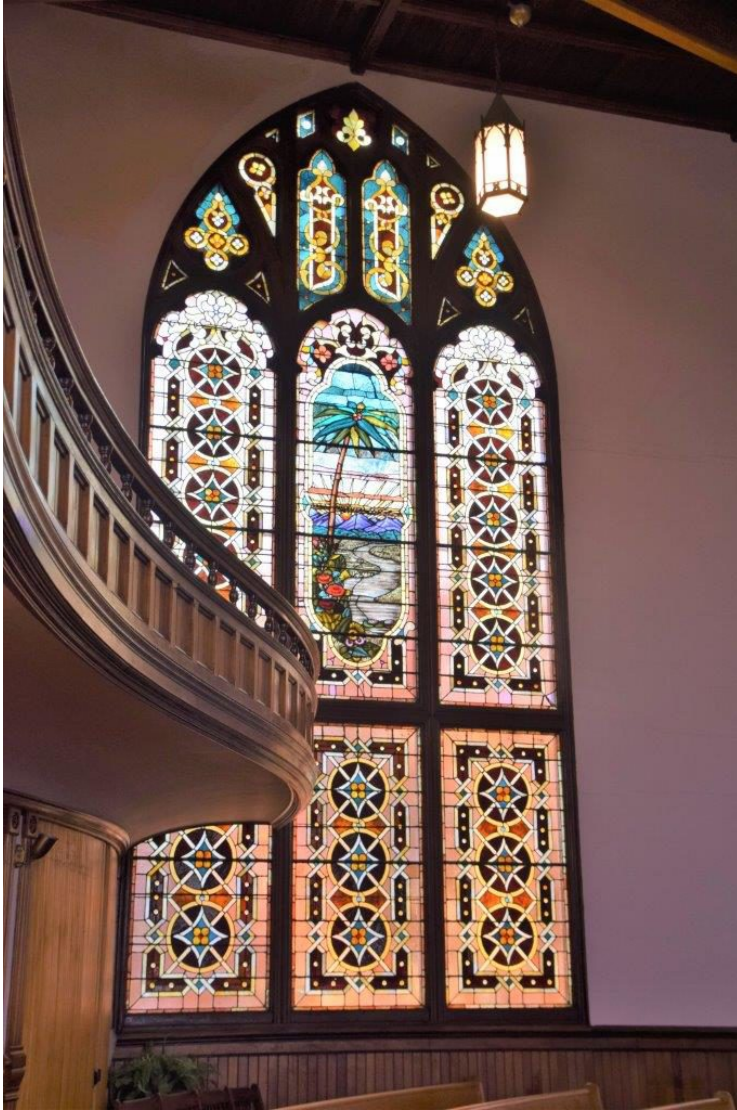


Back to Brothers Walter and Thomas Monteith, Albany's founders. The brothers were successful during California's Gold Rush and used some of their proceeds to purchase the land that was to become Albany. They platted the city and built their first home in 1849 in what was to become the center of town. Today, the Monteith House is open to the public as a meticulously and authentically restored Pioneer Era Oregon home that's listed on National Register of Historic Places.



Members of the Monteith Historical Society dress in period costume, sharing the town's lore and giving demonstrations that depict pioneer life in Albany. Don't miss the original wallpaper in the upstairs bedrooms, the kitchen, and the General store. You may catch demonstrations of candle making or other aspects of pioneer life. We lucked out and got to sample some Dutch oven cornbread cooked in the kitchen fireplace.

Whitespires Church



Whitespires Church was built in 1891 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Considered “Carpenter Gothic” in style, the church spires can be seen from throughout much of the Monteith Historic District. Inside are intricate wood carved details. The church’s Kimball pipe organ was installed in 1906. Three generations from Povey Brothers Studios did extensive stained glass window work in the Pacific Northwest, and the windows at Whitespires are exquisite.

No automated bell ringing here—a good old-fashioned rope and a bit of muscle power is needed to ring the church bell.

Thompson Mills State Heritage Site



At Thompson Mills State Heritage site, there's the opportunity to see the last water-powered mill in Oregon. Located on the Calapooia River, the mill pre-dates statehood.

The site alone makes the mill worth a visit; the compact pastoral one-acre site is lovely. Feed the resident chickens and turkeys, and tour the 150-year-old wooden mill. See the turbines in action, and learn about the history of the mill, and by extension, the history of the town. Docents are on hand to give a tour. Bring a picnic lunch.



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Albany Historic Carousel and Museum

Go ahead, give it a whirl. Climb aboard a wooden painted pony, lion, fish, giraffe or other fancifully posed and decorated member of the animal kingdom (or one of the elaborate chariots) on Albany's carousel. You won't be able to resist the workmanship of these 52 animals (including a few fanciful creatures thrown in there.) Each has been carved by a local team of volunteer carvers and artists. The entire museum project is an effort that illustrates the very best of small town pride and community.

I can't wait for the Grand Opening of Albany's new Historic Carousel and Museum, so here's a preview. The museum's temporary space, with a very active artists' carving workshop, is currently open nearby.

Gustav Dentzel brought the first carousels from Europe to the U.S. and the 1909 donated Dentzel carousel mechanism will come to life again in its new Albany home later this summer. And what a home it is. The new light-filled 22,000 square foot museum is located at the west end of downtown and the design is gorgeous. There's a soaring ceiling of Douglas Fir beams and all natural wood-paneling, and floors of striped terrazzo that change color every four feet. A brand new carousel organ is modeled after an early Wurlitzer organ, a self-playing organ complete with paper rolls.



In addition to the carousel, there's a concession stand, gift store, event space, and a great view of the volunteer artists at work. See skilled volunteer artists carve and paint not just the carousel animals, but all of the other carousel embellishments.

The basement and carousel pit of the museum has been ingeniously designed to give easy access from below to change out carousel animals and work on the carousel mechanisms as needed. There's also even more space for artists to work, storage, and all else that goes with making the fantasy happen.



I've got my first token ready and I promise to walk, not run, toward one of my already carefully chosen favorite creatures at the carousel's opening.

Stay the Night

Note to hoteliers: Albany's historic downtown core just begs for a really special boutique hotel and if I had the pocketbook, I'd develop one myself. In the meantime, I thoroughly enjoy my stay at Best Western Plus Prairie Inn, which is just a couple of miles from downtown. My suite is spacious, with a king-sized bed, arm chair, great work space, and good lighting. Recently remodeled, there's an indoor pool and hot tub, breakfast and other amenities, and the staff was great.

Albany, Oregon: Small Town with Culinary Excellence

A trip to Albany provides some great historic sites and it also offers fabulous dining. Again, this town has more than its per capita share of great places to eat! Take a look at our picks of [great places to eat and drink](#) during your stay. The food alone may make you extend your trip.

For More:

- We promised you more about Albany's food scene, so take a [look](#).
- Albany Visitor's Association has the scoop on all things Albany. Visit their downtown location or their website, albanyvisitors.com
- Albany Historic Carousel and Museum, albanycarousel.com
- Best Western Plus Prairie Inn, Albany, Oregon, albanybestwestern.com/

-All photos by Nancy Zaffaro.