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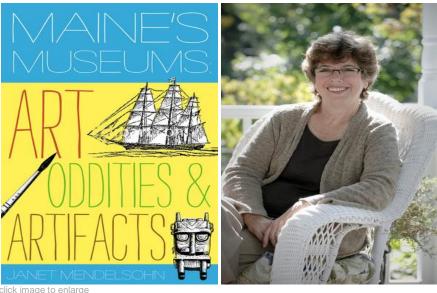
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Author Q &A: Hanging Around

Travel writer Janet Mendelsohn finds treasure right under our noses: Nearly 80 Maine museums, from the world-class to the slightly wacky.

By Bob Keyesbkeyes@mainetoday.com Staff Writer

In this age of "staycations," New England author Janet Mendelsohn has an idea: Why not visit a museum?



Janet Mendelsohn

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With the number of museums in Maine, it's easy to plan a day trip or a several-day getaway to any number of museums across the state. And Mendelsohn, a freelance newspaper reporter who lives in Kittery Point and Somerville, Mass., has written a travel book that touts the depth and breadth of them.

"Maine's Museums: Art, Oddities & Artifacts" (Countryman Press, \$18.95) serves as a guide to the broad scope of art, history, maritime, children's and unusual museums across the state.

We all know about the world-class art collections at the Portland Museum of Art, the Farnsworth and others. With this book, Mendelsohn reminds us that Maine is richly endowed with dozens of other museums that specialize in natural history, antique cars, rare maps, folk art and carved wooden birds. In all, she writes about close to 80 Maine museums.

Q: What inspired the book? Ultimately, what made you decide to write it?

A: It was really two things. One was, I love museums everywhere I go. Whenever I travel, I go to museums. I find them an interesting insight into local culture. I've done that all my life. Since coming to Maine for the first time 14 years ago, I have been really surprised how few Mainers go to museums. They might go to the Portland Museum of Art, but there are so many good museums, and so many people do not go.

And two, I am a freelancer for the Boston Globe travel section. A few years ago, I wrote a piece about the Maine folk art trail. There were 11 museum involved; some of the big ones and some were small. Just discovering some of the collections in the small museums was just wonderful. I felt that people needed to know about it.

Q: How did you research it? Did you visit each and every place?

A: I visited every museum in the book. I wouldn't write about a place that I am not familiar with. You cannot do a good job. There are a handful I did not get to for one reason or another. One that bothers me that is not in the book is the Monhegan Museum. If I write a second edition, I will get to them and include them.

Q: You showed very little bias. You write about the smallest of museums tucked away in the most unlikely places.

A: Yes, I just got in the car and I drove. One of the wonderful things about researching the book was, it took me to places I have never been before and might not have gotten to otherwise. I went up to Van Buren to get to the Acadian Village. I had never been to The County before, and I had no idea how beautiful it is. It opened a world to me I otherwise would not have seen. My husband went with me on that leg of the trip. We were driving down a road and he said, "This looks like Montana," which he had been to the year before. We turned a bend in the road, and there was a sign: "Welcome to Maine's big sky country."

Q: Do you think a person could visit every museum in Maine in one year?

A: If you set your mind to it, yes -- with one caveat. It seems that every town in Maine has a small history museum. There must be close to 300 of them. I don't think you could get to every one of those. But you could get to every one in my book if you set your mind to do it.

Some are seasonal museums and are staffed with volunteers. They have very limited hours. A handy thing to know: If you know you are going to be in an area and want to go to a museum, if you call ahead, they will make sure somebody is there and will show you around. The volunteers who work at these small museums are very passionate about the museums and the history.

Q: What did you learn about Maine museums that surprised you?

A: To me, the museums as a whole paint a portrait of the entire state. I learned a lot about the industry and trades that built the state, some of which are gone, and especially how pivotal they were in the formation of the nation. I knew about shipbuilding, of course. Early on, I wrote about the Thompson Ice House Museum, but I didn't realize how important ice was in so many ways. For example, it started the whole frozen-food industry. Ice from Maine went around the world.

When I went to Museum L/A, which is dedicated to the brick, textile and shoe industries, I knew they had existed in Maine, but I didn't know their role in employment and immigration. When I went to the Saco Museum, which is one of my favorites, learning about the mill girls there, for example, I hadn't thought deeply before how the mill girls were the first women in their families to work outside their homes.

Q: What is your experience with Maine museums, apart from researching the book? It seems apparent that you have a deep-seated interest in the arts in Maine. Where did that come from, and what has sustained it over the years?

A: One of the key ingredients about being a good writer is being curious. One of the things that has struck me about Maine is how passionate people are about their place. Nowhere do I find people who are as loyal to their home state as they are in Maine.

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