In some ways, the Greater Portland Casco Bay region lives up to its romantic reputation — lighthouses dotting the rocky coast, lobster boats puttering by. But it’s also an area of entrepreneurs and out-of-the-box innovators, where cobblestone streets lead to high-end boutiques, and fishing boats and cruise ships alike make port. “Portland is surprisingly sophisticated in ways that might not be otherwise known,” says Barbara Whitten, president and CEO of the Greater Portland Convention and Visitors Bureau.

But more people are finding out: Tourism, the region’s No. 1 economic driver, lures nearly 8.5 million visitors a year, generating an annual economic impact of $1.2 billion. Foodies flock to Portland, enticed by the city’s two James Beard Foundation Award-winning chefs, Sam Hayward of Fore Street and Rob Evans of Hugo’s. And the region’s mix of small shops, national chains, and outlet stores makes it “the triple crown of shopping,” Whitten says.

Not to mention the triple crown of development: Portland, Maine’s largest city, along with the surrounding region is the state’s primary economic engine. It boasts one of the state’s two international airports (Portland International Jetport); a growing health-care industry anchored by Mercy Hospital and Maine Medical Center (the state’s largest hospital, it was ranked by U.S. News and World Report as one of America’s Best Hospitals in 2008); and a handful of colleges that attract more than 16,000 students every year. Area schools include the University of Southern Maine, Bowdoin College, Southern Maine Community College, and the University of New England. UNE’s College of Osteopathic Medicine is the No. 1 provider of physicians for the state.

Though Greater Portland is home to many of the state’s largest employers, 78 percent of the region’s businesses employ fewer than ten people. “Small business is the heartbeat that keeps the whole thing pumping,” Whitten says.

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A Historic Stay
Located in a former armory, the stately Portland Regency Hotel and Spa (right) boasts its own fitness center and a full day spa. Built in 1895 for the Maine National Guard, the neoclassical building opened as a hotel almost a century later after a $9.5 million renovation. The past is present in the guestrooms: Many have skylights for windows and slanted walls that follow the armory’s design. Only two blocks from the waterfront, it’s the perfect launching point for exploring Old Port’s shops and restaurants.

University of New England in nearby Biddeford

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