

The Best of the Maine Coast

Humor columnist Dave Barry once suggested that Maine's state motto should be changed to "Cold, but damp," thereby emphasizing its two primary qualities.

That's cute, but it's also sort of true. Spring here tends to last just a few days or weeks; November features bitter winds alternating with gray sheets of rain; and the long winters often bring a mix of blizzards and ice storms.

Ah, but summer. Summer on the coast of Maine brings osprey diving for fish off wooded points, fogs rolling poetically in from the Atlantic, and long, timeless days when the sun rises well before visitors do. (By 8am, it can already feel like noon.) Maine summers offer a serious dose of tranquility; a few days in the right spot can rejuvenate even the most jangled city nerves.

The trick is *finding* that right spot. Route 1 along the Maine coast is mostly an amalgam of convenience stores, tourist boutiques, and restaurants catering to bus tours. The main loop road, single beach, and most popular mountain peaks in Acadia National Park tend to get congested in summer. And arriving without a room reservation in high season? Simply a bad idea.

On the other hand, Maine's remote position and size often work to your advantage. The state has an amazing 5,500 miles of coastline, plus 3,000 or so coastal islands (admittedly, some of these are nothing more than rocks). With a little homework, you can find that little cove, island, or fishing village that isn't too discovered yet, book your room well in advance, and enjoy coastal Maine's incredibly lovely scenery without sweating any of the last-minute details.

Getting to know the locals is fun, too. They're mostly fishermen (as opposed to the farmers who colonized the rest of New England) and other seafaring folk, or the descendants of such, and today's coastal Mainers—even the transplanted ones—exhibit both a wry, dry sense of humor and a surprising gregariousness. (There's a Bait's Motel in Searsport, complete with worm-hanging-off-its-hook motif, for instance, and a tiny street called Fitz Hugh Lane in Somesville.) And fishermen's stories, of course, are the stuff of legend. Take the time to get to know some folks, and you'll smile a lot more.

Basically, your main challenge when preplanning a vacation in coastal Maine boils down to simply this: Where to start? Here's an entirely biased list of destinations—some places I enjoy returning to time and again. During my years of traveling through the region, I've discovered that places like these merit more than just a quick stop; instead, they're worth a detour or an extended stay of a few days to a week.

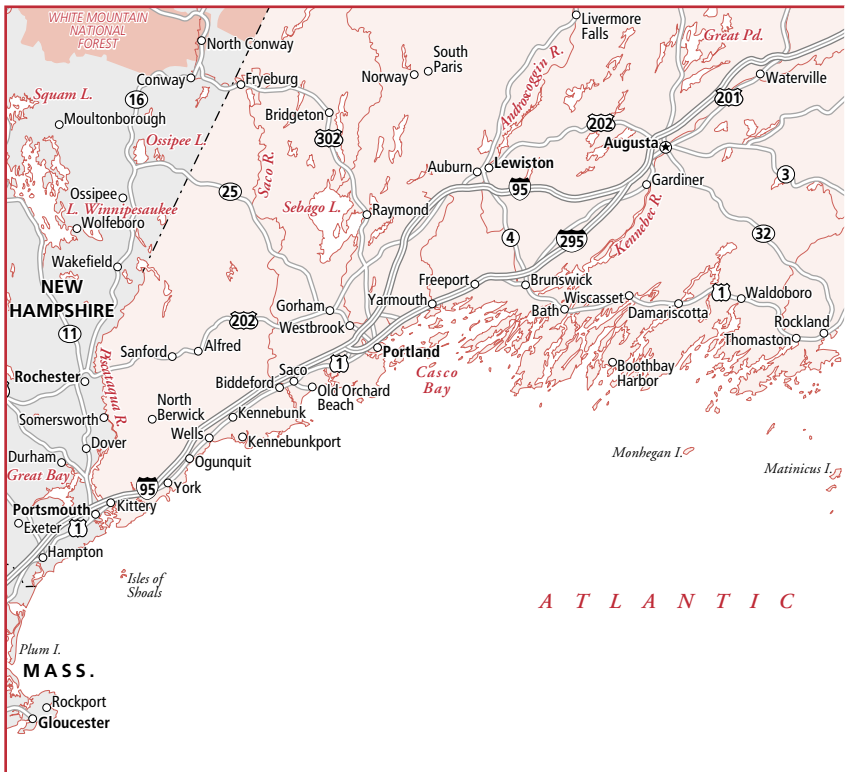
1 THE NATURAL WONDERS OF COASTAL MAINE

- **The Beaches of Southern Maine** (southern Maine): The flat, white-sand beaches of southernmost Maine are gorgeous and perfect for playing Frisbee,

4 The Maine Coast

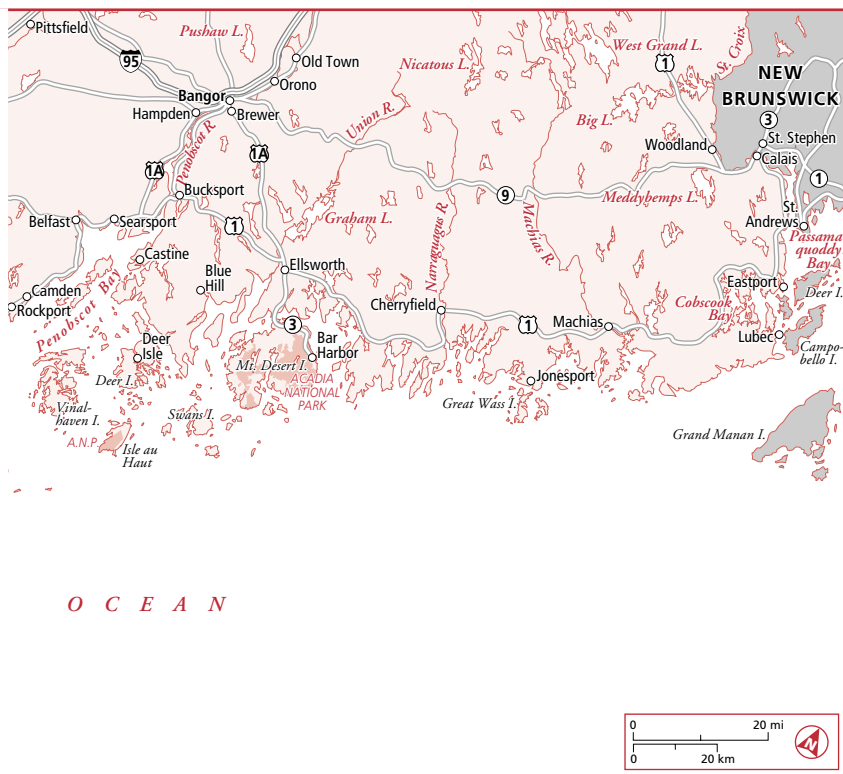
THE BEST OF THE MAINE COAST

1 THE NATURAL WONDERS OF COASTAL MAINE



walking, tanning, kite flying, and photography. Just watch your tootsies: That water's cold. See chapter 5.

- **Casco Bay's Islands** (southern Maine): Locals call 'em the Calendar Islands for a reason: They claim there are 365 of these rocky islands dotting Casco Bay, in every shape and size. (I'd wager there are more than that, though.) Catch a mail boat from Portland harbor and see how many *you* can count. See chapter 6.
- **Rocky Peninsulas** (southern, Midcoast, and Downeast Maine): Everywhere you go—from the Cape Neddick area to just south of Portland, from Harpswell to Georgetown, from Blue Hill to Boothbay to Schoodic Point—you'll find long fingerlings and headlands carved of sheer bedrock. Once these were mountaintops high above an ancient sea; now they comprise some of the East Coast's most beautiful scenery. Try some back-road wandering to find the best ones. Just remember that these take time to traverse. See chapters 5, 8, and 10.
- **The Camden Hills** (Midcoast Maine): They're not huge, yet this run of hills comes with a bonus you'll only understand when you get to the top: eye-popping coastal vistas of boats, villages, and islands. In the winter, you can even



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toboggan-run from crest to valley. See chapter 8.

- **Acadia National Park** (Downeast Maine): New England's only national park is also one of the most beautiful (and popular) in the entire U.S. The fractured, rocky, surf-pounded coastline here is the main attraction, but don't overlook the quiet, boreal forests and open summits of low mountains that afford spectacular coastal views, either. And don't forget to rent a mountain bike or horse-drawn carriage for further exploration. See chapter 9.
- **The Appalachian Trail and Mount Katahdin** (side trip from Downeast Maine): All right, they're not on the

coast. But Maine's highest peak is well worth a short detour inland. Rising abruptly from a thick blanket of North Woods forest, the nearly mile-high Mount Katahdin has an ineffable spiritual quality to it. It's the centerpiece of equally inspiring Baxter State Park, one of the last, best wildernesses remaining in the eastern U.S. While here, don't forget to check out the Trail itself, which stretches 2,100 rugged miles from Georgia before winding uphill to the finish line here on Katahdin. These stretches in Maine include some of the most magnificent scenery in New England. See chapter 11.

2 THE BEST SMALL TOWNS

- **York Village** (southern Maine): What else can you say? It's Maine's oldest settlement, so it's got history and fine architecture. It's also got a set of beaches and a coastal trail nearby. And people just seem friendly here. See chapter 5.
- **Camden** (Midcoast Maine): This seaside town has everything—a beautiful harbor; great Federal, Queen Anne, and Greek Revival architecture; and even its own tiny mountain range affording great hikes with sweeping ocean views. With lots of elegant bed-and-breakfasts, it's a perfect base for explorations farther afield. See chapter 8.
- **Castine** (Midcoast Maine): Soaring elm trees, a peaceful harborside setting, grand historic homes, and a selection of good inns make this a great spot to soak up some of Maine's coastal ambience off the beaten path. See chapter 8.
- **Blue Hill** (Midcoast Maine): A tiny town with fine harbor views; a general store; central green; museum; a lazy, summery feeling; and no—absolutely no—pretense nor tourist tack (so far). See chapter 8.
- **Northeast Harbor** (Mount Desert Island, Downeast Maine): Northeast has a waterside setting, sure, but also a gentle mixture of seafaring locals and art-loving summer folks, giving it an aura of a place that's still living life from a century ago. The single, sleepy main street anchors one of Mount Desert Island's best little villages. See chapter 9.
- **Eastport** (Downeast Maine): Sure, it's basically a fish-processing town, yet Eastport is making a slow transition from working-class town to (gasp) tourist destination. Don't be surprised if it gets more popular as time goes on; or see it now, and be ahead of the curve. See chapter 10.

3 THE BEST PLACES TO SEE FALL FOLIAGE

- **The Camden Hills** (Midcoast Maine): The surrounding countryside is full of blazing color, with whitewashed homes and sailboats to offset it. See chapter 8.
- **Acadia National Park** (Downeast Maine): This national park possesses some of the finest foliage in northern New England, all the more so because it's set right beside the dramatic, rocky coastline. See chapter 9.
- **Blueberry Barrens** (Downeast Maine): Downeast Maine's vast wild blueberry fields suddenly turn a brilliant cranberry-red color each fall, practically setting the landscape ablaze with color. This is one of Maine's unappreciated scenic treasures. Wander the dirt roads northeast of Cherryfield through the upland barrens, or just drive Route 1 between Harrington and Machias past an experimental farm atop (of course) Blueberry Hill. See chapter 10.

4 THE BEST COASTAL VIEWS

- **From Hiking Trails on Monhegan:** The village of Monhegan is clustered around the harbor of the same-named island, quite a way off the coast. The

rest of the 700-acre rock is comprised of picturesque wild lands, with miles of trails crossing open meadows and tracing rocky bluffs. See chapter 7.

- **From the Deck of a Windjammer:** See Maine as many saw it for centuries—from the ocean, looking inland. Sailing ships depart from various harbors along the coast, particularly from Rockland and Camden. Spend between a night and a week exploring the dramatic shoreline. See chapter 8.
- **From Merchant's Row via Kayak:** The islands between Stonington and Isle au Haut, rimmed with pink granite and capped with the stark spires of spruce trees, are among the most spectacular on the entire East Coast. They're inaccessible by motorboat, but wonderful to explore by sea kayak if you've got the skill (or the will). Some outfitters even offer overnight camping trips on the islands. See chapter 8.
- **From Acadia's Park Loop Road:** Forming the heart of Acadia National Park, this is New England's premier oceanside drive. Start along a ridge with views of Frenchman Bay and the Porcupine Islands, then dip down along the rocky shores to watch the surf crash against the dark rocks. Plan to do this 20-mile loop at least twice to get the most out of it. See chapter 9.
- **From a Well-Located Rocking Chair:** Views are never better than when you're caught unaware—such as glancing up from an engrossing book on the front porch of an oceanside inn and catching a great sunset or angle of light on the water. This book includes many hotels and inns on the water. A list of the best porch views in Maine could run for pages, but it would certainly include those gleaned from the Beachmere Inn (in Ogunquit), the Black Point Inn (in Scarborough), Grey Havens (on Georgetown Island), East Wind Inn (in Tenant's Harbor), the Samoset Resort (outside Rockport), the Inn on the Harbor (in Stonington), the Tides Inn (in Bar Harbor), and the Claremont (in Southwest Harbor). But feel free to find your own best front porch, too.
- **New Hampshire Route 1A by Bike:** This beautiful little ride packs a sampling of all sorts of coastal scenery into a tiny slice of New Hampshire coastline running approximately from Hampton Beach. You begin among sandy beaches, then pass rocky headlands and handsome mansions before coasting into the scenic, appealing little city of Portsmouth. See chapter 11.

5 THE BEST ACTIVE VACATIONS

- **Mountain Biking at Acadia:** Oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, Jr., built the carriage roads of Mount Desert Island so that the gentry could enjoy rambles in the woods on horseback—far away from those pesky cars that were just then filling his bank accounts with huge profits. His extensive network today offers some of the most scenic and enjoyable scenic mountain biking in the U.S. Thanks, John! See chapter 9.
- **Kayaking the Coast:** With its massive and serpentine coastline and thousands of islands, most of them uninhabited, Maine is a world-class destination for those who know their way around a sea kayak. The Stonington area is considered the best spot for kayaking in Maine, but it's hard to go wrong anywhere northeast of Portland. Just beware the dangers that lurk in the form of tricky tides or weather—kayak with a guide if you're at all a novice.

- **Canoeing the North Woods:** Maine has thousands of miles of flowing rivers and streams, and hundreds of miles of shoreline along remote ponds and lakes. Happily, these are not all that far inland

from the coast. Bring along a tent, sleeping bag, and cooking gear, and you're good to go: It will be just you, the stars, and the sounds of the loons. See chapter 11.

6 THE BEST DESTINATIONS FOR FAMILIES

- **York Beach** (southern Maine): This beach town is actually a set of three towns; head for Short Sands with the kids, where they can watch a taffy-pulling machine, play video games in an arcade, ogle seashells in a trinket shop, or scarf cotton candy at a small amusement park. The Long Sands section is ideal for tanning, Frisbee tossing, or kite flying, and nearby Nubble Light (a scenic lighthouse) is close to a kid-friendly ice-cream shop. See chapter 5.
- **Old Orchard Beach** (southern Maine): This place has sort of a carnival

atmosphere—there are french fries, hot dogs, and fried-dough galore. Though it might be a bit much for adults, the kids will probably love it. See chapter 6.

- **Monhegan Island** (southern Maine): The mail boat from Port Clyde out to Monhegan is rustic and intriguing, the inns are a rustic overnight adventure, and the smallish island's scale is perfect for kids to explore, especially kids in the, say, 8-to-12-year-old range. See chapter 7.

7 THE MOST INTRIGUING HISTORIC HOMES

- **Victoria Mansion** (Portland): The Victorians went all out for grandiose material excess in a Trumpian-before-the-Donald sort of style. You'll find Victorian decorative arts at their zenith in this elaborate Italianate mansion, which was built during the Civil War. It's open to the public for tours throughout the summer, and then again during the Christmas season. See chapter 6.

- **Parson Fisher House** (Blue Hill): Parson Jonathan Fisher, who served as minister to the quiet town of Blue Hill in the late 18th century, was a man of extraordinary talents, from designing his own house to building his own clocks and preaching sermons in five languages (including Aramaic). As if that wasn't enough, his primitive landscape paintings of the region are surprisingly good. See chapter 8.

8 THE BEST PLACES TO REDISCOVER THE PAST

- **Sabbathday Lake Shaker Community** (New Gloucester): This is the last of the active Shaker communities in the nation and the only one that voted to accept

new converts rather than die out. The 1,900-acre farm about 45 minutes outside of Portland has a number of exceptional buildings, including some dating

from the 18th century. Visitors can view examples of Shaker craftsmanship and buy herbs to bring home. See chapter 6.

- **Mount Desert Island & Bar Harbor:** In the mid-1800s, America launched a love affair with nature and never looked back. See where it started, here amid surf-wracked rocks, and where some of the nation's most affluent families ventured to erect vacation "cottages," with bedrooms by the dozen. The area still

offers lessons on how to design with nature as accomplice rather than adversary. See chapter 9.

- **Portsmouth** (New Hampshire): Portsmouth is a salty coastal city that also happens to possess some of the most impressive historic homes in all New England. Start at Strawberry Banke, a 10-acre compound of 42 historic buildings. Then visit some of the many other grand homes in the surrounding neighborhoods. See chapter 11.

9 THE BEST RESORTS

- **The Colony Hotel** (Kennebunkport; ☎ 800/552-2363 or 207/967-3331): This rambling, gleaming white resort dates from 1914 and has been upgraded over the years without losing any of its charm. You can play shuffleboard, putt on a putting green, or lounge in an oceanview pool. More vigorous souls cross the street to brave the cold Atlantic. See p. 100.
- **White Barn Inn** (Kennebunkport; ☎ 207/967-2321): Much of the White Barn staff hails from Europe, and they treat guests graciously. The rooms and suites here are a delight, and the meals (served in a gloriously restored barn) are among the best in northern New England. See p. 98.

10 THE BEST BED & BREAKFASTS

- **The Captain Lord Mansion** (Kennebunkport; ☎ 800/522-3141 or 207/967-3141): You'll transcend all those "wannabe&Bs" at this genuine article, chock-full of grandfather clocks, Chippendale highboys, and other antiques. This mansion is just off the village center in Kennebunkport, perfectly situated for relaxing strolls to the beach or into town. See p. 100.
- **Grey Havens** (Georgetown Island; ☎ 800/431-2316 or 207/371-2616): This graceful, 1904-shingled home with prominent turrets sits on a high, rocky bluff overlooking the sea. Inside, it's done in mellow pine paneling, with a spacious common room where you can relax in cozy chairs in front of the cobblestone fireplace while listening to classical music. See p. 139.
- **Lindenwood Inn** (Southwest Harbor; ☎ 800/307-5335 or 207/244-5335): This place features a jovial owner, good rooms, a refreshingly laid-back and summery feel, a fine pool and deck, and proximity to one of Mount Desert Island's key lobster piers. See p. 231.
- **The Claremont** (Southwest Harbor; ☎ 800/244-5036 or 207/244-5036): The Claremont is a Maine classic, Victorian-style resort, complete with sparsely decorated rooms, creaky floorboards in the halls, great views of water and mountains, and a croquet pitch. See p. 230.

11 THE BEST AFFORDABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

- **Driftwood Inn & Cottages** (Bailey Island; ☎ 207/833-5461): Where else can you find a double room at the edge of the rocky Maine coast starting at around \$80? This classic shingled compound dates from 1910 and offers mostly rooms with shared bathrooms, but the views might be worth that inconvenience. See p. 141.
- **Maine Idyll Motor Court** (Freeport; ☎ 207/865-4201): The 1932 Maine

Idyll Motor Court is a classic—a cluster of 20 cottages scattered about a grove of beech and oak trees. Each cottage has a tiny porch, wood-burning fireplace (birch logs provided), TV, fridge, modest kitchen facilities (no ovens), and timeworn furniture. The downside? A little highway noise. Cottages start at \$63 for two. See p. 133.

12 THE BEST ALTERNATIVE ACCOMMODATIONS

- **Maine Island Trail:** About 70 remote islands along the Maine coast are open to camping, and from these remote, salty wildernesses, you'll see some of the best sunsets imaginable. See "Outdoor Activities," in chapter 3, for an introduction.
- **Windjammers** (Midcoast and Downeast Maine): Maine has the East Coast's largest fleet of windjammers, offering

adventures on the high seas throughout the summer. You can explore offshore islands and inland estuaries and learn how sailors once made the best of the wind. Accommodations in private cabins are typically spartan, but you'll spend most of your time on the deck luxuriating in the stunning views. See chapter 8.

13 THE BEST RESTAURANTS

- **Hurricane** (Kennebunkport; ☎ 207/967-1111): Talented chef Brooks MacDonald's restaurant emphasizes local seafood and lobster with a creative flair right in Kennebunkport's Dock Square. See p. 103.
- **White Barn Inn** (Kennebunkport; ☎ 207/967-2321): The setting, in an ancient, rustic barn, is magical. The tables are draped with floor-length tablecloths, and the chairs feature Italian upholstery. The menu—and the decor—changes seasonally, but is always top-notch. See p. 104.
- **Fore Street** (Portland; ☎ 207/775-2717): Fore Street is one of New England's most celebrated restaurants, and has been previously selected as one of *Gourmet* magazine's 100 best restaurants in the U.S. Chef Sam Hayward has been getting lots of press. His secret? Simplicity: Some of the most memorable meals are prepared over an applewood grill. See p. 111.
- **Primo** (Rockland; ☎ 207/596-0770): Melissa Kelly and Price Kushner create culinary magic on two floors of a century-old home at this winning Rockland

bistro. Expect fancy treatments of foie gras, scallops, duck, steak, and more;

outstanding desserts; and a long, impressive wine list. See p. 161.

14 THE BEST LOCAL DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Becky's** (Portland; ☎ 207/773-7070): Five different kinds of home fries on the menu? It's breakfast nirvana at this local institution right on Portland's working waterfront. This is *the* favored hangout of Portland's fishermen, not to mention high school kids, businessmen, and lots of other folks. See p. 114.
- **Silly's** (Portland; ☎ 207/772-0360): Hectic and fun, this tiny, kitschy restaurant serves up delicious finger food in a no-frills setting. Expect pita wraps, thick burgers, kabobs, hamburgers, and pizzas, among many other things. The milkshakes alone are worth the detour. See p. 116.
- **Dolphin Chowder House** (South Harpswell; ☎ 207/833-6000): The fish chowder and lobster stew are so reasonably priced and delicious at this hidden spot—which is part of a marina at the very end of a dead-end road—that you'll want to find it. Blueberry muffins come with most meals. See p. 142.
- **Thurston's Lobster Pound** (Bernard; ☎ 207/244-7600): It doesn't get much more local than this eatery, perched on stilts right above the lobster boats with atmospheric views on the so-called "quiet side" of Mount Desert Island. Choose your lobster from the tank at the counter, plus sides of corn on the cob, steamed clams, blueberry cake, and beer, then join the happy crowds either upstairs or down. See p. 234.

15 THE BEST DESTINATIONS FOR SHOPPERS

- **Kittery**: There are tons of outlets on Route 1 of this otherwise sleepy hamlet; you're bound to find something good at a low price at Crate & Barrel, Coach, Seiko, Gap, or wherever. See chapter 5.
- **Portland**: A city this size really ought to have more shops than it does—the Old Port, the chief shopping district, is in serious danger of becoming a bit too precious, and is pretty small—but you can still find great little boutiques and shops if you look hard enough. See chapter 6.
- **Freeport**: L.L.Bean is the anchor store for this thriving town of outlets, but you'll also find places such as Patagonia, J. Crew, Dansk, Brooks Brothers, and about 100 others. This is somehow among the most aesthetically pleasing of the outlet centers scattered around northern New England. See chapter 7.
- **Portsmouth, New Hampshire**: Downtown Portsmouth offers a grab bag of small, eclectic shops ranging from funky shoe, vintage, and toy shops to classy art galleries. The downtown is small enough to browse on foot, and you'll find a broad assortment of stuff for sale appealing to almost any taste. See chapter 11.