

An escape to Acadia Park when the crowds have gone

ACADIA, from 1-R

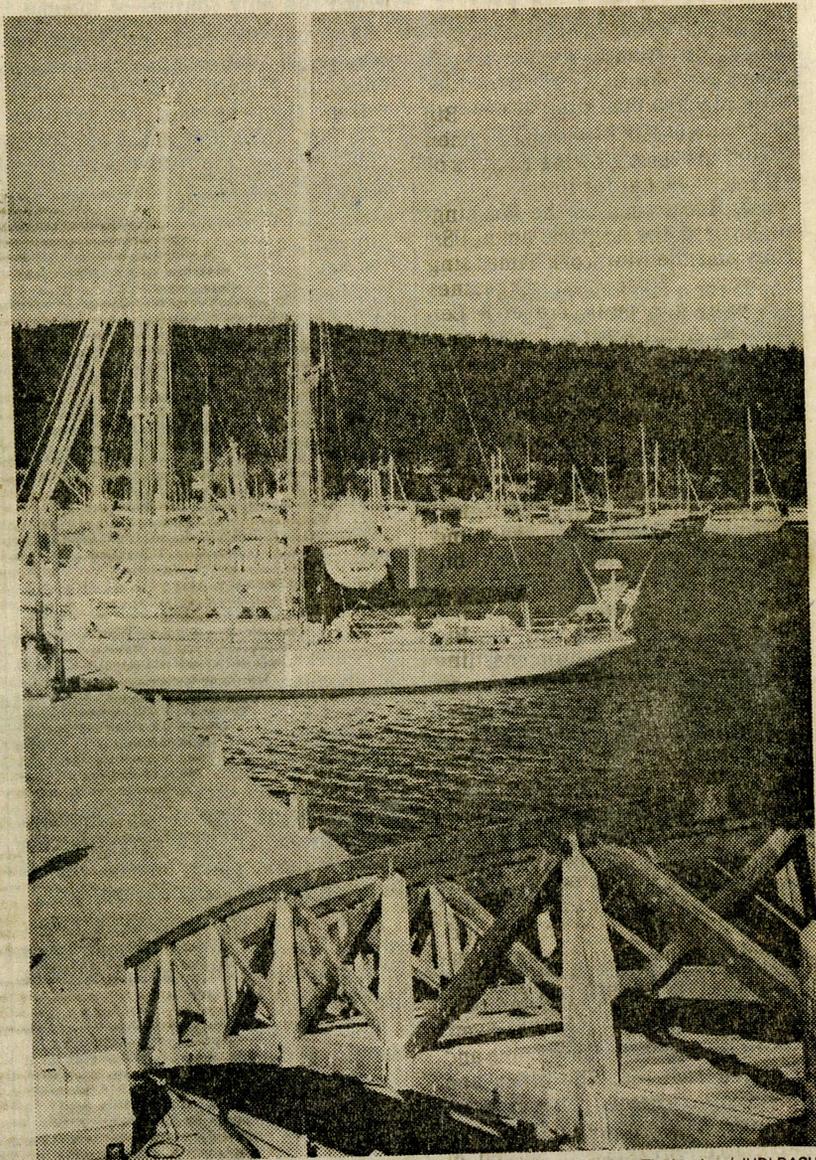
"people from away," as Mainer calls anyone not from the Pine Tree State, as well as some natives with insufficient regional ancestry.

Even at this time, though, the 120 miles of hiking trails never seem crowded; the tourist throngs drive the 22-mile Park Loop Road, taking in the mountain, lake and sea views from open windows, and leaving the wilds to the rusticators — as Mainer calls everyone from a weekend woods-walker to a mountain biker. Then, come September, even the loop road quiets down. And for two precious months between Labor Day and Halloween, most inns and restaurants stay open, and Acadia is both full-service and untrammelled.

The autumn colors — probably coming to peak right about now — are no less than breathtaking. The cool wind scours the mountains and sea of the summer haze, turning everything crisp and bright; at times the scenery seems more like an idyllic painting than reality.

At this time of year, we never know whether the morning will be cold and windy, warm under a hot morning sun or lashed by autumn rain, but it never matters. If it's sunny, we rent bicycles in Bar Harbor and head for Acadia's magnificent carriage paths, or take the mail ferry from Northeast Harbor to tiny Little Cranberry or Swan Islands, for a few hours of reconnoitering these sparsely inhabited fishing communities.

On cooler days, we hike, selecting from dozens of mountain, forest and beach trails detailed in the guides sold at the park visitors center near Hulls Cove, a few miles north of Bar Harbor. You needn't be a mountain climber to take in great views on foot. Many of the beginner trails are nearly flat, and within just a few minutes afford gorgeous vistas of cliffs and sea.



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Northeast Harbor, home port for the out-island mail boat.

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Rain? That's a perfect time to visit Southwest Harbor's Oceanarium, where you can learn about the creatures of the sea. Inclement weather is also an opportunity to drive to Bangor, the closest real city an hour northwest, or along the Park Loop Road, and watch the rain meet the surf crashing against the shore. We may even make a run to Freeport, to L.L. Bean (a hefty 2½-hour drive), where you can shop till you drop for all the outdoor gear ever invented.

On a clear evening, we might drive up Cadillac Mountain to watch the sun set crimson against the mountains and lakes. Then we might join a free park-ranger-guided excursion to view night animals. (Walks are listed each week in Acadia Weekly, a free guide to the park.)

Cadillac's 1,500-foot peak, the highest on the U.S. Atlantic coast, is the first place on the East Coast that the sun touches as it rises. Hikers often scale the peak at dawn; you'll see T-shirts at many gift shops bearing the brag: "Cadillac Mountain Sunrise Club." You also can drive to the peak at sunrise; the road to the summit opens an hour before dawn.

When hunger strikes, we're confronted with an embarrassment of

riches. Should we feast on the magnificent salad bar and spicy shrimp fra diavolo at 124 Cottage Street in downtown Bar Harbor, or sample the catch of the day while overlooking the water at the Seafood Ketch in tranquil Bass Harbor? Perhaps an aperitif at Bar Harbor's Opera House Restaurant and Listening Room, whose the name describes exactly what you'll hear in this romantic, candlelit cafe, decorated with portraits of famous opera stars. Cocktails are served in a lace-accented lounge that looks like a Victorian living room.

Some of our other favorites are Nakorn Thai Restaurant, a no-frills storefront with spicy fare and cheap prices; Georges, an elegant Greek cafe with a classical-guitar player at night, and — for drinks at sunset — the boathouse at the Claremont Hotel in Southwest Harbor, overlooking beautiful Somes Sound. And we always try to catch afternoon tea at the Jordan Pond House, a restaurant in the park that abuts the lovely pond for which the cafe is named.

We've sampled several types of accommodations in the area, enjoying each for its particular rewards. One of our favorites is the Claremont Hotel in Southwest Harbor, expensive in high season but much

cheaper now that the main hotel is closed, as it does each Sept. 15. Guesthouse rooms then go for \$80 double, bigger cottages for \$110 for two. Phone 207-244-5036. On our most recent visit, we stayed at the inexpensive (\$68 per night) Edgewater Motel and Cabins, right on the water at Salisbury Cove. 207-288-3491. We had a kitchenette, but no phone — ideal vacation living. The Acadia park entrance was only a short drive away, as was Bar Harbor.

Leaving Acadia is always traumatic. We crave just one more hike to gaze at the sea from a rocky precipice; just one more bike ride along the carriage paths; just one more round of drinks at the Claremont Hotel boathouse, watching the sun set over Somes Sound.

We never quite feel we've had enough of Acadia, and we've thought about extending our stay to two weeks. But maybe it's this feeling that keeps drawing us back, year after year.

How to get there, and what to do

Here are a few tips for traveling to Acadia National Park:

You'll want to budget a long three or four-day weekend, especially if driving, because the park is about 12 hours by car from Philadelphia. USAir flies nonstop from Philadelphia to Portland (\$138 round trip, advance purchase), where you can rent a car for the three-hour drive to the park.

For information on the park, write to the Visitor's Center, Box 177, Bar Harbor, Maine 04609, or call 207-288-4932. The center is off Route 3 at the Hull's Cove entrance to the park. There is no admission charge to the park for pedestrians, but motorists pay a \$5 fee per car for a seven-day pass.

For more information about the area, including accommodations, contact the Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce. Phone 207-288-3393.

