

# Down East Islands

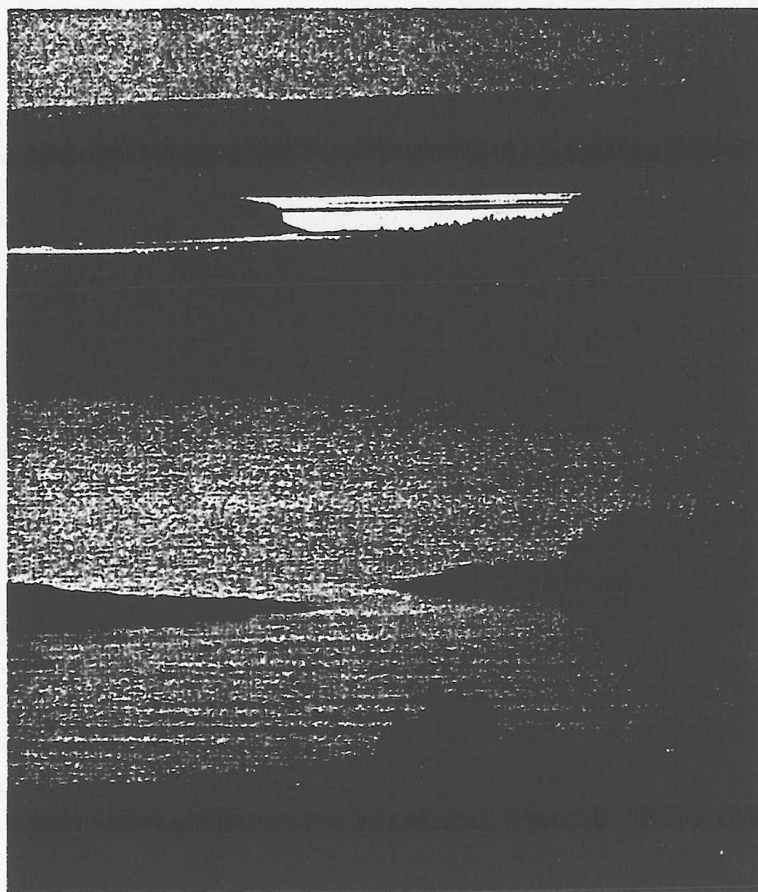
*New England's prime terrain is off the coast of Maine*

By Cathryn Jakobson

**Y**ou board the *Governor Muskie* ferry in Rockland, Maine, which has to be one of the ugliest towns in New England. There's a hustle and a confusion as pickups and battered vans line up: Can the milk truck get on? Are there groceries in that wagon? A man in a hunter's orange vest, directing traffic, thrusts a flat hand at you to pull you up short and motions forward a flatbed truck loaded with lumber. Then he waves his arm, and you roll your bicycle onto the crowded deck, sucking in your gut to squeeze past a fender. Just then, there's an ear-piercing whistle. The ferry is under way.

It's a chilly June morning, and some people have left their engines running and their heaters on; others are perched on the hoods of their cars, having a smoke. There's a strange, heady mix of carbon monoxide and fresh Atlantic air in your face as the harbor spreads before you—long, narrow, green islands to your right and left, fringed with rocks and topped with dark green spruce. Some have their own halos, floating rings of clouds that cling tenaciously to their edges.

An hour later, you're docked in Vinalhaven's minute harbor. It isn't quaint in the "city slicker bought a tumbledown house and fixed it up" sense of the word; in fact, it's about as far from the Kennebunkport genre as you can get in the state of Maine. This really is Maine, not some trumped-up-for-the-tourist version. You can't get a beer to save your soul on Sunday, and you're likely to sleep in a creaky bed in a house that smells like your Great Aunt Harriet's. Add to these pleasures the multitude of outdoor activities—hiking, biking, bird-watching, rock-hunting, fishing, canoeing, sailing, windsurfing, wildflower



*The view from Maine's Mount Desert Island: good hiking near the sea*

gathering, and foraging—and Maine's coastal islands qualify as prime summer getaways.

SOME OF THE ISLANDS AREN'T EASY TO reach; maybe that's why they've remained so special. Unless you have a private craft at your disposal, most of them are inaccessible. There are, however, a number of islands that are served by public ferry.

The largest island and one of the easiest to reach is Mount Desert—just drive across an unassuming bridge and you're there. The island is home to Acadia National Park, and for this reason alone it's worth a visit. The best way to see Acadia is on foot. Take the park roads to observe the wonders of Thunder Hole, Bubble Rock, and Cadillac Mountain, by all means—but then dump the car, pull out your *Appalachian Mountain Club*

*Guide*, and take to the trail. Sargent Mountain offers a pleasant, boulder-strewn hike, but there are dozens of other choices—and lush crops of wild blueberries everywhere.

Mount Desert's main town, Bar Harbor, holds a different interest: In the late 1800s and early 1900s, wealthy East Coast families chose it as a location for their "summer cottages," splendid mansions akin to those in Newport, Rhode Island. Unfortunately, only a few of the houses remain: A fire swept the island in 1947, destroying most of them.

Outside of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert has other riches. Take your bicycle down the rolling roads to Somesville, talk with the lobster fishermen in Northeast Harbor, and hop the *Beal & Bunker* ferry to the Cranberry Islands, where there is good bird-watching—with luck you'll see double-breasted cormorants, eider ducks, herons, black-backed gulls, and terns.

Back on Mount Desert, visit Indian Point, just off Clark Cove. The Maine branch of the Nature Conservancy owns a spit of land there, and you might spot the resident family of ospreys, high in a fir tree.

Although it is not accessible from Mount Desert, Isle Au Haut encompasses another part of Acadia National Park, so it's a logical next stop. To reach it, drive from the mainland to Stonington, a fishing town at the very tip of Deer Isle, and catch the *Miss Lizzie* ferry. You'll dock first at the town landing, a tiny hamlet that is home to a hundred people throughout the year, and pick up a park ranger. On the way down to Duck Harbor, he or she will explain that the island is covered with an even-aged forest. Colonial settlers clear-cut a good part of the island for farming and grazing livestock, but when they moved to more

generous climes in the early 19th century, cat spruce reclaimed the hills. The hobbit-like forest is now well past its prime, and the results are eerie. In the quiet dampness grow puffy blankets of green and pink moss and a dozen kinds of mushrooms; tree limbs are twisted and bleached with age.

You can obtain a map of Isle Au Haut and recommendations on trails from the ranger. Try taking Western Head into Cliff Trail, where the cold ocean meets the inland warmth and envelops you in a soft mist. There are no sand beaches; instead, gently colored cobbles, smooth as eggs, clack against one another at the ocean's edge. Squared-off cleavages of pink, blue, and gray granite, peppered with mica and schist, provide a comfortable seat from which you can watch a flock of cormorants dart and dive.

ISLESBORO PRESENTS A MORE CIVILIZED PICTURE. A three-mile boat ride from Lincolnville Beach, near Camden, it was one of the first islands to be parceled into salt-water farms. In Dark Harbor, the affluent section of Islesboro, Philadelphia bankers sip five-o'clock gin and tonics on the verandas of their Victorian mansions, enjoying views of distant islands. The houses are immaculately maintained; someone is always on a ladder, wielding a paintbrush on gingerbread trim. Of all the islands, Islesboro is the most like Nantucket: You may or may not appreciate the contrivance of fruit drinks under Cinzano umbrellas on the deck of the Dark Harbor Shop on Main Street.

But there is a simpler side of Islesboro as well. Bicycle across The Narrows to the northern end of the island and introduce yourself to the regular folk. If the Second Baptist Church's ladies' sewing circle is sponsoring a bazaar that day, check the meetinghouse for white-haired ladies who offer you all the iced tea you can drink for a quarter and then fill you with sandwiches, brownies, and cider. If you arrive late in the day, you'll receive apologies that the only sandwiches left are those on whole-wheat bread.

On the return trip to the ferry dock, look in abandoned barnyards for raspberry canes, which grow up around the crumbling boards. In early August, they are laden with sun-warmed berries. They probably aren't free for the taking, but if you don't stuff as many into your mouth as you can manage, you're missing a good bet. Unless you have reservations at a local hostelry, don't tarry too long. The last summer ferry leaves at 5:30, and accommodations on the island are pricey and limited.

MONHEGAN, 11 MILES OUT TO SEA, attracts a crowd of urbane artists and writers. To get there, you can take the

Laura B. ferry from the town of Port Clyde or boats from Boothbay or New Harbor. Monhegan is intentionally primitive; there is no central power source on the island. If you want water, you pump it from a well, and the phone service is tenuous at best. The people who love Monhegan shun improvements; they figure there's enough of God's work to appreciate—like the towering cliffs of Burnt Head, Black Head, and White Head, and Cathedral Woods, a giant forest of fragrant balsam fir. Monhegan is an island that's proud of its idiosyncracies: For instance, from June 25 to January 1, there's no lobstering in Monhegan waters. The motive is purely economic; when other islanders are trying to trap crustaceans in winter's icy Atlantic, Monhegan lobstermen are hauling in their uncultured catch—fat, plentiful, and certain to fetch high prices in the market.

Vinalhaven is perhaps the strangest of the islands, the most difficult to categorize. The island lost its purpose long ago and never really found another. It was once a great center of granite quarrying, until cement was invented and Maine's beautiful, hard stone became a luxury. The abandoned quarries are worth a visit; some of them are filled with fresh, clear water, offering the best swimming in the islands. Use caution, though: Quarries marked private are

definitely not open to the public.

Brave souls can make the trip to Matinicus, 23 miles out to sea. There is only one ferry a month, the *William S. Silsby*, that runs between Rockland and the island. Matinicus is not known for its hospitality, but it does have a couple of good sand beaches. It's a place that lives in the past; little has changed there for 50 years. There's a carefully cultivated colony of Atlantic puffins on Matinicus Rock, a 30-acre dome of granite, but you'll need to hire a fisherman to take you out

to it in his boat. Once there, you can attempt to answer the longstanding riddle: How many fish can a puffin hold in its orange bill at once? The record—so they say—is 28.

With the exception of Mount Desert, which is loaded with chic little eateries and bars, there are very few restaurants or drinking spots on the islands. If you're going to Isle Au Haut, be sure to bring your own picnic—there's no food available. Fresh seafood is your best bet anywhere in the islands, and it's cheap. Look for steam rising outside a little roadside dive: That means lobster is being boiled. Tell the boss what size you want, and he'll drop the crustacean into an enormous vat. Better food was never eaten, but don't make the error of asking for your lobster broiled or, God forbid, stuffed. Islanders wouldn't dream of subjecting a lobster to such treatment. The plentiful fried clams, scallops, shrimp, and fish are also delicious. None of these

delicacies, of course, taste quite as good anywhere else. They're made to be consumed on an island off the coast of Maine, after a summer day of exploring in the fresh, open air of the Atlantic.

## Travel Information

**Mount Desert Island:** If you like country inns, try the Central House, 60 Cottage Street, (207) 288-4242. For more

modest accommodations, call McKay's Cottages, 243 Main Street, (207) 288-3531. Both are in Bar Harbor. Write to Acadia National Park, P.O. Box 177, Bar Harbor, Me. 04609, for information on camping in the park. Private campgrounds are also available; for more information, request the *Passbook* from *The Bar Harbor Times*, (207) 288-3311.

**Isle Au Haut:** There are five lean-to sites available at Duck Harbor from May to October, but they are in great demand. There are no other accommodations on Isle Au Haut, and you cannot use a tent. For reservations, write to Acadia National Park (address above).

**Islesboro:** The most elegant accommodations are in the Dark Harbor House, (207) 734-6669. There are also several guesthouses. For information, call the town manager's office, (207) 734-6445. If you wish to camp, you can pay a boatman to ferry you to Warren Island State Park. Contact the town manager for camping permits as well.

**Monhegan:** There are three hostleries on the island: the Island Inn, (207) 372-9681; Monhegan House, (207) 372-9681; and the Trailing Yew, which has no phone. All accommodations are extremely simple. There is a reservation clearinghouse at (207) 784-9161.

**Vinalhaven:** For information on guesthouses and camping, contact the town office, (207) 863-4471.

**Matinicus:** There is one guesthouse on the island, and camping is allowed with special permission from the town manager. For more information, call the Maine State Ferry Service, (207) 594-5543.

**Special trips:** The Maine Audubon Society, 118 Old Route 1, Falmouth, Me. 04105, and the Maine Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, 20 Federal St., Brunswick, Me. 04101, organize field trips, often to islands that are inaccessible to the general public.

Renting a boat is a good way to see the islands, as long as you're a very competent sailor. Bareboat charters are available from Trispar Marine Charters, Shore Rd., Southwest Harbor, Me. 04609; (207) 244-5561. Manset Boat Rentals, Box 206, Manset, Maine, also has boats available.

For those who don't know how to sail but still want to get out on the water, there is everything from windjammer cruises that last six days to single-day charters. Request the Windjammer Cruises brochure from the Maine Publicity Bureau, 97 Winthrop St., Hallowell, Me. 04347; (207) 289-2423. The same organization can furnish information on day sailing.



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