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Maine's Mount Desert Island, home to Acadia National Park, lakes and more

June 11, 2014 By ALISON GREGOR Special to Newsday



Fishing boats at rest in the calm of Bass Harbor on Mount Desert Island, Maine. (Credit: iStock / Paul D. Lemke)

When presented with the opportunity to visit Mount Desert Island in Maine, my first thought was, "A desert island -- what three things do I need to bring if I'm stranded there?"

As it turns out, it's pronounced "dessert," and the island is almost the farthest thing from a desert one could imagine. (The island was named by French explorer Samuel de Champlain, who observed the bare granite

peak of Cadillac Mountain as he sailed past.) Hosting part of Acadia National Park, Mount Desert Island is 108-square miles of rocky shoreline, mountains, valleys, lakes and forests, about two-thirds of which is national parkland. The most arresting features of Acadia, and the reason private landowners began acquiring and donating its acreage to the federal government in the early 1900s, are the craggy seaside cliffs and granite-domed mountains that thrust straight up from the sea. Formed by glaciers about 18,000 years ago, the area once laid claim to the eastern United States' only true fjord -- a narrow, deep sea inlet between high cliffs. (It has since been slightly downgraded by geomorphologists to a lower-relief "fjord," but is still dramatic.)

At more than 47,000 acres, Acadia stands apart from destinations like coastal Alaska and northwestern Washington -- also known for sea-and-mountains landscapes -- in its accessibility and family-friendliness.

CARRIAGE TRAILS

Our first activity was driving the stunning 27-mile Park Loop Road, which included summiting the park's highest peak: 1,528-foot Cadillac Mountain. But it wasn't until we'd found the more than 45 miles of carriage roads that we truly began to discover the park.

The vision of John D. Rockefeller and other philanthropists, the gently winding crushed-stone roads are used by hikers, cyclists and horseback riders, and are a virtually effortless way to experience the park's interior. There are even horse-drawn carriage rides.

All trails seem to end (or begin) at [Jordan Pond House](#), where afternoon tea has been a tradition since the late 1800s. Hike the sedate Jordan Pond Loop or jump on a cycle to explore Bubble Pond and Eagle Lake.

GO VERTICAL

There are 120-plus miles of hiking trails in Acadia at all levels of difficulty. Many are perfect for families, such as the one-mile hike up South Bubble to Bubble Rock, a 14-ton boulder left perching in what looks to be a precarious position by receding glaciers. However, after much effort, my 2-year-old daughter and husband can attest that the rock isn't going anywhere.

After the South Bubble, we decided to try the Goat trail because we were told it was easy for those hauling kids. It was -- once we got through the initial third-of-a-mile scramble straight up the side of 850-foot Norumbega Mountain. We also found fairly easy trails on the pink-granite promontories of Otter Cliff, Gorham Mountain and Great Head.

After our ascent of Norumbega, we'd developed a taste for the vertical and became particularly intrigued by what are called "ladder trails," which incorporate ladders with rungs drilled into rock faces. We made adventurous ascents up the Beech Cliff and the Beehive (both of which conveniently start from swimming areas).

RANGER FOR A DAY

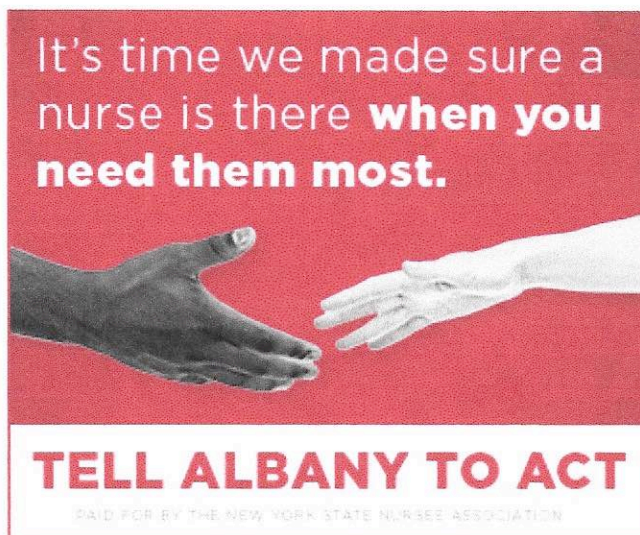
Acadia offers ranger-led programs on myriad topics that can be great for all ages. Besides daytime hikes and talks, there are evening rambles and cruises. We became kids again for a couple of hours on a [Dive-In Theater Boat Cruise](#) in Frenchman Bay, where we watched a diver scour the ocean floor for marine life that was then brought aboard for us to investigate.

After floating on water for a couple of hours, we decided to get in it and found the only saltwater beach in rocky Acadia, a 290-yard slice of sand rather prosaically named Sand Beach. With summer water temperatures averaging between 55 and 60 degrees in Acadia, any dips will most likely be refreshing but short.

OUTSIDE THE PARK

Bar Harbor, a village of about 5,200, is the island's social hub, where shops and restaurants serve as satellites to the Village Green. A handful we enjoyed are [Spruce and Gussy](#), a quaint gift shop; Bar Harbor Hemporium (207-288-3014) with everything hemp; and [Stone Soup](#), a fun toy store.

For a meal, [Cafe This Way](#) is renowned for its ample brunches, but shouldn't be overlooked for supper. (The Maine seafood spring rolls are superb.) For dessert, [Mt. Desert Island Ice Cream](#) has a host of intriguing flavors, like Vietnamese coffee, Atlantic brewing stout with fudge or Callebaut chocolate wasabi. While Bar Harbor is lively, we loved being based outside the township in Otter Creek and visiting touristy areas. On our drives, we grew accustomed to seeing white clapboard Colonial houses surrounded by hydrangeas bursting with peach-colored flowers.



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[The Naturalist's Notebook](#), a creative, science-based store for everyone, but particularly aimed at kids, became our second home when it rained. In Otter Creek, we discovered the Burning Tree (207-288-9331), one of the best seafood restaurants in Maine. The Monkfish pan-sauteed in a Thai sweet chili sauce in particular earned our accolades.

A VISIT TO GARDENS

[The Asticou Inn](#) was one of the few Victorian buildings to survive Bar Harbor's great fire of 1947, which wiped out 60 of the island's summer estates. The inn, which once served the likes of the Astors and Rockefellers from its manicured perch overlooking Northeast Harbor, has been carefully preserved, with a vintage telephone switchboard and other antiques. Meals are delicious, with such temptations as lemon-ricotta pancakes topped with blueberry compote or lobster frittata.

Across the road are the Asticou Azalea Garden, modeled after a Japanese garden, and Thuya Gardens, an English-style perennial garden, which can be toured gratis. They are owned and maintained by the Mount Desert Land and [Garden Preserve](#).

THE QUIET SIDE

A jaunt along Sargeant Drive to take in Somes Sound, Acadia's fjord, leads to the island's so-called quiet side, or its western half. We took a break at the arched Somesville Bridge in the oldest permanent settlement on Mount Desert Island (dating to 1759).

For slightly warmer water temperatures and a gently sloping beach for young swimmers, Echo Lake is a popular freshwater swimming area.

After a dockside meal of boiled lobster and corn cooked in its husk in lobster water at [Thurston's Lobster Pound in Bernard](#), a visit to the Bass Harbor Head Light, the only lighthouse on Mount Desert Island, capped off our day visiting Mount Desert's western side, which may be quiet but shouldn't be overlooked.

If you go

ACADIA NATIONAL PARK

A park protecting more than 47,000 acres of rocky shoreline, beaches, mountains, valleys, lakes and forests on the Maine coast. A weekly car pass is \$20.

INFO nps.gov/acad

GETTING THERE

Acadia is about 264 miles from Boston and 40 miles from Bangor International Airport. Drive there along Route 1A and then Route 3, across the bridge at Trenton and onto the island. New York-Bangor round-trip airline tickets usually run \$350 to \$500.

WHERE TO STAY

There are hotels and campgrounds, but renting a home can be very economical ([vrbo.com](#), [airbnb.com](#) and [homeaway.com](#)). Small cottages run \$70 to \$100 a night, and large homes sleeping a dozen or so may run \$500 to \$1,000 a night.

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