

## Mount Desert Island

Pedaling my rented bicycle through the piney woods of Maine's Acadia National Park, on a wide, winding, crushed rock trail laid out by one of the nation's wealthiest philanthropists, I kept thinking to myself, "What a delightful anomaly."

These trails, known as carriage roads, were built during the first half of the 20th century by John D. Rockefeller Jr., who had a vacation home in the area. The Carnegies, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts et al called them "cottages." The rest of us would call them mansions.

The Rockefellers, you might recall, made their money from oil, from which we get the gasoline that powers our cars. Well, it seems that John Jr. didn't want the cars that helped make his family even richer spoiling the serenity of the park's interior. So he went to work laying out and building 57 miles of paths for horse-drawn carriages. No cars allowed.

What a gift that turned out to be for the 2 million-plus people who visit Acadia every year. For me, a novice hoping to become a serious cyclist, riding the carriage roads (45 miles are open to the public) was the highlight of a recent trip to Maine with my wife, Pam, and four other couples.

Acadia National Park encompasses more than 47,000 acres, most of it on Mount Desert Island, which is two-thirds of the way up the Maine coast and 45 miles southeast of Bangor.

The island is pronounced dessert, like your after-dinner treat, though we found some Mainers saying desert, as in Mojave. If that's too confusing, just say MDI and everyone will know what you mean.

The 16-foot-wide carriage paths are said to be the best example of broken stone roads -- common at the start of the 20th century -- in America today. They take bikers, walkers and yes, carriage riders past lakes and granite outcrops, through forests, up and down mountainsides and to a ridge overlooking the ocean.

One thing we learned about the Maine coast is that when gray, rainy weather moves in, it has a tendency to hang around. It rained the day we arrived and the day we left -- and all but one day in between. A newspaper photo caption aptly described the weather as relentless gray. We'd been hoping for more along the lines of persistent blue.

A tourist one of our friends met said that when he got home and someone asked about his trip to Maine, he'd just pour a glass of water over his head. But the landscape engulfed us in greens of every hue and if you like ferns and flowers, this is your place.

When we did get our nice day, we took advantage. Six of us rented bikes in Bar Harbor, the tourist town that has most of the island's hotels, inns, B&B's, T-shirt shops and restaurants. The town's permanent population of 4,500 swells many times over in July and August, but we found the place in early June just crowded enough to make us feel like we were in a desirable spot.

If you're carrying a bike on or in your vehicle, you can drive to half a dozen parking lots that provide direct access to the carriage roads. Otherwise, it's a mile-and-a-half ride out of town on a paved road that you share with cars and is mostly uphill.

It's not the easiest start for a ride, but once in the park, you forget all about it. Plus, there's the comfort of knowing it'll be a downhill coast back to town.

In designing the roads, Rockefeller followed the contours of the land and sought to offer the best views possible. He wanted to make sure the grades weren't too steep so the horses could climb them without difficulty.

Still, if ol' John D's engineers had made them just a little flatter, that would have been OK by me. I abandoned any pretense of pride and walked up a couple of hills, as did the others in the group -- except for our friend Gregg. He put his bike in first gear and left it there, whether the road was up, down or flat. At times, he was pedaling so fast yet going so slow I don't know how he kept his bike upright. But he never had to walk it.

We chose the easier section through the center of the park. Bikers seeking a more challenging ride can take the steeper roads to the west. The roads snake through the park in loops, so you get different scenery on the way back.

The ride was fabulous. You could race through the park if you wanted a workout, but these roads are met for lingering and checking out the views of lakes, mountains and marshes. Sometimes the road takes you high above a lake for a panoramic view. Other times, you ride right next to the shore.

Three of us took the road to Jordan Pond, enticed by the thought of eating the popovers for which the Jordan Pond House, a restaurant at the southern tip of the lake, is noted. The restaurant offers lunch, dinner and a popular afternoon tea. We were way too early for tea, but the popovers were coming out of the oven in droves.

It's a perfect spot to break up the ride. As we washed down the flaky popovers with freshly squeezed lemonade (so fresh that you're given a shot of sugar water to sweeten it), we could gaze out over the lake to ``The Bubbles," the two hills that rise above the forest on the north end. You can't go anywhere on the island without seeing a photo of that scene.

From there, we made a 6.5-mile, mostly level ride that skirted the shoreline of a small pond and Eagle Lake and took us back to the road to town -- and that exhilarating downhill glide.

You don't have to bike to enjoy Acadia, though. The park has 120 miles of hiking trails and a 20-mile paved loop road for cars that takes visitors past many of the same vistas offered by the carriage roads and runs along the coast for five or six miles.

Pam and the three other non-bikers hiked the 3.3-mile Jordan Pond trail and drove to the top of Cadillac Mountain, at 1,530 feet the highest point on the Atlantic Coast between Maine and Brazil. From the top, you can see many of the smaller islands that dot the ocean surrounding MDI, all the park and back to the mainland. On a clear day, that is.

All 10 of us had driven to the top the day before and we did get a view -- of clouds. Several miles down the road we found Sand Beach, which is named for obvious reasons and arcs between two tree-covered points in a postcard perfect setting.

A few of us worked up the nerve to take off our shoes, roll up our pants and wade into the ocean. Let me tell you, standing in 45-degree water shocks you with a far more bracing jolt than anything Starbucks could offer.

There's plenty to do outside the park, too, though the dour weather scrapped our plans for the ferry ride to Little Cranberry Island for lunch and a stroll around town. You also can canoe, kayak, go on nature and whale watch cruises and shop `til you're down to your last dollar.

Along with the ubiquitous T-shirt shops, Bar Harbor has bookstores, boutiques and shops selling outdoor gear. Some guidebooks describe the town as a kitschy tourist trap, but we weren't put off at all.

And if you tire of shopping, you can always eat lobster. You've got your steamed lobster, your fried lobster, breaded lobster, lobster rolls, lobster salad, lobster chowder, lobster stew, lobster salad, lobster pizza and lobster ice cream. Sheesh, I feel like Bubba talking about shrimp,

Blueberries are big, too -- pie, ice cream, milk shakes, fresh, dried and chocolate-covered. Heck, there's even a blueberry ale. Not enough berry flavor or fragrance? We ate at one place that gives you blueberries to plop into your beer.

Accommodations on the island range from the Bar Harbor Inn, a gracious waterfront establishment that seemed a little too genteel for our oft-times rowdy group, to mom and pop motels to dozens of cozy bed and breakfasts.

We chose the Lindenwood Inn in Southwest Harbor, a small town on the western side of Somes Sound, which cuts into the middle of the island and gives it the shape of a chunky lobster claw. Southwest Harbor bills itself as the quiet side of Mount Desert Island, which seems a bit out of character for our group. But we were drawn by the inn, which has a wraparound porch, a small bar, a heated pool and an even more heated hot tub.

The top floor suite, which one couple in our group booked, has a rooftop deck and a private hot tub -- a perfect party place.

Plenty of restaurants are close by and so is Thurston's Lobster Pound, in the small fishing village of Bernard. Lobster pounds are located up and down the coast and offer Maine's most famous food in a quintessential Maine setting -- right on the dock, lobster cages stacked just outside the door, boats bobbing in the harbor, the lobster straight from the sea.

You walk to the counter, peer in at the live lobsters sorted by size (small, medium, large) in tanks, place your order and take a seat. The lobsters are plunked into a steamer and come out red, hot and sweet.

Thurston's offers several side dishes, including chowder, lobster stew, corn on the cob and coleslaw. I opted for the lobster roll, a sandwich of lobster meat mixed with a little mayonnaise.

"It's all good here," said the woman taking our orders. "Good for everyone but the lobsters," Gregg responded.

We had started our day tasting chardonnay and pinot noir at a winery, then sampled several beers at a microbrewery, including the ever-present blueberry brew, of course. And this was just in the morning. But hey, it was after noon somewhere. Besides, when the rain falls in Maine, you find a way to make do.