Look Mom, No Car!

Discovering New England by foot, bike, train, bus, and boat • by Nell Porter Brown

Paddlers enjoy the serenity of Flagstaff Lake, Maine.

CHAN WELLER

"Exploration is a liberal art because it is an art that liberates, that frees, that opens away from narrowness," asserts Orchard professor of landscape history John Stilgoe in Outside Lies Magic. *But the car "moves too fast for its driver to notice much....Always its engine drowns out whispers; its windows, its air-conditioning shut out odors.... Bicycling and walking offer unique entry into exploration itself."*

For Harvard School of Public Health research fellow Anne Lusk, who is studying ways to improve biking infrastructure to get people onto bikes and recreational paths, the other reasons to shed the steel tonnage on vacation (and every day) are primarily physical: to ensure the health of the planet, people, and society.

"We need fewer cars, less parallel parking, wider sidewalks, barrier bike lanes, better public transportation—this is the new urbanist model," says Lusk, who is also a trained architect. "Our culture is all about consumption [of foods and goods], and that's got to change." We need to do other things that satisfy and reward us: hiking a mountain and reaching the summit, swimming in a clear lake on a summer afternoon, working in the yard with friends, playing sports, or, she might add, pedaling down a bike trail to a café to meet friends for a morning coffee. "In the meantime, we can't immediately take people 100 percent away from consumption—if goods and food inspire what we do and people are fixated on these culturally, then the question is, how do we incorporate those things on a bike trail and with biking? Because we have an obesity crisis in our country, we should take the resources and infrastructure we do have *now* and identify how to get more people out there walking briskly, biking, skating, or jogging and using the paths."

To help out, *Harvard Magazine* suggests five relatively car-free vacations in New England that hold something of interest for everyone. (Or, to design your own trip, visit the comprehensive website of car-free options created by the regional office of the Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/NE/topics/air/carfree.html.)

Flagstaff Lake near Rangeley, Maine

By boat, hike, and mountain bike

Imagine paddling a canoe 740 miles across the top of New England, from the Adirondacks to the Canadian border. This largely wilderness tract, known as the Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT), is surprisingly close to home, yet offers labyrinthine waterways and true North Woods beauty, along with black bears, moose, bobcats, and soaring birds of prey.

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"We have people who do the whole 740-mile trail; they are the 'through paddlers' and are kind of the heroes. Others do the whole thing, but take different trips in pieces," says Kate Gunness Williams, executive director of the nonprofit NFCT, based in Burlington, Vermont.

For the rest of us, the NFCT has created 13 maps that neatly cover sections of the trail, each complete with destinations, recommended outfitters, lodgings, resources, and area attractions that make navigating this northern frontier feasible enough even for families with younger children.

One such trip is on and around Flagstaff Lake (Map 9). The 20,000-acre lake was created by the construction of the Long Falls Dam on the Dead River; several villages were flooded at the time, and visitors can still spot relics from old homesteads in the shallower waters. The lake offers majestic views of Bigelow Mountain (among Maine's highest peaks) and access to the Appalachian Trail, along with fishing, swimming, campsites, and two new huts that provide healthy food and comfortable beds. The huts, operated by the nonprofit Maine Huts and Trails, are the first of 12 planned to extend across 180 miles of hiking and mountain-biking trails, akin to a European alpine system. The existing huts have parking lots and trailheads on the shoreline, but are also accessible by boat along two- to five-mile routes. This is also the first season that Maine Huts has partnered with a pontoon operator based in Stratton who ferries people to and from one hut three days a week.

Ideally, visitors will park a car at a boat launch, paddle to a campsite or a hut, and take off from there on short or numerous expeditions—especially along the rugged Appalachian Trail—into some of the most glorious natural beauty New England has to offer.

www.northernforestcanoetrail.org
www.mainehuts.org
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Boston to Portland, Maine—and even Canada

By train, bike, bus, and boat

The only passenger train to Maine, the Downeaster, runs five round trips a day

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Cyclists of all levels can enjoy the coastal Eastern Promenade Trail in Portland.

COURTESY OF PORTLAND TRAILS

from Boston to Portland. Although the train itself belongs to Amtrak, the route is run by the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA), which is good news because, unlike most Amtrak trains, the Downeaster allows bikes on board with advance reservations, making it possible to go from Boston to multiple points north—as far as the legs will travel. (See website for details.)

If a shorter trip appeals, the Downeaster's earlier station stops include Durham, New Hampshire, where a frequent shuttle bus service (which is run by the state university and takes bikes) goes to nearby Portsmouth—a desirable biking destination with beaches, restaurants, lodgings, parks, and the historic Strawberry Banke neighborhood. Or get off a bit later, at the Old Orchard Beach depot, and grab a shuttle for a day or two of swimming and sunning there.

The trip from Boston to Portland takes two hours. A city bus can then carry visitors to a range of spots, including the Old Port downtown, where select restaurants and galleries commingle with the usual T-shirt and ice-cream venues. Portland's other lures include the Portland Sea Dogs (minor league baseball), the Portland Art Museum, a working lobster-boat excursion, and a visit to the octagonal Portland Observatory, the last maritime signal tower in the United States.

Biking around the city is a lot of fun, especially as civic leaders and activists there continue to make it safer, easier, and more beautiful to ride, thanks to a series of pathways, including the central 2.1-mile Eastern Promenade Trail that follows Casco Bay, and the Bayside Trail now in the works. The Casco Bay Ferry Line (which allows bikes) travels to local islands, including Peaks Island (where businesses are within walking distance of the dock) and then on to Little Diamond, Great Diamond, and finally, Cliff Island, where most residents do not use cars.

For those craving international adventure, the high-speed CAT ferry typically leaves Portland at 8 A.M. and arrives in Yarmouth, at the southern tip of Nova Scotia, by 1:30 P.M. Bikes are allowed—and

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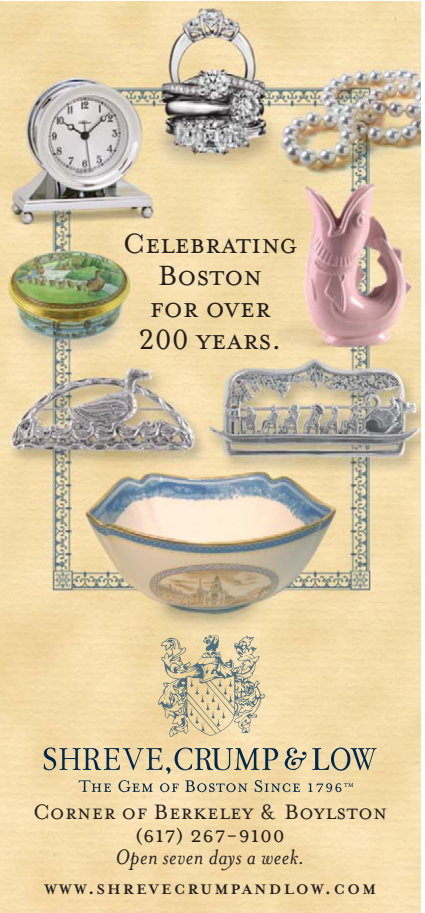

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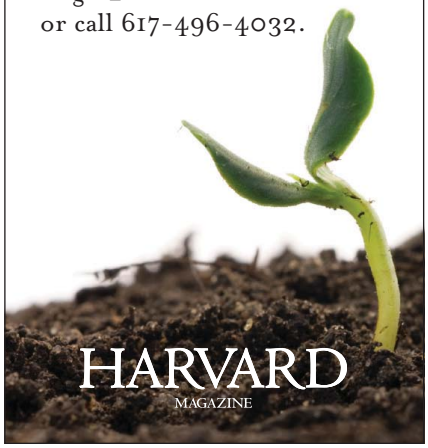

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even encouraged—as bike touring is gaining in popularity there.

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Mystic, Connecticut

By train, boat, and bike

This picturesque mid-coast village, easily accessible by Amtrak trains, offers not only the multifaceted Mystic Seaport, but boat rentals to explore the eponymous river, a shuttle bus, and a new cooperative bikes program—which means the whole area around the adjacent town of Stonington can be explored over several days without bothering with a car.

At the seaport, antique vessels, tall ships, and other historic boats are on display, while visitors can also witness preservation in action: conservators are currently working on the *Charles W. Morgan*, the last wooden whaling ship in the world. In addition, an extensive nineteenth-century village creates a tangible history of seacoast life; there are also an aquarium and planetarium, a museum for young children, and a series of gardens, including a sweet patch of plants named for animals (e.g., "lamb's ears"). "People think when they've been here once, they've 'done Mystic,'" says the seaport's public-relations director, Michael O'Farrell. "But there's always a reason to come back."

Mystic Cycles rents bikes, but visitors can also take a water taxi to "Downtown" Mystic (a half a mile away), which has shops, restaurants, and pretty walks through residential streets. Visitors can also stop at one of the Mystic Community Bikes kiosks and, for a $10 deposit, receive a bike, a helmet, and a lock—then tour the area for as long as they like. A public bus operates during the week, shuttling people around town—and to stately Stonington Borough, where art and antique shops, marinas, restaurants, and historic homes abound.

From the Amtrak station, you can walk to the seaport itself (one mile), as well as

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to closer bed and breakfasts and a few choice hotels, including The Inn at Mystic and The Taber Inne, which have swimming pools. There's a thriving restaurant scene; one favorite is the Italian bistro Anthony J's; for a water view try the S & P Oyster House.

For an interesting side trip, take a taxi 10 miles south to New London and hop on the ferry to Block Island, where bike rentals are seasonally available within walking distance of the dock. A cross between Maine and Cape Cod, the island offers natural beauty and quiet space for meditative arts—along with an active nightlife, restaurants, and other artful entertainment.

www.mysticseaport.org
http://mysticcyclecentre.com
www.mysticcommunitybikes.org
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www.innatmystic.com
www.longislandferry.com/bif/home.htm
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Newport, Rhode Island

By boat, bus, bike and—with a little more effort—train

One of the most beautiful warm-weather routes to Newport is the hour-long water-taxi ride from Providence, which docks at Perrotti Park. From there, visitors can walk, rent bikes, hail a pedicab, or hop on a city bus to explore pretty much all of this summertime hotspot. For *totally* car-free travel, you can also take Amtrak to Providence and a shuttle bus or taxi to the ferry.

Because Newport is congested with cars in the summer, parking is tight and officials actually encourage non-car travel. The most popular tourist sites—the mansions, the Cliff Walk, and the International Tennis Hall of Fame—are easy to get to, as are other recommended attractions, such as Rough Point, Doris Duke's home (rotating exhibits include the current *Shop Like an Heiress,* featuring a collection of haute couture), the historic Touro Synagogue (the oldest in the United States), and the International Yacht Restoration School, where visitors can see expert shipwrights return vessels to their glory days. The august Newport Historical Society also offers richly narrated walking tours of all kinds, including "Newport's Buried History: Slavery and Freedom" and "Tastes of the Working Waterfront."

Also outdoors, numerous beaches beckon (Gooseberry is well-kept, with calm waters, while Second Beach, technically in next-door Middletown, offers a little more wave action. Both are bikeable; at Gooseberry you save the car-parking fee.) Or go farther afield to the stunning oceanfront Brenton Point State Park, favored by joggers, picnickers, and kite-fliers of all ages. The Fort Adams State Park offers a swimming beach, fort tours, and the unusual Museum of Yachting, with new exhibits on the art of scale models, the history of the America's Cup, and an in-depth look at the 1885 *Coronet* (being restored at the yacht school).

At the park, visitors can board a sepa-

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Sailboats in Newport Harbor

rate ferry that tours the bay, stopping at Rose Island and Jamestown, or they can go back to downtown Newport to get yet another ferry to Block Island. (All the ferries take bikes, as do the local buses.) So accessible is summertime Newport without a car that during the high season a pedicab company transports people (on weekends until 2 A.M., for those engaged in the town's heralded nightlife). After all this, if you crave an alternative route home, opt for the Peter Pan bus line to a range of destinations, including Boston—only $24 one way.

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Greater Boston

THE CITY'S car-free travel options are truly limitless. The commuter-rail system, for one, offers rides to more than 120 destinations, and typically takes bikes on board (check website for details).

For the best beaches, take the Newburyport/Rockport Line up to Ipswich, where a summer-season shuttle bus meets riders and takes them to Crane Beach, or get off at Manchester-by-the-Sea for Singing Beach. Farther away, Newburyport offers a Nantucket-like downtown, and a beautiful bike ride along the causeway out to Plum Island, where marshlands and beach trails wind through conservation land. To reach the coast south of Boston, hop on the Greenbush Line to Nantasket Junction and bike to Hull's beach and concrete walkway (the old-time carousel and Saporito's Florence Club Restaurant are fun), or to the exquisite oceanfront World's End, which has trails, woodlands, and dramatic views of the Boston skyline. Hingham's small but thriving harbor area offers excellent restaurants (Star's, Tosca's, and the Square Café), or roam the small beach looking for treasures.

Several ferry companies run boats from downtown Boston's wharves, accessible by bike or public transportation. The Harbor Islands (National Park lands) offer interesting urban history, walking trails, beaches, and even overnight camping. The boat to Salem, a much sweeter ride than the Route 1 traffic affords, lands within bikeable distance (bring your own or hop on a pedicab) to the historic seaport area, the House of Seven Gables, the Peabody Essex Museum, and Willows Park, a grassy and wooded expanse that juts into Salem Harbor—perfect for picnics, games, or simply taking a siesta. Also easy is the high-speed ferry to Provincetown, where pristine beaches and open skies meet fine dining, lodgings, and robust arts and culture.

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