

Scott Burns' Cruising Guide to Mount Desert Island

3/29/2009

[As usual, MHSa takes NO RESPONSIBILITY for the reliability of the navigation directions suggested here. In recent years many Aids to Navigation have been removed, relocated or their characteristics have been changed. Skippers must consult an up-to-date chart and do your own navigating.]

On a rainy Sunday afternoon, the second day of our vacation, I'm sitting in our cabin with a fire going, Kathleen is asleep on the sofa and I look to the south and see the ice bound Rangeley Lake. To the north is the snow covered Saddleback Mountain ski area. Most normal people would head south for warmer weather. So are we normal?

I can't help but think that in a few short weeks we all are going to be working on our boats. By June most will be in the water getting ready for the summer sailing season.

I feel honored to be a part of the MDI (Mount Desert Island) flotilla planning group. However, before I offer suggestions on what to do in Acadia, I would like to share a little about being a young boy growing up in a place once called Eden.

I'm a native of Bar Harbor, born and raised in Bar Harbor. I started lobstering with my father when I was 10 and at 13 had my own trap line and used my father's 38' Novi boat to haul back on. Back in those days we didn't have any navigation devices except RDF's (radio direction finders). Dad wouldn't let my brother and me go without knowing how to run by a compass. I fished until my late teens when I changed careers.

My brother, 3 years younger, started at about the same age and fished with me. Steve still lobsters out of BH today. Together, Steve and I fished Frenchmen Bay and the surrounding waters and we played among the burned out ruins of the now infamous summer homes, places like the Malvern and Belmont hotels, Mary Roberts Rinehart Cottage and more.

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Isles des Monts Deserts:

From the first inhabitants of the region dating back 6000 years to the Native American Indian tribes: the Wabanaki, Penobscot and Abenaki; to the French explorer, Samuel de Champlain in 1604, to the settlement established in 1763 by Israel Higgins and John Thomas, Bar Harbor has an interesting and fascinating history. Native Americans called the region Pemetic meaning "sloping land". Champlain referred to the area as Isles des Monts Deserts, meaning "island of barren mountains". In 1796, the community was incorporated as Eden and finally became known as Bar Harbor in 1918.

Acadia National Park:

Acadia National Park is a land of contrast and diversity. Comprised of a cluster of islands on the Maine coast, Acadia is positioned within the broad transition zone between eastern deciduous and northern coniferous forests and hosts several species and plant communities at the edge of their geographic range. Steep slopes rise above the rocky shore including Cadillac Mountain which at 1,530 feet is the highest point on the U.S. Atlantic coast. While surrounded by the ocean, the entire fabric of Acadia is interwoven with a wide variety of freshwater, estuarine, forest, and intertidal resources, many of which contain plant and animal species of international, national and state significance.

The Father of Acadia:

George B Dorr, the Father of Acadia National Park, an early environmentalist, began to agitate for some sort of control on the rapidly increasing development in the Bar Harbor area. The region became extremely popular with the wealthy in the later 1880s and magnificent summer estates were built in the area. Many of these extravagant "cottages" were lost in the fire of 1947 while others have been renovated into inns and bed and breakfasts.

Rockefeller Roads:

The remarkable carriage road system began in the early 20th century when Harvard President Charles Elliot, George Dorr and young John D

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Rockefeller began a life-long connection with what became Acadia National Park. Rockefeller dreamed of building a network of horse drawn carriage roads that would provide some of the most beautiful views on earth. Acadia's carriage roads are graced with 26 impressive granite bridges and are comprised of 57 miles of roads intertwined with over 100 miles of pre-existing hiking trails.

October 1947 Fire:

1947 was the year Maine burned and MDI was no exception. The fire in Acadia National Park ended the wealthy landowner era for good and cemented Acadia's future.

Caused by extreme drought, strong winds, and human carelessness, this horrible fire burned 17,000 acres for over 2 weeks. One third of the forest on Mount Desert Island was lost. You can still see where the new forest stops and the old forest begins along the Ocean Drive down by Otter Cliffs.

The fire caused extensive property damage... in fact, most of the famous summer cottages owned by the wealthy perished in the blaze. An era ended that year. The 1947 fire also changed the face of Acadia forever.

Cruising to MDI:

Swan's Island:

A good stopping off point would be Swan's Island in Mackerel Cove. Mackerel Cove offers good protection from the south and southwesterly breezes. You can go deep into the cove. The depth is 10' MLW and the bottom is mud and offers good holding ground. Honor green can (GC"3") as there is a ledge covered at high tide.

Just slightly to the northwest of Roderick Head in Mackerel Cove is a much smaller cove (Libby Cove is the local name) that fills up quickly. The Swan's Island Auto Ferry docks on the northeast side of Mackerel Cove and is noisy in the day.

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Bass Harbor:

Bass Harbor is on the southwest side of MDI. It is home to the Morris Yacht Company and they have moorings available. When entering Bass Harbor from the south stay east of Lopaus Point keeping the red nun (RN "2") on your starboard side. Observe the green can east of Weaver Ledge. **DO NOT VENTURE BETWEEN THE BUOYS!** I have seen many boats on their side on this ledge.

Thurston's Lobster Pound Restaurant is located on the west side of Bass Harbor. We sent many of our guests to this lobster pound for the Maine experience. Regardless of what the cruising guide says Bass Harbor is much in need of dredging. There has been talk of doing this but politics has been an issue and I wouldn't feel comfortable there. Bass Harbor doesn't offer much protection from the southerly breezes.

When leaving Bass Harbor and crossing Bass Harbor Bar use caution. A nasty chop can develop when the wind opposes the tide. The depth across the bar is 8', however, there is a fairway channel with a red/white (RW "WB" Gong) on the west side and a red/white (RW "EB" Bell) on the east side. You will sail by the famous Bass Harbor Head Light.

Once past the bar, things should settle down and head for Western Way green can (G "1" Fl G 4s Gong). Be sure to keep Long Ledge well to port. Along this path you will see the famous seawall and pass by Ships Harbor. The name is misleading.

Then steer northeast to the red nun (RN "4") southwest of Cranberry Ledge off Great Cranberry Island. Observe the green can (GC "5") just north of RN "4". Set a course north to the red/white fairway buoy (RW "SP" Mo(A) Gong) west of Spurling Point on Great Cranberry Island.

Southwest Harbor:

Southwest Harbor and Manset have town moorings, anchoring is not allowed. Hinckley & Manset Yacht Yards are next to each other and

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have moorings, however, their location is exposed to easterly winds and they are about 3 miles from town. The Island Explorer does not pass by either yard. It could be a long walk. I recommend docking at Dysart's Marina located at the head of the harbor. Beal's Lobster Pound and Hamilton Marine and Dive Shop is located next to the Coast Guard Base. Southwest Harbor can be roly from the east winds. Contact the harbormaster in each town for available moorings.

You can pick up the Island Explorer at the top of the hill near Dysart's Marina. West Marine has a store there.

Somes Sound:

Leaving Southwest Harbor you can travel two ways up into the sound. You may sail on the either side of Greening Island. I prefer the east side. Once past the green can (GC "5" Fl G 2.5 sec) water depth is 50'+. To the west is Acadia National Park; to the east are summer cottages.

Just northwest of Greening Island and Connor Pt. is the world famous Claremont Hotel and Restaurant, a small ocean side café and croquet green. If you time it right, the mouth of the Sound is a great place to watch the Friendship sloop races.

About a 1/3 of the way up the sound on the left is Valley Cove. The cove is small and deep. There is a Coast Guard mooring buoy. If anchoring I strongly suggest you use an anchor line and tie your stern off on shore. There is very little swing room. The water depth is 50'+. I would strongly suggest a trip line on your anchor. The bottom is rocky. On the northwest side of Valley Cove is Man-O-War Brook.

Back in the days of sail man-o-war ships would pull along side the brook and fill their water barrels. There are great hiking trails. Flying Mountain is to the south and Acadia Mountain is to the north of Valley Cove.

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Half way up the sound on the west side is Jock Williams Boat Yard. They have guest moorings. I had a bad experience with them so I don't recommend them. At the head of Somes Sound is Able Lobster Pound and Boat Yard. Northwest of Sargent Point is the entrance to Somes Harbor. Anchoring is limited and good in mud. Getting up inside of Somes Harbor can be tricky.

I don't recommend anchoring in Somes Sound. The water is very deep and most anywhere when the wind blows from the south you can expect higher than predicted wind conditions funneling up the Sound. Somes Harbor and Able Boat Yard is a great place to ride out any Northeasters and hurricanes.

Northeast Harbor:

Northeast Harbor is by far the best hurricane hole you can pick. Knowing that, if one hits while the fleet is around MDI, I strongly suggest you reserve a mooring well in advance. Moorings are limited and there is no anchoring in the harbor. Morris Yachts has a repair yard with slips and moorings. You can contact the harbormaster or Morris Yachts for mooring info. (Word has it that Northeast Harbor will be under construction -- upgrading docks, moorings and dredging the harbor this summer.)

A great 2.5 hour boat tour, The Sea Princess, leaves from the Northeast Harbor Town Dock. Check sailing times with the harbormaster.

Leaving Northeast Harbor leave Bear Island Light to port. Bear Island Light is owned by a dentist from CT. South of Bear Island Light is Sutton Island. On the Northwest tip is the worlds largest osprey nest sitting high on a ledge. Then turn your boat to the east.

Sail along Eastern Way. You will see many new and old summer cottages that survived the '47 fire. One old home is the Rockefeller cottage on the left side of Seal Harbor. At the head of the harbor lies a

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sand beach and on the right is the Seal Harbor Yacht Club. Martha Stewart may be there. The town dock is nearby.

Leaving Seal Harbor you can sail between the R "4" Bell and East Bunkers Ledge green can (GC "3A") steering to the northeast past Otter Cove. Don't be tempted to enter this cove. It has an unmarked bar across it. At this point you will start to see the Park Loop road. After passing Otter Cove you will see Otter Cliffs. Just below Otter Cliffs is G "1" Bell. Leave it to port or sail on the inside close to the shore along the world famous Ocean Drive. Pass by Thunder Hole, Sand Beach, and on either side of Old Soaker Ledge.

There was a sailing ship that wrecked on that ledge and drifted on to Sand Beach. The sand dunes cover the wreck today but after a good Nor'easter you can see the ribs. Sand Beach is not a real sand beach. The sand is fine sea shells ground up from the wave action off the ledges.

Once clear of Old Soaker Ledge you will see Great Head. I remember as a young boy hiking along this oceans cliff edge and playing in an old brick tea house. The National Park Service dismantled it sometime in the late 60s.

From Great Head to Bar Harbor this part of the shore is called "along the shore or down the shore" depending on which way you're traveling as the locals call it. From Great Head you will see Old Whale Ledge, then on by Schooner Head. Once past this part of the shore you will see the High Seas cottage.

From just north of Otter Cliffs to Bar Harbor the '47 fire leveled everything except the High Seas estate. This is the only building that didn't burn in the '47 fire. Ask Scott about the history of this grand summer cottage, now owned by the Jackson Lab.

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Pass by Schooner Head on the outside of Newport Ledge green can (GC "5"). At this point you can go on either side of Thrumcap Island. Water depth is 8' MLW but I have never seen any grounding. The little cove there and the land behind it once belonged to Joe Pulitzer. His cottage was destroyed by fire. This cove is known as Sealy Cove.

From this point the next cove is Compass Harbor. It's a small cove. Once in the cove there are remains of an estate cottage destroyed by the fire. On its shore is what remains of a granite saltwater swimming pool. We used to play on the beach when we were kids. It was a great place to enjoy the ocean. The estate grounds are now owned by the National Park Service.

The next cove around the bend is called Cromwell Cove. On the northern end of the cove is the summer home of Trist Colket, owner of Campbell Soup Co. Sometimes his Hinckley 54 and his new sailboat, Windcrest, built by Hodgdon Yachts in East Boothbay, are moored there.

Off to the right lies the breakwater from a day marker on the west side to Bald Porcupine Island. The exposed island in the middle is well known for spotting for eagles. You can tell an eagle is nearby because the gulls fly all around attacking the eagles.

Some yachtsmen who fail to read the charts have ended up high and dry with holes through the hull crossing the breakwater because it is covered at high water. There is a picture of a cruise liner aground on the northwest side of Bald Porcupine Island. You may find copies in some of the prints shops around town.

During World War II Navy subs used Porcupines Island as target practice. If you look close enough you can see where the torpedoes hit. Cadillac Mountain was used as a secret Radar installation.

From the breakwater up along this shore is an English Tudor home which belongs to the Webber Oil Company executive, Robert Barrett,

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and his wife, Catherine. The house was designed by Fred Savage, a well known architect in the early 20th century. The Atlantean Inn located on Atlantic Ave was his home and show place. In 2001 my family bought this wonderful home and Kathleen and I lived there and ran a B&B. We sold it in 2005.

The next home to the right belongs to artist John Nelson. His home is known as Devilstone Cottage. From the town dock going south there is a shore path to wander along. You can see many of these cottages along this walk. Take this walk with Scott and Kathleen we will give a local history tour of the residents living along the shore path. When Scott asked Kathleen to marry him, she said yes on the lawn of Devilstone Cottage.

You can anchor in Bar Harbor or hook on to a mooring. I would advise a mooring as the harbor can be roly from a southeast wind. You can't get inside the harbor as this is a working harbor with lobstermen, whale watching and sight seeing vessels working the harbor. If you anchor in Bar Harbor be prepared to have cruise ship tenders passing by. You can pick up water at the town dock and fuel at Harbor Side dock just west of the town pier. The dingy float, located on the west side of the town pier, is full of skiffs and is difficult to dock at.

Things to do in Bar Harbor:

All sorts of shops, too many to list. However, there is a Hannaford located on Cottage Street.

Bar Harbor has over 40 restaurants in a square mile. Two local breakfast restaurants we like are Jordan's (famous for blueberry pan cakes) and Two Cats Café both on Cottage Street. Bar Harbor has two natural food stores. One is located on Cottage street across the street from Hannaford's the other is located on Mount Desert Street across from the Village Green. For more info go on to the Chamber of Commerce Website: www.barharborinfo.com

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At low tide a sand bar is exposed from lower Bridge Street to Bar Island. You will see cars driving across the bar. (Every year you hear about a car being left below high mark.) Once on the Bar Island side there is a nice road up to the top of the island. If you hike up to the top of Bar Island you can see Bar Harbor and Cadillac Mountain looking south. To the north is upper Frenchmen Bay and the main land. Once on Bar Island you have about 2 1/2 hours before the tide comes back in. The tide floods on the island side first.

There are 5 Porcupine Islands. It's neat to climb Dorr Mountain and see a lowering fog just over the island tops. Bar Island is one of 5 Porcupine Island. Jack Perkins of A&E TV built a home on the east side of the island. He has since sold it to the Park and the building is just sitting there.

Bus Tours:

Ollie's Trolley and National Park Bus Tours

The Island Explorer bus service is a free bus service supported by donors, to most points in the park and around the island. It does not go to the top of Cadillac Mountain. Check the local bus schedule at the Village Green in the center of town.

Bar Harbor Whale Watching: They have 3 high speed Cats, Acadian sightseeing, Lulu Lobstering and more. This is the same dock I ran a whale watching vessel out of in '97, a 105' Gulf Star single hull vessel.

A visit to the **Criterion Movie Theater** is in order. It's a 1935 – 900 seat Art Deco theater built by George McKay and used during the rum running. My grandfather told many a story of the Criterion and rum running days.

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Sailing upper Frenchmen Bay:

To the west of Bar Island lies the Cat Ferry. Just to the west of the ferry dock is an unmarked ledge (locals call it Kent's Ledge). My father sat on that ledge a few times. The building you see off to the right of Kent's ledge used to belong to Atwater Kent, a well known radio tycoon. The second floor was removed and today the building is a nursing home.

As you go up the shore, Holiday Inn has a marina there and a small sea side café. Further up the bay is the Bluffs and the Bar Harbor Yacht Club. BHYC doesn't have rental mooring but this is where we kept Talisman, our boat, before we came to GIBY.

If you look to the north you will see a wide open bay and Bald Rock. Bald Rock Ledge is marked with a red nun (RN "2") on the southwestern side and a green can (GC "9") on the northern side.

Continue sailing into Eastern Bay and into the narrows. At low tide there isn't much water. Sailing up into the Skillings River watch the charts and stay in the channel. Once up to Pecks Pt. drop sail and motor up into Young's Bay. This is a great place to hide if a hurricane drops in. There are no moorings available.

Sullivan Harbor is a long harbor that narrows up at the northern end. Tidal Falls Lobster Pound is there. However there is a strong current in that area. The many coves and bays are rich in history along this shore. Today, at McNeil Pt. known as the Mount Desert Ferry, there is a boat yard. You can pick up fuel and maybe moor for the night. It is open to a southeast wind.

The Mount Desert Ferry was a stopping off point for the wealthy to get to Bar Harbor. Then one day the dock collapsed because too many people were on the dock. There was loss of life in this accident.

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Leaving Sullivan Harbor towards Bean Island you can sail most anywhere, however, take notice of Green Can "3" just north of Bean Island. At low water is an exposed rock. Two places for a good anchoring spot for the night are behind Bean Island and Back Cove.

When entering Back Cove, keep close to the Waukeag shore on the mainland side. Enter at half tide or higher. There is an unmarked rock in the middle of the harbor entrance. Water depth is about 7' MLW with good holding.

Both coves are protected from southerly breezes. If the wind comes around to the northwest, it can be a wild night as the winds tend to increase channeling down the bay.

Sorrento Harbor:

Entering Sorrento Harbor from the west between the mainland and Dram Island the water depth is 15' MLW. The harbor is small and has two guest moorings, first come first served. They are located on the north and western end of the harbor. They are marked with lobster buoys. The bottom shoals up quickly on the eastern side. Don't be tempted to cross the bar at high water looking east. There is no fuel or water here. The town is about 1 mile away.

Leaving Sorrento Harbor to the south between Dram Island and Preble Island the water depth is about 25' MLW. Cruise around the SE side of Preble Island back up into the channel on the NE side of Calf Island. About half way down Calf Island is a mooring belonging to the Marlboro Yacht Club. That mooring can be used, however, if a MYC member arrives you have to free the mooring. Farther down Calf Island there is a pier with no float and an old mooring. I have tied to this mooring but that was a few years ago and it didn't look good when I tied to it.

Anchoring in this small cove is mud; holding is good. The tide empties out on the SE tip of Calf Island so anchoring there is not advised. You

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can also anchor NE of Stave Island Cove just above Stave Island. At low water is a bar that goes across between Stave Island and the mainland.

There is a small community on Calf Island, but no one lives there. If you go ashore you will find a small garage with a tractor inside. Look to the left and you will see a road going up a hill. Hiking that road about half way is another road off to the right. At the end is a meeting house type of building. The doors are open, it's kind of strange because there is no furniture, chairs, nothing, and it's just a building.

Continuing up the first road at the top of the hill is the most magnificent view of Mount Desert Island. There you will find bunk houses, mess hall and general living quarters. The island belongs to the Gamble family of Proctor and Gamble Co.

I have never seen a no trespassing sign and many a kayaker goes here for peace of mind and tranquility of nature. A word of warning for dogs. The rocky beach can be a haven for red jelly fish. We almost learned the hard way with Bernie, our Corgi.

Leaving Calf Island to Flanders Bay sail SE around Half Tide Ledge leaving Green Can "3" on your port side. Turn NNE up into Flanders Bay. The bottom west of Hog Island is rocky and as you proceed up into Flanders Bay just north of Schieffelin Pt. the bottom is soft. There is no fresh water or fuel in this bay.

When leaving Flanders Bay exiting between Calf Is. and Stave Island there is a 3' rock by Green Can "1". Deep draft boats would be wise to exit at half tide or more, otherwise the going is good. Sail south to Long Porcupine Island. There is a small cove to the NE of Long Porcupine Island called the Hop. At low tide there is a rocky bar between the islands.

As kids, the Hop used to be a great place to have lobster picnics. Back then we could build a fire below high tide mark and cook lobster in the

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rough. Today the island is owned by the Park Service and fires are not allowed. However, if known well in advance, I can arrange to have a lobster feed on the Hop. A Sunday would be the best timing.

Steve doesn't fish on Sundays, so in the afternoon I could go to Bah Habah, get the cookah and lobster bring them out to Hop Island and have a feast. We can talk more about that.

Stave Island Harbor is a small fishing village untouched by development. The town dock has 3 to 5' MLW. Anchoring is possible in the northern and southern end. There is a bar across between the SE end of Jordan Island and the mainland.

Sailing in the area around Jordan and Ironbound Island your compass may act funny. Both Islands are loaded with iron. Do these islands when no fog is around. Iron Bound Island is owned by the Blaine Family and is part of the Land Conservation Trust. It can never be developed.

SE of Ironbound Island is the entrance to Winter Harbor. Honor the Buoy system when going along side Grindstone Neck. The annual lobster boat races are usually the first or second weekend in August.

I haven't discussed much of the western side of MDI. There is not much there and as you get up inside you have the Union River up to Ellsworth and to the east you have the Narrows. The tide empties out in this part of the bay and when the wind blows from the south it gets lumpy.

Sailing in upper Frenchmen bay when the fog sets in on the southern end of MDI is a treat. The sun clears the fog most of the time and the upper bay offers great sailing with great views of MDI.

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Things to do on MDI:

I can't even begin to offer or try to do all the things that Acadia has to offer. I spent a whole summer in 1996 just hiking the trails and seeing the carriage roads of Acadia.

Sieur de Monts Spring Area:

Sieur de Monts Spring area is the heart of the park. Facilities include the Nature Center, the Abbe Museum, and Wild Gardens of Acadia. Set out on one of many historic hiking trails that begin in the area.

Earthquake:

At 8:07 p.m. on Monday, October 2, a minor earthquake of magnitude 3.8 shook the ground around Acadia National Park. The epicenter of the earthquake was located in the Atlantic Ocean just off Great Head, on the eastern side of the park. Damage appeared to be limited to rocks falling on the Park Loop Road, which re-opened on Tuesday afternoon after a brief closure.

The above earthquake followed several small aftershocks that occurred after a first earthquake on September 22 (magnitude 3.4). The epicenter for the September 22 earthquake was located in the park, just off the Precipice Trail parking area on the Park Loop Road. No damage was reported.

According to the Maine Geological Survey, earthquakes in Maine are rare with just 507 earthquakes occurring in the state from 1747 to 1992. During that time, only one other earthquake originated from Mount Desert Island. Most earthquakes that do occur in Maine are minor, and to date none have caused significant damage.

Peregrine Falcons:

If you are interested in peregrines, be sure to stop by the Precipice Trail parking area most days from July 1 through mid-August (ending date varies each year). Weather permitting, a ranger or volunteer will be available with viewing scopes for watching peregrine falcons breeding

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(or attempting to breed) on Champlain Mountain. Stop by anytime between 9 a.m. and noon.

Parking in Bar Harbor:

Bar Harbor is not nice to some of its summer visitors when looking for a parking spot. The time limit at best is 3 hours but most is 2 hours. I'm working on some of my contact in town to see if we can park long term. I'm not sure what the cost would be.

Colleges:

College of the Atlantic is a marine, liberal arts, environmental and biology college. Allied Whale Foundation studies marine mammals. Paul Newman's daughter studied here.

Research facilities:

Mount Desert Island Marine Biological Lab -- marine research.

Jackson Laboratory -- Does cancer research and breeds most of the laboratory mice used for research throughout the world.