


COLUMN**BIKING**

Secret's out: Super cycling on Chebeague

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August 5, 2007

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Why didn't anybody tell me? Whenever I've asked anyone about biking on Chebeague Island, I've received shrugs and mumbles.

It's OK, they say, but you can't see much from the road. Now that I've finally visited for myself, I know what it is. They were all trying to keep this peaceful island jewel to themselves.

I believe in sharing, so the secret is out. Chebeague Island is in fact a lovely island for biking, and it does, in my opinion, have the best beaches in Casco Bay.

It's even made national news recently, too: The island seceded from the town of Cumberland last year and officially incorporated as a town on July 1. So though the island is only about 5 miles long

and 3 miles wide, I decided it was high time to take a bicycle trip around the newest town in Cumberland County.

There are two ferries that serve the island. Casco Bay Lines runs a passenger ferry from downtown Portland to Chebeague, landing at a dock on the southern end of the island. It takes about 90 minutes, and it runs about five times a day.

The Chebeague Transportation Co., or CTC, operates a small passenger ferry from a dock on Cousins Island in Yarmouth.

Though the 15-minute ride doesn't give you much time to enjoy the scenery from the water, it does mean you'll have more time to spend on the island. It also means ferries run far more frequently than the Casco Bay Lines ones. One cautionary note is that the small boat doesn't have all that much room for bicycles. A large group of cyclists might run into problems.

PLAN FOR A WHOLE DAY AWAY

No matter which ferry you choose, it's also a bit on the expensive side, so plan for a full day trip to make the most of it.

Parking is what'll really cost you, so if you can ride your bike from home to the ferry, even better!

We took an early morning trip over on the CTC ferry (cost: \$25 for me, a child and a bike with a trailer). It pulls in to the dock at Stone Wharf, on the northern end of the island. The friendly ferry folks will give you a map if you look hopeless, or you could plan ahead. There are excellent maps available on the Chebeague Island News Web site, www.chebeague.org.

All the streets on the maps are neatly labeled, which only helps to a small degree as I saw no street signs anywhere on the island. You'll need a little bit of map-reading skill or good intuition to find some of the smaller beaches.

Ride up a gentle hill from the dock with a nine-hole golf course to your right. Turn right onto the main road, South Road, to do a clockwise loop around the island.

In just under a mile you'll come to Doughty's Island Market, the town's only store and a gathering place for tourists and locals alike. Picnic tables spread on the lawn between the store and the Island Hall (housing the library and health center) next door make for a perfect place to snack, eavesdrop on island chatter and stock up on drinks.

A SIGHTSEER'S DELIGHT

Heading down island, you'll soon have plenty to look at. Ocean views on your left reveal all the standard coastal stuff we should never take for granted: an artful splattering of islands, working boats, pleasure craft and shorebirds. There's an eyeful to look at along the road as well: a house practically shingled with lobster buoys, the ribs of a boat being built, funky yard art and much more. The slower you go, the more you'll see.

At Mile 2.6, the road bends to the left. You'll pass paved Cottage Road on the right, and at Mile 2.8, an unmarked dirt road which takes you to Chandler Cove and a lovely horseshoe-shaped sandy beach. I passed on this one (so many beaches, so little time) and kept going on the paved road.

At Mile 3.2, the paved road turns 90 degrees to the right, while dirt roads lead left and straight. I followed the paved road through a few turns all the way to the end, to take a look at the Chandler Cove Wharf where the Casco Bay Lines ferry comes in.

Backtracking to the four-way intersection, I turned right (Bennett Cove Road) and headed down this firmly packed dirt road to Bennett Cove. Shaped a bit like the number three, this small cove is divided in half by a little rocky spit that erupts into a bit of greenery atop a rocky outcropping unofficially called The Nubble.

What words come to mind? Idyllic. Peaceful. Private. At the far end of the cove, the shore was sandy, the water was warm, the swimming was fine. At the near end, we beach combed for sea glass and shells. I could have stayed there all day.

Back on the bike, retrace your route back out on paved roads and turn left onto Cottage Road (Mile 3.9). This swings around the southwest tip of the island, and just before the road turns to head back in a northerly direction, you'll see the spectacular hook of land called Indian Point. Turn left (Mile 5.4) to head gingerly down a steep dirt road to get to this sweep of fine sand.

PERFECT BEACH FOR KIDS

At Indian Point, ripples of sand crinkle like potato chips as tiny puddles form and wet sand squelches between your toes. You have to walk out a long way to get your knees wet. This is a perfect beach for little ones. The tide was low during our visit and the shallow shoreline seemed to stretch forever. At dead low tide, you can walk all the way to Little Chebeague Island. Now deserted, this tiny isle once sported military buildings, hotels and summer cottages.

The ride (or, I'll admit it, the walk) up the hill back out is steep but short. Turn left and ride north, passing the recreation center and pretty United Methodist church. The road surface is extremely uneven and bumpy here.

At Mile 8, just before a paved road appears on the right, you'll come to Calder's Clam Shack. It is indeed a shack, but the menu is extensive and appealing. You can have seafood, of course, but also sandwiches, salads and, most importantly, ice cream.

HARD PLACE TO LEAVE

Ride another half-mile back to the main road you rode out on (South Road) and turn left. I passed the road back to the dock and kept going uphill, past the former Chebeague Island Inn on the left and Sunset Inn Bed and Breakfast on the right.

Over the crest and down the hill, the road then bends sharply to the right (Mile 9.2). After this bend, the paved road continues to the left and a dirt road (Willow Street) carries on straight. Take the dirt road to the end and you'll see yet another broad and impressive sweep of sand with views of islands large and small, boats plying the waters and families enjoying the fine sand of Hamilton Beach.

We pedaled back uphill and then cruised fast down Stone Wharf Road, just catching the ferry in the nick of time. It was hard to leave.

Total miles: about 10. It's not about the biking, really, but more that a bike is the best way to get around this easygoing island. A hybrid or mountain bike is recommended for the uneven pavement and dirt roads.

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). For photos of this ride, or to post comments or ask questions, visit her biking blog at:

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