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OUTDOORS

A midcoast slice of vintage Maine

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Melissa Kim photo

Holbrook's Lobster Wharf and Grille sits up on the pier so you can enjoy your seafood while the tide comes in or out right underneath you.

In the prevailing spirit of the "staycation," here's a close-to-home bicycle ride that starts at Thomas Point Beach in Brunswick and takes you to Cundys Harbor in Harpswell.

Both these spots are vacation destinations in and of themselves, making this an enjoyable day trip. You'll have two great end points where you can enjoy all the pleasures of the New Meadows River.

One of the things I've noticed about the tidal rivers that sandwich the long, skinny, finger-like peninsulas in midcoast Maine is their ocean-like nature. Linger along the banks of the Sheepscot, the Kennebec or the Damariscotta and you might be fooled into thinking you are at the ocean's edge. The New Meadows River has this quality as well. Clammers hunch in mud flats. Ospreys protect their nests with shrill cries. Lobster pounds and pleasure boats dot the shoreline.

Thomas Point Beach sits near the head of Thomas Bay, a stone's throw from the New Meadows. When I was there one morning recently, low tide had brought out dozens of clammers who were raking away just off the beach. A tall straight pole at one end of the park is home to a nesting osprey who had a lot to say that morning.

Thomas Point Beach is a pretty, private park and 75-site campground with ample parking and a small sandy beach, home to many major summer events including the annual Bluegrass Festival in August. There's a main lodge with a snack bar, ice cream shop and arcade, open Friday through Sunday. On weekdays a "Loose Caboose" snack bar outside serves hotdogs, drinks and ice cream. There are bathrooms, a playground and a shower building, handy after a hot ride. Admission is \$3.50 for adults and \$2 for children under 12. The park is open from 9 a.m. until sunset every day.

To get here, take Route 1 to Cooks Corner in Brunswick and head south on Route 24 toward Orrs and Bailey Island. Drive 2.5 miles on Route 24 and turn left onto Board Road. In half a mile, turn left at the end onto Meadow Road. The entrance to Thomas Point Beach is about a half a mile ahead on the right.

Ready to ride? This route is a 17.6-mile out-and-back ride with moderate hill climbing and some areas of heavy traffic. In other words, it's not for families with small kids or for people who are uncomfortable riding near fast-moving cars.

Saddle up and head out of the park, turning left on Meadow Road and right on Board Road. At Route 24, cross with care and turn left. This road can be very busy, especially on summer weekends, and cars do zip along at 50 or 60 mph. There is, however, a smooth, wide shoulder and soon you'll have plenty to look at. At Mile 3, you'll pass the Gumet Trading Company lobster restaurant and cross the bridge over Gumet Strait onto Great Island.

Here's where the sense of ocean begins, as docks tilt down to the water's edge, buoys bob everywhere like a connect-the-dot painting and fishing boats purr along.

At Mile 4.0 there's a well-marked left turn onto Cundys Harbor Road. This woodsy country road is a series of ups and downs, only a few of which are very steep, granny-gear quality hills. Still, it's enough to feel like you are getting a workout. According to Bikely.com, where I've started plotting my routes, the total elevation for this route is 1,090 feet climbing and total descent of 1,116 feet. It really does all even out in the end.

At Mile 5.3 you'll pass pretty Cranberry Horn Cemetery and the edges of the village begin to appear. A sign on a barn proudly proclaims Cundys Harbor as the home of Maine's first commercial lobstering in 1841. You know this is a community proud of its fishing heritage; in fact, it's a community so invested in its heritage as well as its future that it formed the Holbrook Community Foundation to save the village's anchor, Holbrook's Wharf.

The property, which includes the general store, the commercial fishing wharf, a restaurant, moorings, parking and a nearby historic home with two apartments, came up for sale in 2002. Five local women came up with the idea to buy the property and started to gather support, first from Harpswell residents and then from local businesses. As the idea gained momentum, the foundation secured support, advice and money from individuals, land conservation groups, state and municipal agencies, and a statewide community loan fund. The foundation bought the property in 2006 and now leases the restaurant and store, as well as a portion of the wharf. Their innovative plan, to conserve land and a village center with a working waterfront while generating income, seems to be coming to fruition.

As you ride into the center of Cundys Harbor (the public road ends at Mile 8.8), you'll see the general store, wharf and restaurant. The store is everything you want a general store to be. It's open 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays and 7:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekends. There are a few comfy chairs, old Coke signs, coffee, and just about anything else you could want -- even, as a sign advertises, WiFi access.

The restaurant, Holbrook's Lobster Wharf and Grille, sits up on the pier so you can enjoy your seafood while the tide comes in or out right underneath you. It's open in the summertime from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Next door, you could easily spend time and money browsing at Hawkes Lobster and Gifts. I spent a good while trying to figure out if I could carry a large mirror with a seaglass frame back on my bike.

The smell of saltwater mingled with honeysuckle and beach roses as I rode uphill out of the village, leaving Cundys Harbor behind with regret. The road back, with its ups and downs, seemed longer this way, and the hill after the Great Island bridge seemed steeper. I retraced my route back to Thomas Point Beach, took off my bike shoes and put my toes in the sand. Just as I was contemplating a nap, the osprey screeched.

FREE WHEELING

Here are some bicycling events to consider for the month of July.

National and Maine Bike Rally, Fryeburg, Friday through July 13.

The 20th Annual Maine Bike Rally will take place this year at Fryeburg Academy. Chosen as the League of American Bicyclists' National Rally, the event features three days of guided road and mountain bike rides in beautiful western Maine and New Hampshire's Mount Washington Valley for all levels of cyclists plus a long weekend of family entertainment, including a bicycle parade, ice cream social and more. Registration fees start at \$70 (less for children) and include camping, meals and all rides. Local riders from Fryeburg area towns ride for free, thanks to an L.L. Bean sponsorship. For more information, visit www.BikeMaine.org or call 623-4511.

Explore the Eastern Trail, Scarborough and Old Orchard Beach, July 14.

A new section of the Eastern Trail opened on July 1, adding another 1.6 miles to the trail that aims to connect Kittery to South Portland. Eastern Trail Alliance President John Andrews will introduce cyclists to the new section of trail, riding from the Nonesuch River across Scarborough Marsh into Old Orchard Beach to Milliken Mills Road. It's a family-friendly round trip of 13 miles on mostly flat, mostly off-road wide stone dust road. Meet at the Eastern Trail parking lot near Scarborough Marsh on Pine Point Road at 10 a.m. No fee, no reservations necessary, and Andrews says he'll go no matter what the weather. For more information call 282-1979.

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). She welcomes comments at bikes@melissakim.com or on her biking blog at outdoors.maintoday.com/biking/melissakim.

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