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Sunday, July 18, 2004

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Peaks Island tour turns summer visitors into easy riders

By MELISSA KIM,

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Summer's in full swing now and with the nice weather and long days come the inevitable guests: all those friends and long-lost cousins who introduce themselves when summer comes to the Maine coast. What to do with them?

If you want to offer them a fun, easy, accessible outdoor experience, you can't go wrong with a bike tour of Peaks Island. A loop around the entire island is only four miles long, with two very short hills. It's great for families, with kids in trailers, on bike seats, or pedaling under their own steam, as well as older folks. I took my 60-something mother on a ride there recently; she found it the perfect length and had to walk up only one of the hills.

Along the way, you get fantastic views of the islands in Casco Bay. There are beaches to explore and plenty of picnic spots. Supplies and distractions are plentiful; the small village on Peaks has a few restaurants, a grocery store, and a gift shop selling ice cream, as well as a pub/club often featuring live music.

Peaks is also the most easily accessible island in Casco Bay, with ferries running to and from Portland more or less once an hour. Boats leave from the ferry terminal at the corner of Commercial Street and Franklin Arterial in downtown Portland. Check Casco Bay Lines (phone 774-7871 or on the Web at www.cascobaylines.com) for current schedules.

The ferry ride, a scenic tour in and of itself, is only 20 minutes long, so there's no chance to get bored or seasick. A round-trip ticket is \$6 for passengers and \$5 for your bike.

Come off the ferry and head straight up Welch Street just a few hundred yards to the intersection with Island Avenue. This is the heart of the village, and there's a bike rack in the parking lot on your right if you want to lock up your bike while you explore the ice cream stand or get supplies at the market, to the left down Island Avenue.

If you or your summer guest need to rent a bike, turn left to



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visit Brad's Recycled Bike Shop at 115 Island Ave. You can rent bikes of all sizes, including kids' bikes, trailers, baby seats and even tandems; helmets come with each rental. Rates range from \$5 an hour to \$12 for the day, which at Brad's means 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. It's first come, first served and summer weekends get extremely busy, so get there early. Call 766-5631 for more information.

To start a counterclockwise loop around the island, turn right from Welch Street onto Island Avenue. In one-10th of a mile, the road curves sharply to the left and goes up a short steep hill. After another 10th of a mile, turn right onto unmarked Whitehead Street, the second paved road on the right. Just after that, a sharp left-hand curve will put you onto Seashore Avenue.

Bear right, following Seashore Avenue toward the ocean. Here's where the really scenic riding begins, offering up views of Ram Island Light, House Island, Cushing Island and the infinite horizon.

You've now got about two miles of unrestricted ocean views as you ride around the far side of the island, where still more islands in Casco Bay come into view. Watch lobstermen hauling traps, sailors tackling the winds and gulls and other seabirds catching the breeze. The fancy summer homes are all on the left and it's only rocks and seaweed on the right. There are plenty of places to pull over and beachcomb or picnic.

At Mile 2.4, curve left up the only other hill and ride away from the water. You'll come into a residential neighborhood; turn left at the T-junction and continue straight through the next intersection on Trefethen Avenue. You'll immediately come to a junction; turn left onto Island Avenue. Through the houses, you'll get nice glimpses of Great and Little Diamond Island. In 0.7 miles (Mile 3.5), you'll come to a stop sign. Turn right, continuing on Island Avenue, to head back into the village and the ferry terminal.

Melissa Kim, a free-lance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides," due out this winter from Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing. She welcomes comments at: bikes@melissakim.com

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