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Sunday, August 1, 2004

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Skip Acadia`s crowds; Schoodic`s just as scenic

By MELISSA KIM,

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There's no question that Acadia National Park, on Mount Desert Island, is indeed one of the most scenic spots in Maine, and if you haven't biked the carriage roads there, you really should - but just maybe not in August. The park gets overrun by visitors who all want to experience the magical place where the mountains meet the sea.

By far a better summer option is the lesser-explored part of Acadia on the Schoodic peninsula, the only part of the national park that's on the mainland. A ride around this peninsula gives you outstanding, close-up, sea-spray-in-your-face views of islands, lighthouses, sea birds and more.

Depending on where you begin, it's about 13 miles of fairly flat and easy riding on smooth roads, suitable for advanced beginners.

To get there, drive northeast from Ellsworth along Route 1 and Route 186. It's roughly 25 miles on scenic roads through Sullivan and Gouldsboro to Winter Harbor and the park. However, if you're already in Bar Harbor, the best way to beat the crowds and make it a grand day out is to take a ferry across Frenchman Bay. The Bar Harbor Ferry leaves from the pier at the Bar Harbor Inn, just to the right of the municipal pier in downtown Bar Harbor. The ferry ride takes about 20 to 30 minutes, and be advised that on windy days it can be a rough crossing.

The ferry arrives in Winter Harbor on Sargent Street. Head left on Sargent to reach Route 186. A left turn will take you into the center of pretty Winter Harbor, where there are restaurants, a hardware store, supermarket and more. Turning right on Route 186 will take you to the real destination.

Whether you're on your bike or in a car, you'll soon come to Moore Road. Turn right and climb a short hill. In 1.6 miles, you'll reach the Acadia boundary and Frazer Point Park, a lovely coastal spot with a pier, picnic tables and spotless restrooms

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with drinking water. If you're driving, this is the best place to park and start your ride.

You immediately enter the one-way road system and cruise along the western shore of the thumb-shaped peninsula. It's hard to beat the views of the islands and lighthouses in Frenchman Bay. On a clear day, you can easily see the profile of Cadillac Mountain in the distance.

In 2.5 miles, there's an unmarked gravel road on the left. If you've got a hybrid bike, take this road one mile uphill to the top of Schoodic Head. The views from the top of this 440-foot-high hill are worth the trek, either by bike or on foot.

In another mile along the main road, you'll reach a fork; turn right to get to Schoodic Point. Pass by the future home of the Schoodic Education and Research Center on your way to this dramatic point where pink granite slabs with basaltic intrusions stick like tongues into the ocean. Check out the myriad tide pools and spouting waves before riding out the way you came.

Back on the main park road, you'll soon reach another parking area called Blueberry Hill, where you can again explore the coast or hike on a trail inland to a 180-foot-high point called The Anvil. Riding around the eastern edge of the peninsula, the waves quiet down a bit as they meet the pine-edged Schoodic Harbor. You leave the park boundary and ride through pretty Wonsqueak Harbor and Bunkers Harbor.

After all this natural beauty, the convenience stores and gas station in Birch Harbor come as a surprise as you reach the junction with Route 186. Turn left onto Route 186 and ride 1.8 miles back to Moore Road. Turn left and ride the 1.6 miles back to Frazer Point Park (or keep going straight and turn left on Sargent Street if you came by ferry).

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT THE Bar Harbor Ferry Co. (phone 288-2984, Web site www.barharborferry.com). **ROUND-TRIP fares** are \$24 for adults, \$15 for children, plus \$5 for bicycles. **FERRIES LEAVE Bar Harbor** on every even hour (from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.) and return from Winter Harbor on every odd hour (from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.).

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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