

Eden at Sunrise: Flying to and Touring Acadia National Park, Maine

by MATTHEW MCDANIEL

Frenchman Bay bathed in morning civil twilight. The nearest island to the right is Bar Island, immediately north of Bar Harbor's city center.

I quickly silenced the alarm that began chirping at precisely 4 a.m. Even as a morning person, forcing myself from a cozy bed while my wife and kids continued to snooze contently required extra motivation at that hour. The reward was awaiting just outside the door and would unfold over the next 90 minutes. Dressed for the brisk morning air, with a warm drink and camera in hand, I slipped out the door onto the hotel room patio, gazing east as the morning nautical twilight transitioned into civil twilight. A glorious sunrise over the Atlantic Ocean seemed to set the Gulf of Maine ablaze in ever-changing shades of burning red and orange. Fishing and tour boats slipped their moorings as the sea reflected the slow-motion eruption of daylight. Dawn had arrived at Acadia National Park, site of the first sunrise in the Continental U.S.

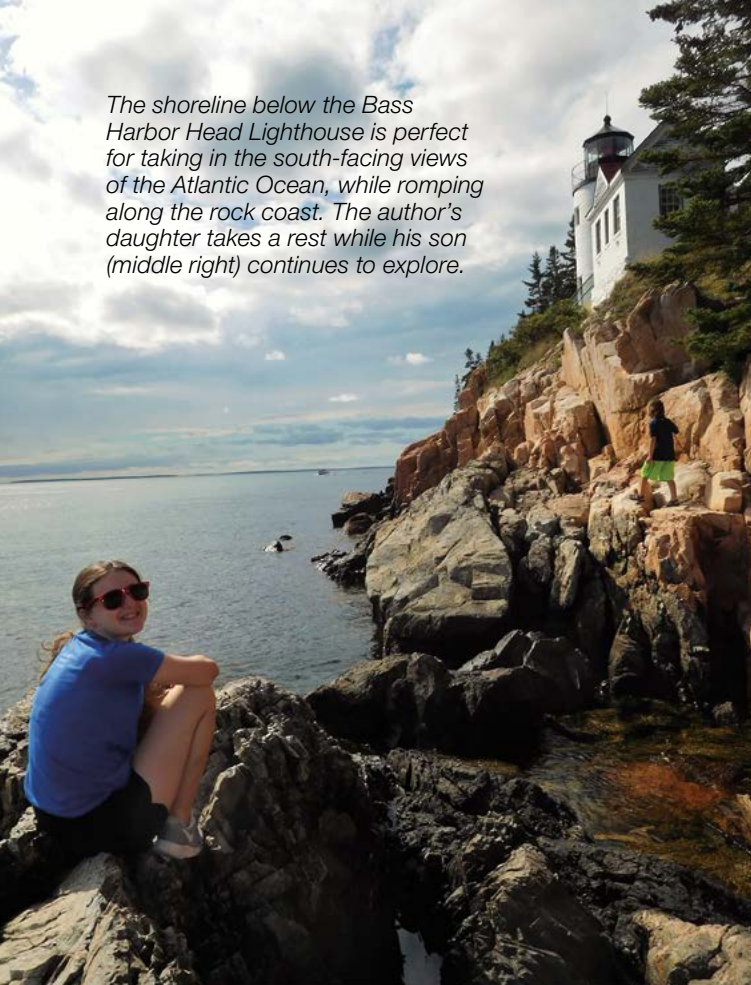
The Maine Idea

Americans often associate their national parks with vast expanses of desolation, from the Rockies westward, yet, many of the National Park System (NPS) gems lie east of the Mississippi River. Some are quite new (like Indiana Dunes, upgraded to a national park in February 2019). Others, like Acadia, have held that status for a century. Almost by definition, many of our national parks are remote and can be challenging to reach. Large commercial airline hubs north of

Boston simply don't exist, limiting commercial flights into the immediate area to connectors only (nondirect). Enter general aviation and its nearly limitless options for taking us to amazing places faster and easier than driving, while providing views vastly different from those of terrestrial tourism. Fortunately, several general aviation airports can get you close to Acadia and provide the necessary services as well.

I first became aware of Bar Harbor, Maine's Hancock Co. Airport (KBHB) back in the early 2000s when I flew Reagan-era Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, in on a charter flight. He was a gregarious elder-statesman and espoused the many virtues of his adopted home. It was the dead of winter and the town and hotel reminded me of the movie *The Shining*, buttoned up as they were for the offseason. But the airport services were excellent, even in those frigid conditions. This far north, tourist season is typically only May through October. Today, FBO services are provided by Columbia Air Services, and include everything a Cirrus pilot might need (rental cars, fuel, tie-downs and hangaring, lounge, flight planning room, etc.). Arrival procedures are straightforward, with an ILS and two RNAV (LPV) approaches and two runways well within Cirrus performance norms. Note that some minimums adjustments are necessary when using nonlocal altimeter settings, which is required when the AWOS is ▶

The shoreline below the Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse is perfect for taking in the south-facing views of the Atlantic Ocean, while romping along the rock coast. The author's daughter takes a rest while his son (middle right) continues to explore.



unavailable at this pilot-controlled field. As an alternative, Bangor's Class C airport (KBGR) is only 30 miles inland. That distance could potentially get you away from coastal weather that might be below your personal minimums for flying into KBHB itself.

Mount Desert Island

Acadia National Park (NP) makes up about half of Mount Desert Island (MDI), half of Isle au Haut, plus 18 smaller islands and a portion of the Schoodic Peninsula, which lies east across Frenchman Bay. Whether you drive from KBHB or KBGR, you'll travel Highway 3 from the mainland and across tiny Thompson Island, where a stop at the Information Center is worthwhile for gathering maps and tourist info for both the park and surrounding areas throughout "Down East" Maine (the local term for most anywhere along the southeastern coast of Maine). Once on MDI, you'll find the majority of resorts, hotels and B&Bs along the northeast coast and within the town of Bar Harbor. We chose the Atlantic Oceanside Hotel, which offered terrific views, a nice evening restaurant and kid-friendly amenities (pool, free breakfast, etc.), all for midrange pricing.

Since we arrived well ahead of check-in time, we chose to drive through the western portions of Acadia to the southernmost point of MDI – Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse. A short wooden staircase takes you down to the rocky

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coastline, where you can ramble across the rocks below the lighthouse while enjoying spectacular views of the Gott Islands (and beyond) across Bass Harbor. Climbing back up, trails are available through the wooded areas and up to the still-functional lighthouse. Built in 1858, the lighthouse is one of four within Acadia, but the only one accessible by car.

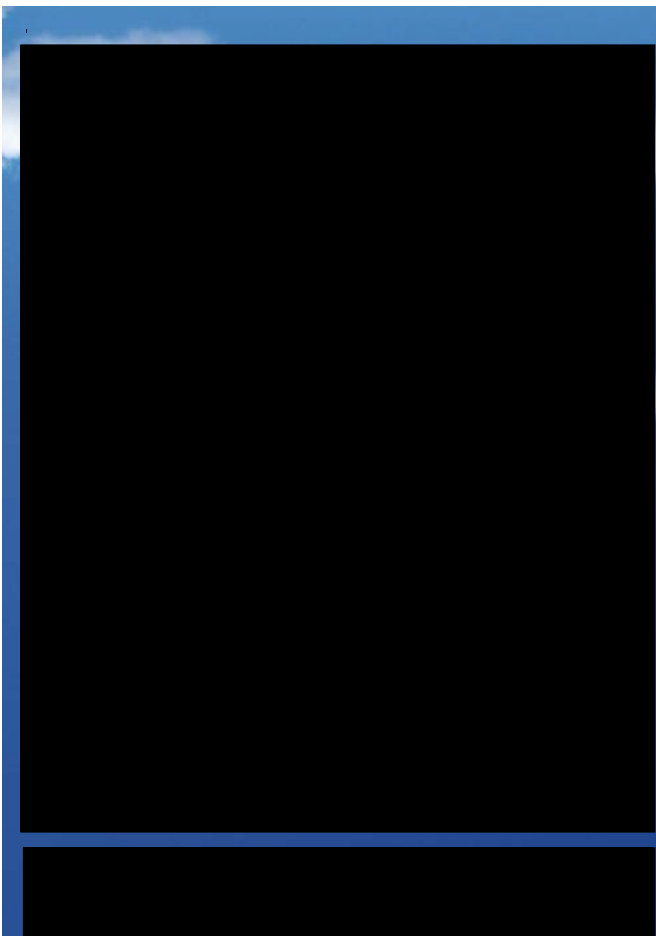
We cruised a scenic route back north, rather than simply retracing our way back. Tiny towns and villages remain scattered across MDI (both within and outside of official park boundaries), providing many excuses for brief stops. The roads are narrow two-lane affairs with a mix of local and tourist traffic. We found traffic to be fairly light on the western half of MDI, even during our August/peak-season visit, proving it sometimes pays to visit the more remote and less publicized sites within a given national park if big crowds aren't your thing. A shortcut across the middle of MDI brought us into Bar Harbor from due west for an evening on the town.

Bar Harbor

MDI has been inhabited for at least several thousand years. The first Europeans arrived in the 1500s and made contact with the Wabanaki natives. French explorer Samuel de Champlain not only founded Quebec and crossed the Atlantic 29 times in his explorations, he also named this area l'Isles des Monts-deserts in 1604. By 1759, the British

had won the power struggle with the French for primary control of the area. In 1796, the first "modern" settlement on MDI incorporated as Eden (known today as Bar Harbor). Situated on the east coast of MDI, Bar Harbor relishes its nearly synonymous identity with MDI and Acadia, making it a matter of semantics to try to distinguish each. As a whole, all proudly proclaim they are the location of the first sunrise on the Continental U.S. This can be a confusing claim, given that none are the eastern- or northern-most points. However, parts of Canada block the sunrise from more northeasterly U.S. locations. Thus, the summit of Cadillac Mountain (MDI and Acadia's highest peak) receives first light at least from Oct. 7 through March 6.

While fishing maintains an employment foothold, Bar Harbor is now the epitome of a tourist economy, well suited for all tastes and wallets. Food and shopping range from the standard tourist-fare to high-end eateries and boutiques, with an emphasis on a wide variety of Maine-lobster and seafood choices. Mostly, you're drawn to the natural beauty of the surroundings – the views of ocean, mountains, islands, peninsulas, quaint city parks and harbor. While, I'm sure there are times when the population of 5,200 is overwhelmed by tourists, that was not our experience. This likely changes when large cruise ships disgorge their passengers at the harbor; cruise ships, tour boats and scheduled ferries to the out-islands and peninsulas are big business here.



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Looking northeast during a morning hike along the Great Head Trail. Egg Rock Lighthouse (circa 1875) warned mariners of the dangers of entering Frenchman Bay via the Mt. Desert Narrows (site of many shipwrecks). Acadia National Park's Schoodic Peninsula in the background.



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The downtown is walkable from nearly any of the public parking areas. Agamont and Grant Parks, plus the Village Green, all beckon you to just lie in the grass and relax, enjoying the view of Frenchman Bay's islands and the various vessels coming and going. At low tide, a wide land bridge provides walking access to Bar Island and the many sandbars and shallow areas you can wade to or from, if you can tolerate the chilly water temperatures. On Bar Island, you can explore via beach combing and wooded hiking trails. Caution should be taken not to overstay your welcome, lest the tide return, trapping you on the uninhabited island overnight!

The Heart of Acadia

Not only was Acadia the first national park east of the Mississippi, it was also the first set aside from exclusively private lands. Wealthy benefactors established a public land trust in 1901 in response to threats of overlogging and other environmental scourges feared by the prominent families who'd established vacation homes on MDI. In 1916, the 5,000-acre Sieur de Monts National Monument was created through cooperation between the trust and the U.S. and French governments. When national park status was granted in 1919, it was renamed Lafayette. A decade later, another renaming labeled it Acadia, a native word meaning "Land of Plenty" and also the name of the first permanent French settlement in North America. Today, it has grown to over 49,000 acres of protected lands.

Armed with some knowledge of the area's history, we embarked upon a day of touring the park's better-known areas via the 27-mile Park Loop Road, which meanders through the more popular eastern half of the park. The famous Precipice Trail is a nearly-1,000-foot vertical and exposed climb up the face of Champlain Mountain, labeled "strenuous." With a rambunctious young son and little safety gear, we skipped it. But, the southeastern point of MDI contains a truly pleasurable hike down to a sand beach – one of the few nonrocky beaches on MDI. After reaching and

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The crystal-clear water of Jordan Pond sparkles while the North and South Bubble peaks provide the backdrop. Park guests can hike to the peaks of both Bubbles ... if they have the stamina.

crossing the beach, we continued along the Great Head Trail, steep and challenging in places, but never more than moderately difficult. The views gained when reaching the heights of this rocky headland were well worth the exertion required and proved to make for a great morning excursion. A short distance further, a wayside stop at Thunder Hole was crowded, but picturesque, even though the calm conditions prevented the buildup of trapped air in the narrow channel from making its thunderous escape, so we pressed on to the 100-foot-tall pink granite cliffs of Otter Point. Further down the Loop Road, we stopped at the Jordan Pond House, site of the only restaurant within the park boundary. Always a popular lunch spot, the nearly perfect warm and calm conditions made dining on the lawn preferable, with its ample seating and amazing view of Jordan Pond and the glacier-scarred Bubble mountains beyond. Be sure to partake of the local fare they've been famous for serving since the 1890s; flaky and delicious popovers with jam and Maine-blueberry infused teas and lemonades (all worth the cheat-day from your low-carb,

low-sugar diet). After overstuffing ourselves, the trails and pathways along the shores of Jordan Pond proved the perfect antidote. At 1.2 miles long, up to 150-feet deep, and covering 187 acres, it is certainly not your typical pond! Jordan's pristine, clear waters and breathtaking vistas encourage you to keep moving just to see what views are hiding around the next bend.

Panoramic Peak

No tour of Acadia or MDI would be complete without a visit to the summit of Cadillac Mountain, either via the curvaceous Cadillac Mountain Road or one of the many hiking trails that converge at the peak (some many miles in length). Cadillac's views down upon MDI and Acadia are all-encompassing, offering a true panorama of the entire area. While a mere 1,530-feet above sea level, no higher peak along the Atlantic Coast exists in the U.S. With parking near the top, the views can be enjoyed while strolling the paved walking path that encircles the peak, offering great photo opportunities in every direction. Unfortunately, over the near century that crowds have flocked to this pinnacle, they've not always been good stewards of it. Be sure to stay on-trail to avoid contributing to the already extensive



The author and family casting shadows atop Acadia National Park's highest peak. The paved loop trail atop Cadillac Mountain provides a 360-degree view of Mount Desert Island and the surrounding waters and islands. Cadillac rises to 1,530 feet above the sea and can be reached via the picturesque Cadillac Summit Road.

loss of soil and vegetation. Careless tourists have put several rare plants at the mountaintop into a threatened status. For any disappointment the calm conditions caused at Thunder Hole, the sedate winds were welcome atop the exposed peak.

Departures and Returns

Acadia National Park offers more to do and see than can realistically be accomplished in a single visit. One must select which of the 125 miles of hiking trails to enjoy (and which match your fitness and equipment

levels). If you prefer biking or horseback riding, you can thank famous American millionaire and philanthropist, John D. Rockefeller. Fearing the park would be overrun by automobiles, he began having narrow stone carriage roads built in 1913. Eventually, they stretched 45 miles through the park and across 17 bridges made from local granite and cobblestones. He also donated more than 10,000 acres for the park. If swimming or water activities are more your thing, there are several ocean beaches and fresh-water valley lakes to enjoy, though they



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remain cool, even in the hottest months. For us, any return visit would hopefully include some carriage road biking and exploration of the Schoodic Peninsula and some of the minor islands.

When your time in Acadia does expire, the drive back to the airport is fairly short – even if you chose the more distant Bangor, versus Bar Harbor. At either locale, a quick call to the FBO can have your plane fueled and awaiting your arrival and rental cars can be returned at the FBO. Departure procedures are as straightforward as arrival options, although you should note the Obstacles Departure Procedures (ODPs). While down-east Maine is certainly not as mountainous as the Rockies, it is a far cry from the Central Plains. ODPs are published for many area runways and care should be given to comply accordingly. If departing KBHB and weather conditions permit, plan a little extra time for a VFR tour of MDI and Acadia's islands and coastlines before turning for home. Remember to adhere to the requested 2,000-foot AGL over protected areas (anything inside a national park boundary). That's plenty low for sightseeing and probably lower than you'd want to be if something went awry over open ocean or rugged islands. Whatever your route home, you'll likely spend much of it mulling your Acadian experiences and contemplating a return trip. ⊕

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Matthew McDaniel is a Master and Gold Seal CFI, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 30 years of flying, he has logged over 18,000 hours total, over 5,500 hours of instruction-given, and over 5,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also an Airbus A-320 series captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown nearly 90 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for nine consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at: matt@progaviation.com or (414) 339-4990.