

*Trip
of a
lifetime*

Walking NEW ENGLAND

A kaleidoscope of red, orange and gold, the Northeast region of the USA is at its most showy in autumn. Travel Editor Emma Winterschladen embarked on a 400-mile round road trip to walk the granite peaks, rugged coastlines and vibrant forests of New Hampshire and Maine.

There is perhaps no better time to visit the tree-laden landscapes of New England than in so-called 'foliage season'. It's around now that this six-state region's woodlands are a blazing cornucopia of colour, the air is crisp and cool, and roadside shops and restaurant menus are overflowing with the spoils of an autumn harvest.

And so it turns out that Jackson, New Hampshire – the first stop on our road trip – is the perfect spot to enjoy a fine 'fall'. A small and charming hamlet resort in the heart of the White Mountains National Forest, each year it attracts tourists from far and wide, many of whom visit for an activity that is, although loved world over, officially known here as 'leaf-peeping'. Our base for the next few days is The Wentworth Inn, which prides itself on being a prime location for this very seasonal hobby – as well as being a brilliant base from which to explore the area's many hiking trails. Outside, the hotel is fringed by brightly hued birches, maples, quaking aspens and mountain ashes. Inside, it offers every comfort you could wish for after a day on your feet. That is: farm-to-table food, comfy beds and, in our case, our own hot tub terrace.

The Granite State

We drove the next day to Flume Gorge in Franconia Notch State Park, just an hour away. This 800ft (244m) natural gorge, at the base of Mount Liberty, was a gentle easing in to our walking adventure. The two-mile loop takes you through leaf-strewn forests, under dappled canopies, over 19th-century bridges and past gurgling streams and rock



The Wentworth Inn



Acadia National Park

formations, until you find yourself sandwiched between two imposing walls of granite, rising up 90ft (27m) around you. The sounds of gushing water and the smell of damp, moss-carpeted rocks abound, and the whole thing feels other-worldly somehow – despite it being very much a part of this world for over 200 million years.

We were in full leaf-peeping mode on our way back, with flowers, ferns and trees at every turn, including a huge hemlock and giant yellow birch. These arboreal grandparents are a rare sight in New England, as most virgin forests were cut down by 1900. Supper that evening was at Christmas Farm Inn, another ode to a bygone era. Old-fashioned hospitality meets hearty home-cooked food at this cosy lodging, originally built in 1786. My boyfriend Tom opted for elk roulade stuffed with applewood smoked bacon, caramelised onion and bread and butter pickle, while I went for tenderloin beef tips with roasted mushroom and spiced walnuts, washed down with a 'Cynically Optimistic' cocktail of botanical gin, bing cherry, blood orange and rhubarb. It was just the generous feast we needed to set us up for the next day's challenge: Mount Washington.

Known as Agiocochook by Native Americans, 'the place of the Great Spirit', this 6,288ft (1.9km) mountain is where those with an adventurous spirit go to hike. Notorious for its erratic weather, it holds the record for highest recorded wind speed, not associated with a tornado or cyclone, at 231 miles per hour! Hiking to its summit, and down again, requires proper kit and a good degree of fitness, with one way taking a minimum of five hours. We opted to take the Victorian-era steam locomotive to the top – the world's first mountain-climbing cog train, and then hike down. The view from the summit was spectacular: 360-degree vistas lazily unfurled into the distance under bright blue skies, with only the blustery breeze there to remind you that you're not in a postcard.

We hiked down via the Boot Spur Trail, the lesser-known, slightly longer route, with easier access and quieter views. It was hard work, but the pine and flora-rich mountainscape, painted with the colours of autumn, more

'The panorama from Cadillac Mountain was bathed in a golden light that bounced gloriously off the ripples of pink granite'

than made up for it. Dinner that evening felt well-deserved and came recommended by fellow hikers: White Mountain Cider Company, where we devoured pan-roasted duck with apple-walnut farro, and the house speciality: cider doughnuts and ice cream with caramel sauce.

Maine event

The next leg of our trip was a four-hour drive away, to New England's largest state. The land of lighthouses and lobsters, rocky Atlantic coastline and copious forests, Maine is a haven for outdoor souls. We were heading to Acadia National Park, a 47,000-acre recreation area that sits, wild and beautiful, on Mount Desert Island. Despite being one of the USA's smallest national parks, it doesn't feel it when you're there, surrounded as we are by an expanse of untamed ocean and land. It's also one of the most accessible national parks, with over 124 miles of carriage roads woven throughout. Built by John D Rockefeller in 1913, today these perfectly kept roads are frequented by horse-riders, walkers, cyclists and drivers. But we were more interested in the 158 miles of hiking trails. Most specifically, we wanted to hike to the top of Cadillac Mountain – the highest point on the US East Coast.

And so off we set on the North Ridge Trail, which we'd heard was harder but more rewarding than the South Ridge. The hike is classified as moderate, but we both agreed such a rating feels very subjective. Tom, a keen sportsman, navigated the ups and downs with ease, whereas I, a keen ambler at best, found it more challenging – although Tom conceded I did get points for enthusiasm on the 'rock scrambling' sections. As we gained elevation, forests soon gave way to breathtaking views across the Atlantic. To the east we spotted Frenchman Bay and the famous, uninhabited Porcupine Islands (named Sheep, Burnt, Long and Bald), which sit peacefully in the water, just waiting to be photographed.

We made it to the summit of Cadillac Mountain, legs burning and invigorated, just as the sun was setting. Although this particular spot is the first place to see sunrise in the US from October to March, it also boasts an impressive sunset. The panorama was bathed in a golden light that bounced gloriously off the ripples of pink granite. Flora grows out of the granite's deep, ancient crevices, new life sitting alongside millions of years' ➔

worth of history – a rich geological past written in the rocks. We looked out from the top, across the primordial landscape below, half expecting to spot a dinosaur wading through the trees. And that’s the thing about Acadia: there’s a *Jurassic Park*-esque rawness to it. With its raging seas, wild wetlands, spruce fir forests and granite peaks, it feels outside of time itself.

Golden memories

Bar Harbor is the gateway to Acadia, and where we were staying the night. It oozes seaside charm, while managing to feel quirky and cool. Streets are lined with local independent restaurants, coffee shops (we loved Coffee Hound Coffee Bar) and boutiques. It’s been the summer destination of choice for many of America’s wealthiest families since the 19th century, and has its own Millionaire’s Row, built by the Vanderbilts, Astors and JP Morgans of this world. It was, however, on Lulu’s Lobster Boat trip that we found out about the Great Fires of 1947, which destroyed 67 of these grand residences, along with five historic hotels – most of which were never rebuilt. Today, glimpses of the golden age remain woven through the architectural fabric of Bar Harbor, and there are still elements of the high life to be found, even if it now attracts a whole host of visitors and residents – from artists to hikers, families to cruise ships.

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We stayed at West Street Hotel on the waterfront, a luxury boutique hotel with its own rooftop pool, nautical-inspired rooms and an extensive spa across the road at the Bar Harbor Club. It’s here I enjoyed a warm stone treatment – a blissful celebration of the area’s geological uniqueness, with basalt stones used to help my circulation and offer some much-needed muscle relaxation. We spent our evening in Bar Harbor doing what we do best: walking

talking, eating, drinking and dancing. Live music floats through the air of this small, animated town and alfresco dining options are aplenty. We found ourselves drawn to the buzz of Project Social Kitchen & Bar, and ended up whiling away the hours with small plates of local mussels and pork belly, and a few too many kombucha cocktails.

Old-fashioned fun

The following day we set off early to Bass Harbor Lighthouse, at the bottom of Mount Desert Island, for a morning walk and some successful whale-watching (we spotted two beneath the waves!). Then it was a three-hour drive to Mid-Coast Maine, stopping along the way at the intriguing, Pinterest-worthy roadside Green Tree Coffee and Tea – makers of the smoothest, richest coffee both Tom and I have ever tasted. We arrived finally, caffeine-fuelled, to Sebasco Harbor Resort on the tip of the Popham peninsula in Phippsburg, Maine. ➔



Bass Harbor
Lighthouse



Kennebunkport Inn (above) and Sebasco Harbor Resort (right)





Set on 450 acres of whispering woodland and tidal estuaries, this vacation destination is a nostalgic nod to a wholesome yesteryear. And it's easy to see why generations of families continue to return, more than 90 years after it first opened. Play and relaxation, the owner Bob Smith tells me, is at the heart of Sebasco's philosophy. From the vintage candlepin bowling lanes to the mature golf course, to its Fairwinds Spa and The Pilot House restaurant, it's a playground for every age. We pulled on our well-worn walking boots and hiked through the salt marshes to the top of Morse Mountain, with its oil-painting views across conservation areas, marshland and sandy coves. Our day ended with more walking, but this time it was a salty sunset stroll along the vast stretch of golden sand at Popham Beach.

Our trip of a lifetime ended in the coastal town of Kennebunkport in southern Maine. We stayed in the boutique Kennebunkport Inn, a New England white picket-fenced building with navy shutters and a fairy-light clad decking area. The only walking left to be done was around town, stopping for drinks and people-watching, before returning to dinner at the hotel's restaurant The Burleigh. Our farewell meal was a time for reflection over bowls of Maine mussels and our final lobster rolls of the holiday. After over a week of exploring the great outdoors, we were both physically exhausted, but wholly restored in spirit. Turns out fall in New England leaves you feeling nothing but lifted. 🍂
With thanks to the Inspiring Travel Company, Discover New England tourist board and Hertz for supporting this trip. Travel to Maine and New Hampshire with Inspiring Travel Company for two nights in Kennebunkport, one night in Sebasco, one night in Bar Harbor and three nights in Jackson, inclusive of international flights to Boston with British Airways, starts from £1,439 per person, excluding meals and car rental. To book, visit inspiringtravelcompany.co.uk

EMMA'S ITINERARY at a glance

NEW HAMPSHIRE

The Wentworth Inn, Jackson
thewentworth.com

Flume Gorge, Franconia Notch State Park
franconianotchstatetpark.com

Christmas Farm Inn, Jackson
christmasfarminn.com

Mount Washington, Presidential Range,
White Mountains
visitwhitemountains.com

White Mountain Cider Co., Bartlett
ciderconh.com

MAINE

Acadia National Park, Mount Desert Island
The Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse
visitmaine.com

West Street Hotel, Bar Harbor
theweststreethotel.com

Coffee Hound Coffee Bar, Bar Harbor
coffehoundcoffeebar.com

Lulu's Lobster Boat Ride
lululobsterboat.com

Green Tree Coffee and Tea, Lincolnville
greentreecoffee.com

Sebasco Harbor Resort, Phippsburg
sebasco.com

Kennebunkport Inn, Kennebunkport
kennebunkportinn.com

Car hire from Boston Logan International Airport, New England, with Hertz starts from £30 a day. Head to hertz.com/us/roadtrip/planner for off-the-beaten-track routes, downloadable maps and more.

Visit discovernewengland.org for travel information and tips on things to do.

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