



Curtis Island Light at Sunrise (Photo by Greg Currier)

Camden

Maine's Mid-Coast Summer Jewel

by
Darin Strickland

Along Maine's Atlantic coast, Route 1 winds through the picturesque countryside — a scenic byway that hugs the coastline and skirts quaint seaside villages and towns. For the summer tourist, it serves as a springboard to Maine's coastal vacation destinations and a direct route to popular Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park. However, there is one town on Route 1, that won't be bypassed and ignored as it requires you to drive through its main street and take notice as you do.

Camden's Main Street and Route 1 are the same. Lining the way, historic and stately Federals, Capes, and Victorians with

architectural details such as nautical widow's walks and bay windows; some with carriage houses and many with B&B welcome signs. These centenarians are the first to quietly announce this town has been receiving the affluent for a long time.

The road dips and bends into a cluster of shops nestled together in buildings that have been there for decades, reflecting the character of this town in days gone by. Mills and wharfs are re-dressed as boutiques, galleries, restaurants and book stores. Even from the confines of the car, one starts to feel the quintessential charm of this little town.

The Megunticook River runs

briskly under foundation piers of buildings that once harnessed its energy as it rushes to spill into the Camden harbor. Just above the shops, sitting prominently on a high, grassy village green, is the public library, its grounds designed by one of the nation's most lauded landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted. Beyond the library, Mount Battie looms at surprisingly close proximity.

From Mount Battie, or even down on the village green, one gets a perfect view of the harbor. During the summer months, it is buzzing with activity. Historic windjammers moor alongside sleek sailboats and well-appointed yachts. Kayaks skirt the shoreline while small sailboats from



Camden Harbor
(Photos by Greg Currier)

Camden Yacht Club's junior sailing program take to wind farther out. Still, not all is play in this harbor as The Wayfarer, a working boatyard, and some lobster fishermen also call it home. Curtis Island and its lighthouse punctuate the view at the harbor's entrance as its rocky waterline stretches out onto Penobscot Bay, bobbing with colorful lobster trap buoys.

The summer weather along Mid-

Coast can be incredibly clear with vibrant blue skies and comfortable temperatures. While on other days, an equally invigorating cool coastal fog can blanket the area, leaving unhurried time to explore Camden's many galleries, shops and nearby museums.

Prosperity and Culture Came in Waves

It is easy to see what attracted the

first settlement in 1768 when the area was still considered untamed wilderness. The river's energy and a safe harbor provided an ideal location for a sawmill and gristmills. A flourishing manufacturing and shipping industry would soon appear. By the 1800s, Camden's manufacturing included a powder mill, the country's largest anchor foundry and a woolen mill. Exports to Europe included lime, lumber, fish and ice; and its harbor held as many as six shipyards, building sailing ships to carry goods around the world.

The glory days of shipping and exporting were highly profitable. The ship captains were known to be well read with extensive libraries onboard, and they brought back culture and literature from around the globe. As ships brought the world to Camden, artists such as Thomas Cole, Fredrick E. Church and Fitz Hugh Lane introduced the dramatic Maine land and seascapes to the world, and the enticed



Stern man, Andrew Baxter positions *The Lively Lady Too* for picking up another lobster trap in Camden Harbor. (Photo by Darin Strickland)

The schooner *Heritage* is part of the Windjammer fleet that tours around the Maine Coast.

began to arrive on steamboats in 1823. Soon affluent New Yorkers and Philadelphians known as Rusticators came to look for summertime immersions into nature, purchasing land and staying in nearby island resorts.

The steamboats introduced a new economy and were the harbingers of what would eventually be lost — manufacturing and shipping by sail that had made Maine the most prosperous state in the Union. Still, new artists such as Childe Hassam and the Wyeths, and authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett filled the country's imagination with the romantic and natural beauty of the area, inspiring more summer people, artists and writers to visit the Maine coast. Many would choose to stay or “summer” there each year. In time local businesses serving the summer visitors would find new uses for the fine old captains' homes and wharves.

As the hobby of pleasure sailing continued to grow, Camden provided an ideal harbor and served as a link for supplies to the numerous islands along the coast. The area's flourishing art communi-

ty was attracting enthusiastic audiences. In 1936, an enterprising captain started the first of what is now the Camden Harbor windjammer cruises, finding a new use of a fleet for the local historic sailing vessels.

Hollywood too has been lured numerous times by Camden's charm. Movies including *Carousel* in 1956, *Thinner* in 1996 and *In the Bedroom* in 2001 were filmed here in part. However, it was 1957's *Peyton Place* starring Lana Turner that used the town as a backdrop to its fullest and remains a popular factoid. The movies' memorabilia can be found at The Whitehall Inn and the Camden Library, and the movie's DVD is in several local shops.

In the 1980s, Camden found itself on several “best places to retire” lists and attracted yet another influx of residents, including doctors, diplomats, executives, and federal government retirees. The long-lived Knox Woolen Mill closed its doors in 1988, and its building was eventually acquired by MBNA, the credit-card giant, who occupied the mill from 1992 to 2004, infusing even more millions into the local



economy before abruptly moving out.

Culture

Just as the gourmet stores and farmer's market make Camden an ideal harbor for provisioning sailors, its numerous art galleries and museums featuring the region's vibrant art communities provide sustenance for visual art lovers. Camden's biannual Harbor Arts and Craft Show features more than 100 artists. Writers from diverse backgrounds arrive later in the year for the annual Maine Author's Series and Literary Festival, leaving tempting reads for next season's visitors at the four book-sellers in town.

On stage, both Camden and nearby Rockport have newly refurbished opera houses, and the Bok Amphitheatre at the Camden Library hosts entertainment during the summer months. All three are small intimate venues. The Bay Chambers Concerts infuse all three locations with diverse sounds from brass to big band to baroque.

The Mid-Coast "Lobstah"

No visit would be complete without, and nothing is more synonymous with the Mid-Coast, than the lobster, where it is celebrated in most every way. Aficionados say that Mid-Coast lobsters are distinctly sweeter than others. In nearby Rockland, 20,000 pounds are consumed in the course of just five days during The Maine Lobster Festival.

One of the best ways to learn all about lobsters is from local lobstermen. Dockside in Camden, Captain Alan Philbrick welcomes tourists aboard *The Lively Lady Too*, a 42-foot 1971 lobster boat. This one-time teacher mesmerizes children and adults alike while explaining in interesting detail the economics, biology and geology of lobster harvesting. If anyone has romantic views of a lobsterman's life, Philbrick will cast him overboard with his traps. "This is a healthy fishery," he concluded. "I want everyone to go home



Whether it is sun bathing, sailing or touring on a tall ship, Maine is an escape for many from the hot humid summers. (Photo by Anne Coles)

One unique Camden gallery -The Ducktrap Bay Trading Co. specializes in wildlife art and represents over 200 artist including over 100 decoy carvers. (Photo by Darin Strickland)

and eat lobster! Don't feel sorry for them; even lobsters want to eat lobster." Philbrick then turns lobster harvesting to eco-touring with sightings of harbor seals, eider ducks, eagles and other wildlife on the coastal islands just beyond Camden Harbor.

Stay and Play

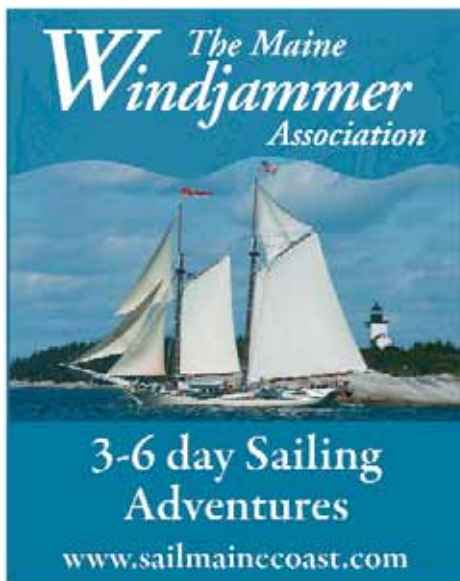
With numerous historic and picturesque B&Bs, inns and hotels, Camden is an ideal base for a Mid-Coastal Maine stay. The Chamber of Commerce also offers a listing of weekly and seasonal rentals ranging from cabins to coastal homes. Most activities can be decided on short notice since they're just moments away.

- *Start with a big bite of the local cuisine.* Maine lobster rolls are available almost anywhere on the street. All things "lobstah" and blueberry are readily found in the restaurants and inns. Don't leave without sampling the "chowda." Other regional specialties include sea clams and rock crabs.



Camden's farmers' market is impressive. Twice a week, it brings organic produce, artisan cheeses and meats to sailors and other water folks, as well as locals and visitors. Don't miss the crab-cake lady.

- *Raise your glass* with tours provided by three local wineries and a distillery. Maine also has one of the largest concentrations of microbrews. Don't fail to sample the blueberry wine.



Camden Chamber of Commerce
www.visitcamden.com (800) 223-5459

Camden Farmers' Market
www.camdenfarmersmarket.org

Camden Hills State Park
www.state.me.us (207) 236-3109

Camden Opera House
www.camdenoperahouse.com
 (207) 236-7763

Camden Yacht Club- Junior Sailing Program www.camdenyachtclub.org
 (207) 236-4575

The Farnsworth Art Museum and Wyeth Center
www.farnsworthmuseum.org
 (207) 596-6457

Maine Center for the Contemporary Arts www.arts-maine.org (207) 236-2875

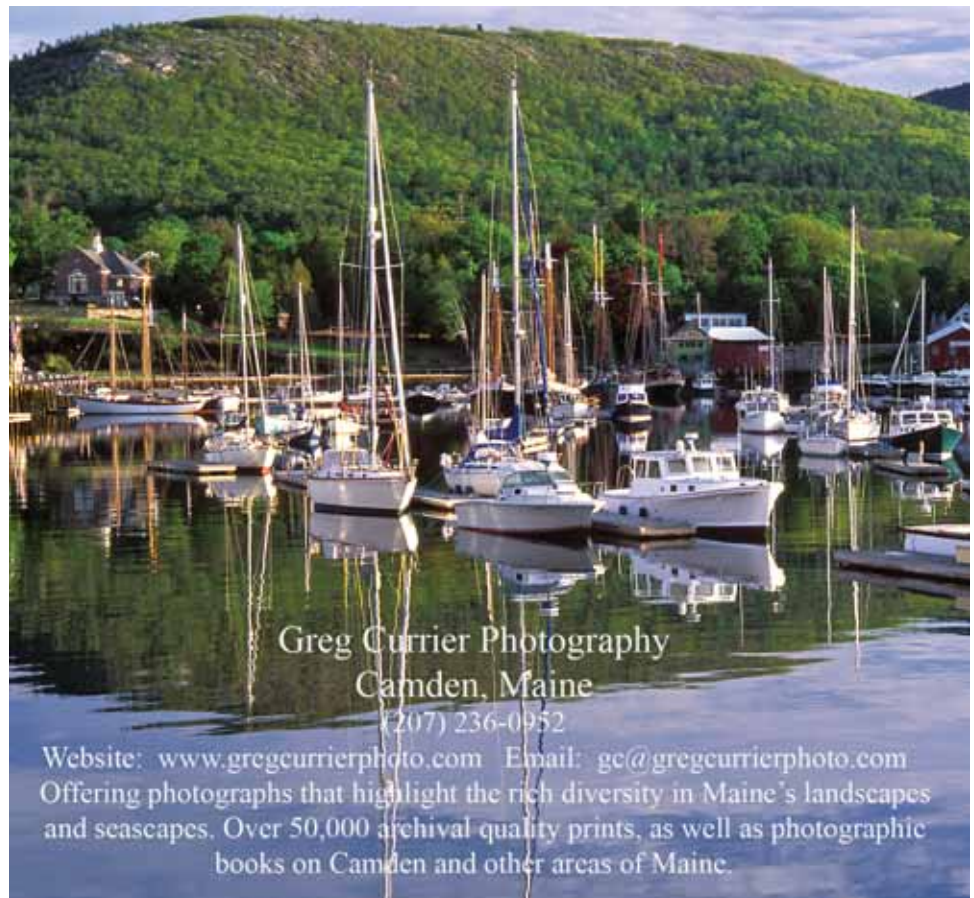
Maine Lighthouse Museum
www.mainelighthousemuseum.com
 (207) 593-3301

- *Take a historic sail* aboard a windjammer. Camden and nearby Rockport harbor are home ports these vessels. Trips range from two-hour and sunset sails to eco-tours and week-long sails.
- *Get out on the water* with kayaks or canoes and tour the harbor or nearby lakes. Paddle out to Curtis Island Lighthouse. See loons, eagles, ospreys and eider ducks. Young sailors staying awhile can take lessons at Camden Yacht Club's Junior Sailing Program.
- *Hit the trails* on a bike or for a hike. There are trails in Mount Battie, Mount Megunticook and Camden Hills State Park.
- *Visit the seven lighthouses* including Rockland Breakwater Light and the Pemaquid Point Light as pictured on the Maine State quarter.
- *Catch a fish* on your own or with a registered Maine guide. Quarries include mackerel, schoolie stripers and bluefish in the bay and tributaries; and smallmouth bass, brown trout, and landlocked salmon inshore.
- *Visit the museums* including The Farnsworth Art Museum and Wyeth Center and Maine Lighthouse Museum in Rockland. Maine Center for the Contemporary Arts is just a scenic ride away in Rockport.

Other points of interest include Aldermere Farm and its Dutch belted Galloway cows, and The Center for Furniture Craftmanship School and Gallery. Day Excursions less than three hours away include Monhegan Island, Bar Harbor/ Acadia National Park, Boothbay Harbor, and the L.L. Bean Flagship Store in Freeport.

Camden and Maine's Mid-Coast offer a break from summer heat and humidity and provide plenty of reasons to get out and play.

Darin Strickland ventured far afield from his usual haunts for this article. He is an upland game bird hunting guide at Blandfield Plantation near Tappahannock, Virginia.



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 Offering photographs that highlight the rich diversity in Maine's landscapes and seascapes. Over 50,000 archival quality prints, as well as photographic books on Camden and other areas of Maine.