

Deer Isle: Granite, Spruce And the Sea

A lobstering island off Maine

By John Thaxton

Deer Isle looks on a map, in the words of a local historian, Vernal Hutchinson, “like a figure eight drawn by a very shaky hand.” At high water the sea all but meets at Long Cove and Northwest Harbor and divides the island. Countless coves and inlets run along the island’s jagged coastline. Scores of smaller out islands, some no more than pink granite outcrops where cormorants spread their wings to dry, whorl about the shore.

Separated from the Blue Hill peninsula by half mile-wide Eggemoggin Reach, Deer isle, which separates the lower stretches of Penobscot and Blue Hill Bays, extends some nine miles into the Atlantic. At its southern end a maze of tiny islands, navigable via Deer Island Thorofare, litter the seascape all six miles out to Isle au Haut, a heavily wooded, 18-square-mile promontory that rises some 565 feet out of the ocean. Looking out from the shores of Deer Isle, it doesn’t seem farfetched that the coast of Maine twists 3,000 miles to cover a straight-line distance of 230 miles.

Not really on the way to anyplace else, other than the most remote, least visited section of Acadia National Park on Isle au Haut, Deer Isle seems as old and resistant to change as the granite bedrock it sits on. Sheer rock headlands thick with spruce dominate the scenery, 15-foot tides cover and uncover an extensive littoral rife with rockweed and mussels and periwinkles, and when sea smoke rises from Penobscot and Blue Hill Bays the offshore islands look like mountaintops poking through the clouds. Deer Isle and the islands surrounding it are, in fact, the peaks of drowned mountains, formed 500 million years ago, then sculpted and scraped by glaciers.

Samuel de Champlain, who named Isle au Haut as well as Mount Desert Island, charted deer isle in 1604. But Deer Isle didn’t attract a significant permanent settlement until the close of the French and Indian Wars in the mid-1760s, when fewer than 20 families inhabited the island. By 1775, right before the outbreak of the Revolution, perhaps 100 families had settled on Deer Isle, which was as out of the mainstream then as it is now. Indeed, when a group of zealous patriots living on the island captured a commercial vessel they mistook for a British sloop of war, the state House of Representatives responded to the ship owner’s legal petition by expressing surprise that anyone lived on Deer Isle.

The early settlers, like residents today, got their living from the sea. In those days fishing for lobsters involved little more than walking out among the rocks at low tide and grabbing one. In August, the islanders held duck drives, during which teams would row a series of small boats beyond a raft of molting, flightless waterfowl, corral them and then force them onto the shore, where catching them was child’s play. The settlers used Atlantic salmon as fertilizer and pressed their oil from menhaden, a kind of herring.

By the mid-19th century Deer Isle had become the second largest fishing port on the East Coast, but in the 1860’s when over harvesting exhausted the mackerel fishery, the

islanders retrenched and focused on herring and lobster. Though a high-priced entrée today, lobsters didn't impress 18th- and 19th-century palates. Maine officials, thinking too much lobster was toxic, decided in the mid-19th century that inmates in state prisons should consume the food only twice a week rather than three times.

The mainstay of Deer Isle, and any number of Down East towns, the lobster fishery today is as regulated as it is ubiquitous. Every other house on the island seems to have a neatly stacked wall of lobster traps in the backyard. Clusters of lobster-trap buoys hang like bunches of enormous bright orange or yellow or chartreuse grapes from the sides of barns and houses and from the limbs of trees. Lobster boats float at anchor in every harbor, and the sight of one slowly cruising across the bay, or its lone captain pulling up a trap in heavy fog, suggests the essence of Deer Isle.

For visitors, the main attraction is the scenery. Over the course of an hour viewing conditions can change from opaque to crystalline, from a fog so thick you can't see your feet to a blinding dazzle of sunlight on water. White spruce dominates the rocky shoreline, which gives way inland to areas wooded with increasingly larger stands of aspen and white birch, sprinkled with tamarack. Very few structures impose themselves on the scenery, for the better part of the out islands, as well as Deer Isle itself, remains uninhabited. From just about anyplace you're likely to see a seal pop its inquisitive, whiskered face out of the water. Harbor porpoises, their black backs and fins preceded by a short snort of an exhalation, appear everywhere. Thirty-strong squadrons of cormorants and eiders fly low over the water, and ospreys, announced by their high-pitched whistles, plunge talons first into the Penobscot, disappear for a second or so and then burst back into the air, in a sort of reverse splash, a fish in their claws if they're lucky.

You can walk for miles along the shoreline here, especially during low water, when the beaches along the island seem to quadruple in size, and to get from here to there you needn't stroll across somebody's lawn or scale a sheer rock face. From the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts campus in Sunshine, on the east side of the island, one can walk for a mile across pink granite boulders the size of small buildings. Bordered on one side by the dark green of spruce and on the other by the pale jade green of Jericho Bay, every turn of the pink granite coast at Haystack seems to open to a different vista. Black guillemot and eider families patrol the coast, and herring gulls try opening mussels by dropping them from a height onto the rocks. Now and again there appears a casual sculpture of natural material—objets trouvés arranged by Haystack students. Just in from the coast not long ago, hikers chanced upon an automobile-size boulder wrapped, a la Cristo, in a green, cellophane like material. From the pink granite trail several others lead into the woods and, eventually, back to the Haystack campus.

On the west side of the island, at Goose Cove, a series of seven trails radiate from the 70-acre grounds of Goose Cove Lodge. The lodge's owner, Eli Pavloff, welcomes all—not only her guests—on the land, saying, “You can't really own Goose Cove.” One of the trails follows the shore, another passes over a cliff and runs down to the beach. Wolfe Trail winds through a spruce forest, and Wilderness Trail passes by a bog. When the tide is out, hikers at Goose Cove can walk on a sandbar out to Bard Island, a small pink granite outcrop wooded with spruce and owned by the Nature Conservancy.

Deer Isle looks good from the water, too, and those who don't bring a boat should consider an excursion. Palmer Day IV Excursions (207-367-2207) offers 16-mile cruises around the islands (\$7, \$4 children under 10). Captained by affable Reg Greenlaw, the Palmer IV leaves from Stonington at 2 P.M. every day from July 4 through September 1. Captain Greenlaw throws fish to the seals, points out osprey nests and answers all questions. Isle au Haut Boat Company (207-367-5593 or 207-348-6038) operates Miss Lizzie, which goes out on tours of the islands at 2:30 P.M. from late June to early September and on mail runs to Isle au Haut Monday through Saturday (island excursions \$7, \$11 round trip to Isle au Haut).

For a bit of history, visitors might explore the 1836 Salome Sellers House, a red clapboard farmhouse with white trim. The house is operated by the Deer Isle-Stonington Historical Society (in Sunset, no telephone). The house, which has an extensive collection of memorabilia, was owned by a woman who lived to be 108. The house has become the island's repository of all sorts of collections, from a scrapbook bulging with 18th-century cloth napkins from restaurants and hotels all over the world to swaths of delicate lace with tiny fish motifs. There are several silk and lace dresses, and a garret contains an extensive collection of old books, local newspapers and maps that visitors may handle. Admission is free to the house, which is open early July to early September on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 5 P.M.

Artisans abound on Deer Isle, which is also the home of the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts (207-348-2306). Situated on a steep, heavily wooded slope that runs down to a rocky shore, and designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes, Haystack is a series of houses and studios connected by decks. The architecture alone is worth a visit. Master craftspeople from all over the world lead workshops in blacksmithing, metalsmithing, weaving, clay, paper, fabrics, wood and glass. From June 5 through September 2. Thursday through Sunday between 10 A.M. and 4 P.M. visitors are welcome to tour the campus's studios. No items are for sale at the school.

Island Country Club (Sunset Road; 207-348-2379) welcomes visitors to use its nine-hole golf course and three clay tennis courts. Tennis court fees are \$16 an hour (reservations a must) and on Sunday from 2 to 5 P.M., and Wednesday from 9 A.M. to noon, the club organizes open doubles. A full day of golf costs \$8 on weekdays, \$10 Saturday and \$12 Sunday and holidays. A lunch bar is open daily from 11 A.M. to 2 P.M.

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