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June 17, 2014

ARTICLE

### Schoodic Peninsula--adventures on the offbeat track

'Other' Acadia, picturesque fishing villages draw tourists

by Laurie Schreiber



Pamela Ann, coming into the Corea Lobster Co-op wharf on a sunny spring day, is part of a robust fishing fleet around the Schoodic Peninsula. LAURIE SCHREIBER

Puttering along the edges of the Schoodic Peninsula and its various gnarly bulges, the sea breeze freshens, sights abound, and folks stop everything for a friendly hello.

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Vistas of fields undulating to the rocky shore alternate with dense wooded areas and surprising heaths—located just past the large osprey nest atop a telephone pole—all punctuated by the business of life.

The lobsterboat Pamela Ann angles into the Corea Lobster Co-op's neatly kept wharf to unload. Galleries arrange displays of local artists and crafters. An organic farm advertises fresh eggs on a roadside blackboard. A giant cutout of a fisherman in oilskins, a long-time advertisement for

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by Staff Writer June 18, 2014



a seafood-packing plant, indicates change of focus, having swapped sardine can for lobster trap.

In these seaside villages—Winter Harbor, Prospect Harbor and Corea, all within the town of Gouldsboro—colorful bait bags are hung for lawn décor, and weather-beaten planks, hand-lettered, indicate "path to beach" and "Lobstertown."

Idyllic and quaint? Of course. Culturally, the peninsula is also a happening scene. Artists and literary types have long abounded; the Schoodic International Sculpture Symposium has resulted in a statewide "sculpture trail" of modern granite works; Schoodic Arts for All is an incubator for experimental and traditional forms of performance.

But wait, there's more! There's the Schoodic portion of Acadia National Park, a 2,366-acres wonderland, pointed into the open ocean, that's off the beaten track—and all the more cherished by residents and visitors alike. There's the peninsula's status as the state's first national scenic byway. There's Acadia's Schoodic Education and Research Center, using repurposed facilities at a former Navy base, and offering research and arts opportunities and public programs. And there are various other preserved lands, recreational activities, and scenic splendors.

Currently, the Schoodic portion gets 10 percent of Acadia's total visitation. (The bulk of Acadia is on Mount Desert Island; Schoodic is Acadia's only mainland portion.) That's about 250,000 visits per year, out of 2.5 million. But, locals agree, the Schoodic experience is decidedly different from MDI's Acadia.

"It's a whole different story here," said Joe Young, a lobster fisherman who runs the Wharf Gallery and Grill in Corea, a tiny village nearly pinched off the peninsula's eastern shore, where roads narrow to neighborly lanes. "It's not a zoo."

Young recalls a visitor from upstate New York who swung around to Schoodic after staying on MDI. "He comes down my lane, he comes around my fish house, and he looks out and turns to his wife and says, 'Honey, I think we just found the real Down East Maine.'"

"In Bar Harbor, there's so much to stimulate your senses," said Schoodic's park ranger, Bill Weidner. "Bars, restaurants, there's something for everyone. With Schoodic, you don't just end up here. You have to make an effort to come here. It's more of a place to sit and contemplate, or just absorb what's here rather than expect to be entertained."

Most folks visit Schoodic as a side jaunt from MDI, although there are overnight accommodations and summer rentals, to be augmented in 2015 by a private, 90-site campground to be operated by the park service. Peak visitation occurs from July 4 to the end of August, with extreme peaks during high surfs or hurricanes late in the year, and an increasingly popular shoulder season, Weidner said.

"Then we have the 'locals' within, say, a 50-mile radius, and they come often," he said. "And the 'local locals,' right here—I have people I can count on coming through the park every day. I can almost set my watch by them."

A huge draw is the surf.

"MDI has a soloist, and I have a symphony." Weidner said. "When the surf and wind are right and, say, a hurricane has passed off, we experience the surge here and it's spectacular. It's very much like a geyser in Yellowstone. Water hits the rocks and sprays, easily, 90 feet in the air. Sometimes the backdrop is blue, sunny sky. It's a wonderful, free show."

The show also results in one of Weidner's biggest concerns—hundreds of people on slippery rocks, putting themselves at risk of being swept away. Weidner recalls two incidents in recent years, a double and single fatality. Road gridlock has made it hard for emergency vehicles to get in. Weidner credits local volunteer fire departments and EMS crews, and MDI Search and Rescue, for the fine work they do in these situations.

Commercial fishing is alive and well, along with summer rentals and businesses catering to tourists. The demographics have changed somewhat. Older generations are giving way less to younger offspring and more to summer-home-buyers; few fishermen have their homes on the shore anymore. The 2002 closure of the Navy base at Schoodic Point meant losing hundreds of year-round naval personnel who had previously partaken of community life.

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Peter Drinkwater, long-time owner of the Winter Harbor 5 & 10, said kid-friendly programs along the scenic byway, along with free shuttle-buses, ferry and water taxi service from MDI, the campground, and other initiatives will continue to boost tourism.

That's a boon, residents agree, for a short earning season. But there's a delicate balance.

"We want growth and sustainability," said Gary Levin at Chapter Two, a Corea gallery he co-owns with his wife Rosemary. "But one of the reasons everybody is here is because we like the current, quiet quaintness of the village. We like the fact that everybody walks and knows everybody and keeps doors unlocked. We don't want that to get ruined."

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