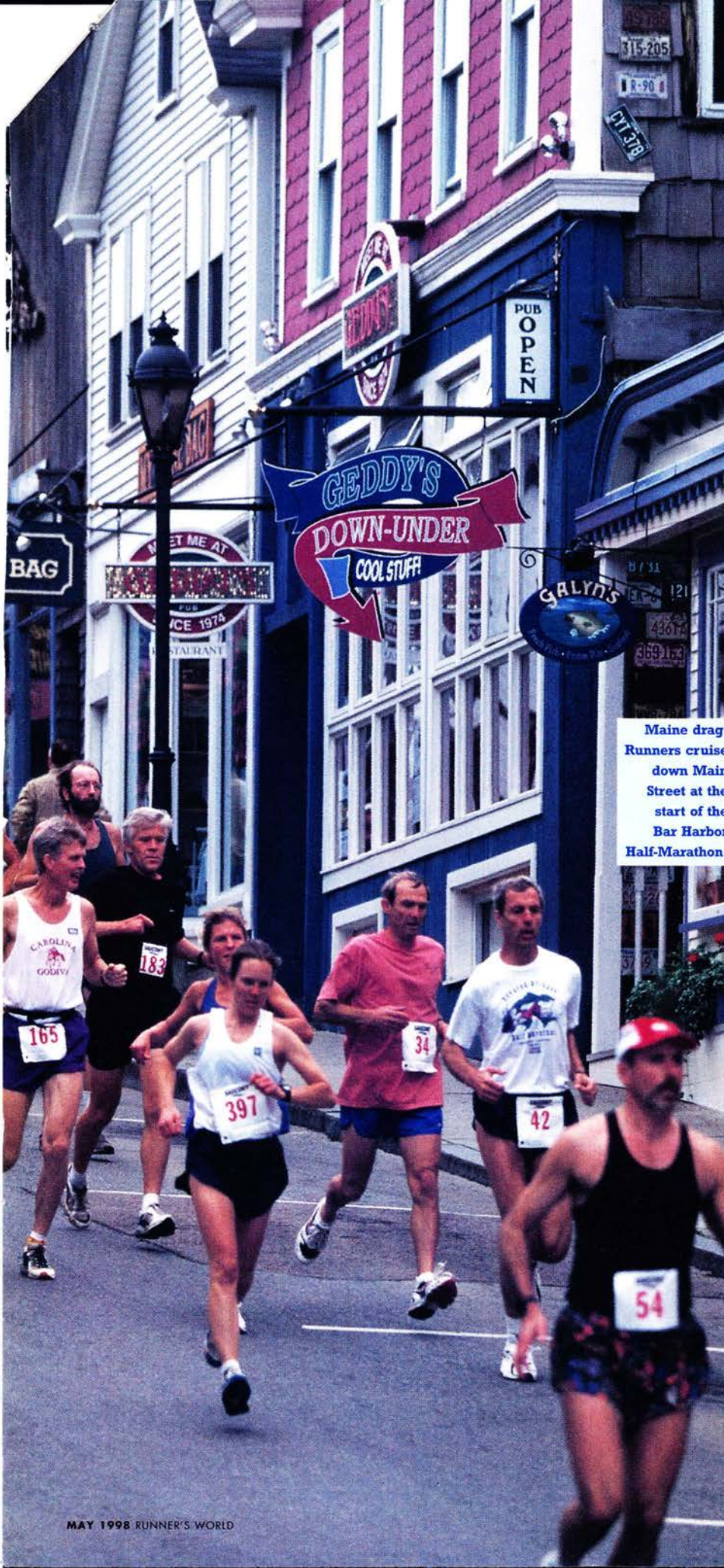




Maine Attraction

Held each fall on the Pine Tree State's remote coast, the Bar Harbor Half-Marathon is tough to get to. But once you're there, you won't want to leave

BY JONATHAN BEVERLY



Maine drag:
Runners cruise
down Main
Street at the
start of the
Bar Harbor
Half-Marathon.

“Grand state of Maine, proudly we sing . . . ” Actually, *we* aren’t singing. *I* am singing. My wife, sitting beside me as we drive north along the Maine coast, is rolling her eyes like she always does when I launch into the Maine state song.

“ . . . To tell your glories to the land, to shout your praises till the echoes ring . . . ”

I can’t help myself. The place is greener and cleaner and downright prettier than any place deserves to be.

Okay, I admit to a bias. I grew up here. But I am not alone in these feelings. The essayist E.B. White wrote: “What happens to me when I cross the Piscataqua and plunge rapidly into Maine? I cannot describe it . . . but I do have the sensation of having received a gift from a true love.”

The gift this September weekend includes the chance to run the Bar Harbor Half-Marathon on Mt. Desert Island, just off the mainland. Most of the race meanders through densely wooded Acadia National Park. When an injury canceled my fall marathon plans a few weeks ago, this race materialized as a great place to heal amid spectacular scenery and forgiving trails.

Some background on those trails: Concerned about the encroachment of motorized traffic on the island retreat, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., financed and supervised the construction of 57 miles of carriage trails between 1915 and 1933. Today they remain closed to motor vehicles—a paradise for bikers, walkers and runners. To protect this paradise, the half-marathon organizers limit the field to 400 participants.

The small numbers don’t keep it from feeling like a big, festive event on race morning, however. We gather in front of Bar Harbor’s new YMCA. The forecast calls for rain and the sky is slate gray, but so far it remains dry.

We speed downhill for the first mile, past the tourist shops and restaurants that line Main Street, close to the park entrance. The elegant mansions lining the road are the only evidence of the high-society crowd that summered here at the turn of the century. The elite families that occupied these Maine “cottages” were instrumental in creating Acadia National Park, donating thousands of acres to what would become, in 1919, the first national park east of the Mississippi.

Just past the second mile, we cross a stone bridge and enter the park woodlands. Dark pines and white birches stand out from the maple, oak and other hardwoods. Green still predominates this late in the summer, with occasional splashes of red and gold. The surface of a pond glints between tree trunks on the right. At

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ATTRACTION**

a remote intersection, a course marshal on a mountain bike directs us downhill to the left.

A few quick miles later, we begin a long climb that feels as if we've started up 1,500-foot Cadillac Mountain (I know it's around here somewhere). I distract myself by talking to local stand-out Donna Hurley, who moved to Maine from New York 20 years ago "to get back to nature like everyone else was doing." She soon powers away up the hill; so I fall in with Tony Ames from Boston. He ran the race on a whim last year, and the course's beauty drew him back again. "We drove up and pitched our tent in the dark last night," he says. "It's such a quiet place to visit."

Tony pulls away on the downhill, and I'm left with my own thoughts. The smell of damp pine takes me back to my boyhood cross-country races in Maine 20 years ago. Had track season fallen before cross-country, I might not be a runner today, for I never fully made peace with the track. But in these forests I thrived. My reverie continues as the sky darkens overhead; the column of runners ahead disappears into a dark green tunnel of trees.

The rain is clean and cool when it comes. A view of Eagle Lake opens up, the surface patterned with raindrops, the mountains behind shrouded and mysterious.

Reluctantly, I realize that we are nearly back to the roadway. Once on the road, I pick up the pace as we crest a long hill, skirt a golf course and drop into the corner of a soccer field for a final kick to the finish. Afterward, most of us happily ignore the light drizzle as we congregate around food tents and massage tables.

My time is far slower than usual, but this seems irrelevant today. To be here, to be running, is reward enough.

The next morning dawns clear and bright under an impossibly blue sky. My wife and I take a long walk on the Acadia trails before heading home. As we approach the end of the loop, she says, to my surprise, "I can see why you became a runner."

But she still rolls her eyes later when I start to sing:

"Oh, Pine Tree State, your woods, fields and hills—your lakes, streams and rock-bound coasts will ever fill our hearts with thrills. . ."

R

Jonathan Beverly, who grew up in Bucksport, Maine, is living in exile in New York City. His wife, Tracy, is equally loyal to her home state of Nebraska.

If you go . . .

September is the perfect time to visit Bar Harbor—after the summer crowds thin, but before the infamous Maine winter kicks in. The race is a great tune-up for a fall marathon, or just an excuse to get away to quiet trails, oceanside scenery and fresh seafood. (That's right, *lobsters*. They're a lot cheaper up here than in other parts of the country.)

GETTING ENTERED

Since 1996, the National Park Service has set a strict limit at 400 entrants, with spaces filled on a first-come, first-serve basis. Last year race officials Sharyn Kingma and Eileen Bartlett started turning people away just two weeks before the race, but they anticipate it filling up earlier this year. You can get applications for the September 19th event from the Mount Desert Island YMCA at (207) 288-3511, or by sending a SASE to MDI YMCA, P.O. Box 51, Bar Harbor, ME 04609.

GETTING THERE

In getting to this part of Maine, you begin to understand the Down East line, "Well now, you caan't get they-uh from he-uh." You have to *want* to go to Bar Harbor—it's a long way from anywhere and not on the way to anything. That's part of its charm.

That said, Continental Airlines does fly directly from Boston to Bar Harbor. Other airlines fly into Bangor (50 miles away) or Portland (161 miles). The closest hub is Boston, 290 miles and a 5-hour drive south.

If you fly to Portland or Boston, build in enough time to enjoy the drive north along Route 1 to Bar Harbor. The coastal towns along Penobscot Bay are small and picturesque, and you'll want to hit L.L. Bean and the outlet stores in Freeport.

GETTING A ROOM

Summer is the hot tourist season in Bar Harbor, so by mid-September you'll have no problem finding a room. If convenience is your priority, the simple-but-clean Cadillac Motor Inn (207-288-3831; \$54)

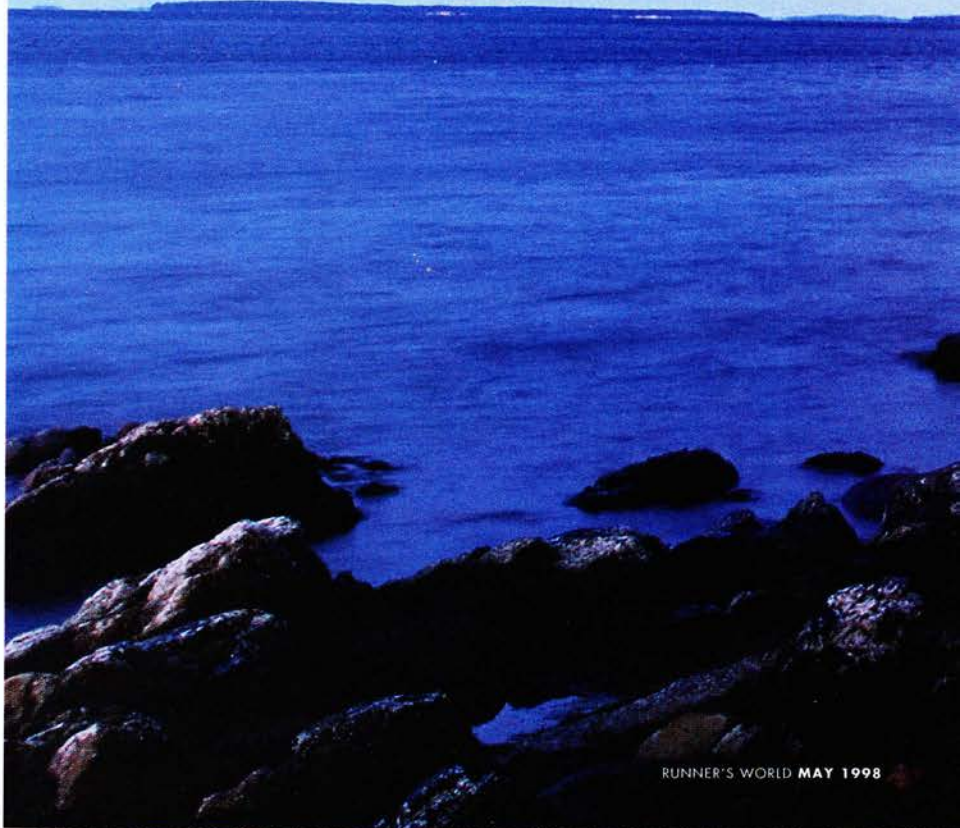
sits literally across the street from the half-marathon start and finish.

If splendor is what you're after, the three buildings of the classic Bar Harbor Inn (800-248-3351; \$125-\$225) are spread out on 7 acres of gardens overlooking the bay, at the top of Main Street. Or you can stay in one of six guest rooms at the elegant Breakwater 1904 (800-238-6309; \$195-\$330), the former home of a turn-of-the-century financier. The Chamber of Commerce (207-288-5103) can provide a complete list of more than 40 hotels and B&Bs in and around Bar Harbor.

To fully immerse yourself in nature, you can do what my race compatriot, Tony Ames, did and tent in one of Acadia's two rustic campgrounds—Blackwoods and Seawall, (800-436-PARK; \$15)—or pitch a tent at the Mt. Desert Campground in nearby Somesville (207-244-3710; \$20).

GETTING FOOD

On the edge of the town square, Mama DiMatteo's hosts the prerace pasta dinner (salad, choice of



seven pasta entrées and dessert for \$7). After the race, many runners head to Duffy's Quarter-deck Restaurant, a race sponsor, where you can select from lots of seafood dishes or an excellent home-style burger (entrées \$9-\$15). From the second story at Duffy's, you can look out at lobster and sight-seeing boats in the harbor.

Nearly every restaurant in town will serve you fresh lobster, but to get the full experience, drive over to Beal's Lobster Pier, next to the Coast Guard station in Southwest Harbor. For \$7 or \$8, you choose a lobster from a wooden tank in the pier kitchen, then eat it at picnic tables overlooking the water.

GETTING BACK TO NATURE

If you're up for it, there are all sorts of outdoor options around Bar Harbor. Acadia's 120 miles of trails range from the half-mile sandbar to Bar Island (make sure you get back before the tide

comes in) to the nearly vertical Precipice Trail (several sections are literally ladders), rising from the shoreline to Mount Champlain's 1,058-foot rocky summit.

Not steep enough for you? Two local outfitters (call the Chamber for numbers) will take you rock climbing on cliffs that loom directly above the surf. Count on paying \$50-\$95 for a half-day and \$95-\$135 for a full day, depending on the number of climbers in your group.

To get out on the water, you can do a sea-kayak tour (\$43 per half-day), or take excursions on a schooner, lobster boat or the 1923 motor-launch Chippewa (all between \$15-\$25). For \$30, you can take a whale-watching boat 25 miles offshore to the feeding grounds. For all seafaring options, check with the Chamber of Commerce.

You may want to tour the course by bike, and several shops will set you up with a mountain bike or road bike for \$16 a day. I kept

mine overnight and headed back onto the carriage trails after the race for a twilight loop around Witch Hole Pond. Park Loop Road offers 20 miles of one-way highway that skims the edges of rocky cliffs, narrow coves and quiet lakes. (To bike the loop, you need a \$3 pass, which is good for four days.) Aggressive cyclists can tackle the road up Cadillac Mountain for the best views of the area.

I admit that I was more inclined to drive after the race than bike. Which worked fine; Park Loop Road is nearly as nice by car (\$5 entrance fee per car), with scenic stops at Sand Beach, Thunder Hole, Otter Cliffs and Bubble Pond. Sargent Drive near North East Harbor offers views of Somes Sound, the only fjord on the eastern seaboard. Drive to the tip of the less developed western half of Mt. Desert

Island to view Bass Harbor Head Light, a Maine coast icon.

In the evening, join the other happily worn-out tourists working their way up and down the souvenir and craft shops along Main Street. Or sit on a park bench above the harbor and watch the islands and boats slowly disappear in the fading light.—J.B.

We'll leave the light on for you: Near Bar Harbor sits Bass Harbor Light. Its red light has guarded the entrance to Blue Hill Bay since 1858.

