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Acadia's sweet season

For hardy souls, late autumn on Mount Desert Island is a study in stillness, solitude

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SEAL HARBOR, Maine - The sun rises over Sutton Island and the Cranberry Isles. I'm walking by myself, following the carriage roads, circumnavigating the shore of Little Long Pond at the base of Sargent Mountain and Penobscot Mountain on the south side of Acadia National Park.

In fair weather this part of the park is lively with summering preppies. Pastel picnickers spread out blankets in the meadows, retrievers fetch sticks from the pond, horse people drive their carriages up and down the mountains - Martha Stewart, who has a summer house here, can be seen riding her Friesian horses along the roads and over the stone bridges. But today it is cold and most of the leaves have fallen and so I have the place to myself.

In late fall, Mount Desert Island is a paradise for reverent ramblers. There are more than 47,000 acres of mountains, woodlands, ocean shoreline, and lakes, with 125 miles of hiking trails and 45 miles of carriage roads. The hiking trails are marked with stone cairns and hand-carved stone steps. John D. Rockefeller Jr. built the carriage roads between 1913 and 1940. In the summer a couple million visitors swarm all over the park. For those seeking it, solitude can be found on the west side, the "quiet side of the island," but most of the park's attractions are around the high mountain and dramatic shoreline of the east side.

By early November most of the island's tourist attractions have shut down for winter. No more fudge, dream catchers, or plush lobsters. Soon, the ground will freeze, and the scarlet and bronze will disappear from the hills. But for the next few weeks, the park can be a place of stillness and quiet beauty. Now is the time to slow down and walk for

pleasure, to enjoy the waning of the sweet season, the last sights - the purple of the New England asters in bloom, the merry honking of Canada geese flying south, and the winterberry shrubs heavy with red fruit.

From Little Long Pond I drive north through the park and into the town of Bar Harbor. Mount Desert Island has always been a haven for summer visitors. Native Americans called it Pemetic (translated as “the sloping land” or “mountains seen at a distance”). They would have seen the mountains from their birch bark canoes as they paddled down the tidal rivers headed toward summer fishing and food gathering places on the island.

In 1604 the explorer Samuel De Champlain called the area Isles des Monts Deserts - Islands of Bare Topped Mountains. Later came the landscape painters, then the rusticators, and then the cottagers - all the big names of the time: Astor, Pendleton, Vanderbilt, Ford, Rockefeller. Many of the cottagers settled in Bar Harbor.

A forest fire in October of 1947 burned 10,000 acres and destroyed 60 houses, mostly in Bar Harbor. After the fire many of the wealthy summer people moved to Northeast and Seal harbors. In their eyes Bar Harbor had become the place for kitsch and motels. Tourists flock here, but it is also home to plenty of artists and close-to-the-land types, as well as Jackson Laboratory, a nonprofit biomedical research institution, and College of the Atlantic, an environmental liberal arts college.

I stop into the Morning Glory Bakery for an egg sandwich, a cup of coffee, and a sticky bun. The bakery is sunny and packed with hungover college kids and bearded triathlons. No kitsch in sight.

Stuffed, I walk around the corner to the Abbe Museum - a few nicely curated rooms devoted to Maine’s Native American heritage - the Wabanaki, or “people of the dawn” tribes: the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Micmac, and Maliseet.

Right now in addition to the museum’s permanent collection there are two temporary exhibitions - “Indians and Rusticators: Wabanakis and Summer Visitors on Mount Desert Island 1840s-1920s” and “Twisted Path II: Contemporary Native American Art Informed by Tradition” - an invitational contemporary art show featuring native artists from the Northeast. Highlights include Passamaquoddy artist George Neptune’s four-tiered wedding cake woven out of ash and sweetgrass (it looks like chocolate) **and the intricate beadwork of Abenaki artist Rhonda Besaw**. “These are contemporary artists pushing the boundaries of what can be done with traditional crafts like beadwork and basketry,” says Raney Bench, the curator of education at the museum.

In the main gallery I listen to a recording of a snake dance song from Calais from March 1890 and then linger around the cases of artifacts - a swan bone flute, tools of modified bird beaks and beaver teeth, birch bark containers, ash and sweet grass baskets.

During rusticator times Wabanaki guides took the city slickers out to the outer islands to hunt porpoises and seals. The island was wilder then. Now the whole place feels like a botanical garden and the city slickers are here to ride bicycles and eat ice cream cones.

I head out into the park. The 20-mile-long Park Loop Road twists through Acadia's blockbuster attractions - Sand Beach, Thunder Hole, the Jordan Pond House, Bubble Rock, The Precipice trail, Otter Cliffs - and eventually climbs to the 1,530-foot summit of Cadillac Mountain.

I drive the loop. I pass sun-tanned paddle boarders in Otter Cove, a man humming Chinese opera and snapping photos of road kill, an elderly motorcycle group.

I stop for a walk at the Bubbles, a pair of glacially rounded mountains on the west side of Park Loop Road. The trail is covered with yellow birch leaves. Crows harass a sleeping owl. The summit looks down on the cold and deep water of Jordan Pond and out to the outer islands of Frenchman and Penobscot bays. On the way down I make eye contact with a chipmunk.

Back in Bar Harbor, I'm ready for a cup of tea. I stop at A&B Naturals, an excellent, year-round natural food store in the center of town, and help myself to a cup of PG Tips with plenty of cream and honey. They also sell soup, sandwiches, smoothies, and snacks - all precious and rare things during the off-season on the island. Ben Nimkin, a cashier at the store, says that it is a "starling transition from busy summer into quiet winter." "It slows," he says. "It becomes easy to see how small this community really is, and who the real locals are. I love the winter here. The serenity of it, and the peace of it."

The last cruise ship of the season is anchored just offshore. I wander along the Bar Harbor Shorepath, a three-quarter-mile trail that wraps around the eastern tip of town offering big views of Frenchman Bay and the Porcupine Islands.

It's sunny but cold and I'm ready to sit down a while. I walk over to College of the Atlantic. The campus, a former monastery with formal gardens and stone terraces sloping down to Frenchman Bay, is powered almost entirely by renewable energy. The newest student housing village is heated with a giant wood-pellet boiler and boasts composting toilets.

I sit in a rocking chair in the library, looking out over Frenchman Bay, and flipping through a stack of nature journals. I nod off.

Refreshed, I get back in the car and drive up Cadillac Mountain to watch the sun set. In the winter the road to the summit will be unplowed and wild, but for now it is still passable. The road is 3.5 miles of hairpin turns and almost aerial views of the island and ocean.

From the summit it is possible to see many miles in every direction. This is the highest peak on the island. The wind is blowing but the sky is clear. The sun dips down over hills to the west. The granite glows.