

Travel

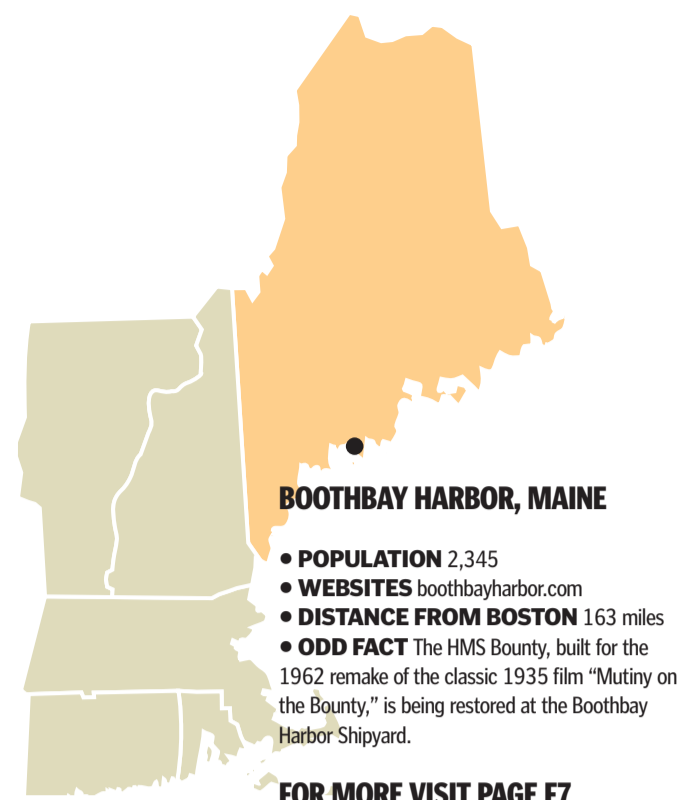
CLOSE-UP ON **BOOTHBAY HARBOR, MAINE**

LOW SEASON HIGHS

EXPLORE THE SEASIDE RESORT WHEN IT'S LESS HECTIC (AND THE PARKING'S FREE)

BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

You're probably familiar with this charming seaside town in warmer weather, when sea kayaks, lobster boats, and whale-watching vessels dance in the harbor. But it's a treat to explore Boothbay Harbor off-season, after the crowds vanish, the locals reappear, and the pace offshore and on land loses its frenetic feel. In the low season, finding a parking spot is a breeze and it's free (lots charge \$2 to \$8 per day in the high season), plus many inns and restaurants drop their prices, and reservations aren't typically required. Although some of the museums, shops, and restaurants close until spring, there's still plenty to do, including relax.



DO

Two picturesque drives take in some of the area's best views. Follow Route 27 south over a narrow swing bridge and do a 15-mile loop around **Southport Island**, stopping at Hendrick's Head Beach and the Southport Memorial Library, which lends books to out-of-towners for free, still uses an old card catalog, and has an excellent collection of books by and about Rachel Carson, the environmental writer who once lived on Southport. Step out onto the Public Pier for top views of Cuckold's Light and, to the right, an osprey's nest.

From Route 27 just north of Boothbay Harbor, take Route 96 east through East Boothbay to **Ocean Point** about six miles away. Park your car at the point, bundle up, and walk along a quintessential rocky Maine coast, with views of open ocean and islands on one side and stately summer homes on the other.

The **Boothbay Region Land Trust** (1 Oak St., 207-633-4818, bbrlt.org) oversees more than a dozen preserves where you can go hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and bird watching. The trails at **Porter Preserve** on Barbers Island (connected to the mainland by a drawbridge) cut through old-growth spruce, oak, and pine forest and offer beautiful views of the Sheepscot River. **Oven's Mouth Preserve** has 5.3 miles of trails that pass by salt marshes, tucked-away coves, and a tidal basin. Pick up maps and a list of guided walks at Oak Street or at kiosks at each of the preserves.

Visiting scenic Boothbay Harbor is quieter and cheaper in the off-season.



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

PLAY

A visit to the **Boothbay Region Historical Society Museum** (72 Oak St., 207-633-0820, www.boothbayhistorical.org) is like stepping into someone's well-organized attic. Six rooms full of old treasures capture the region's history, from ships' bells, lighthouse artifacts, and old photos to tools once used in the local ice-cutting, fishing, and lobster industries. It hosts a monthly storytelling event, Seafaring Adventures, and is open Wednesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., or by appointment.

The new 248-acre **Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens** (Barbers Island Road, 207-633-4333, mainegardens.org) officially opens on May 1 (adults \$10, children 5-17 \$5). Until then, wander the gardens' two miles of trails for free, past stone and glass sculptures, and down a gentle slope to the meditation gardens overlooking a tidal river. Educational programs and events are underway.

Come summertime, you can see blue lobsters at the **Marine Resources Aquarium** (194 McKown Point Road, 207-633-9542), ride a restored narrow-gauge steam train at the **Boothbay Railway Museum** (586 Wiscasset Road/Route 27, 207-633-4727, railwayvillage.org) and take a boat out to **Burnt Island** for a living history tour of the light tower, the keeper's house, and the island (207-633-9559).



At the new Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens, Henry Richardson's glass orb sits next to a path leading down to the meditation garden.

PARTY

At the **Townsend Avenue Coffee House and Wine Bar** (53 Townsend Ave., 207-633-0809, townsendcoffeehouse.com, open until 11 p.m., Thursdays through Saturdays), you may feel as if you've stepped into someone's Pottery Barn-style home. Sit on a leather couch or oversized chair, listen to live music, surf the Net wirelessly, and sip your merlot or Colombian blend in the two living room-like spaces downstairs. Or, retreat to a room upstairs and indulge in chocolate fondue and make-your-own s'mores. Book, poetry, and play readings are also big here.

For a more lively scene, head for **McSeagull's** (14 Wharf St., 207-633-5900, Fridays through Sundays until April and then daily the rest of the year) on Pier 1 for the live music, pub-style atmosphere, and plenty of elbow room off-season. Come spring, two other bar/restaurants reopen on Pier 1 — Hawks and Gray's Wharf — and the "barmuda triangle," as it's called, becomes a center for nightlife.

SPEND

The metalsmiths at **A Silver Lining** (17 Townsend Ave., 207-633-4103, asilverlining.com) produce a great selection of jewelry in gold, sterling silver, and titanium, while the **House of Logan and Village Store** (20 Townsend Ave., 800-414-5144) carries designer clothes (Vera Bradley and Lilly Pulitzer), household accessories and coastal gifts.

The **Palabra Shop** (53 Commercial St., 207-633-4225, palabra.shop.com) is a treasure trove of antiques, newer artifacts, and Maine handicrafts and geegaws. Wander through the shop's 10 packed rooms and then check out its collection of Moses bottles — the world's largest collection, which were once used to bottle Poland Spring water (viewing by appointment).

Just up the street, the two-story **Sherman's Book & Stationery** (5 Commercial St., 800-371-8128 or 207-633-7262, shermans.com) carries a good selection of books on all things nautical and titles by local authors, plus toys and kitschy souvenirs.

Many local artisans keep their studios open for visitors year-round. Keep an eye out for their signs.



Shopping along Commercial Street can net anything from antiques to handicrafts.

FUEL

Mama D's Cafe (50 Union St., 207-633-3464, breakfast \$2-\$5.50, sandwiches and wraps \$4.45-\$6.95) is a great place to stop for breakfast, quiche, or a wrap. Sit in the window seat, at the counter, or at a handful of round tables and read the Boothbay Register. Local tip: The cafe serves free hot chocolate when it's snowing.

For its creative menu and tavern-like feel, you can't beat the **Thistle Inn's** restaurant (55 Oak St., 877-633-3541, thethistleinn.com, sandwiches and burgers \$5-\$10, dinner entrees \$16-\$26). It offers dinner and live entertainment year-round, but in the winter, prices drop and it adds a daily lunch menu with upscale pub-style fare (Portobello wraps, hot sandwiches, and burgers with hand-cut fries).

It takes a while to read through the menu at **93 Townsend** (93 Townsend Ave., 207-633-0777, 93townsend.com, entrees \$15-\$23, more for lobster dinners), which offers an extensive range of seafood dishes — you can have your lobster at least nine ways — and a national award-winning appetizer: french-fried asparagus served with cabernet ketchup.



Owner Lorie Demers of Mama D's Cafe serves free hot chocolate whenever it is snowing.

REST

Affordable rooms with fireplaces, comfy chairs, and ocean views are easy to come by in the wintertime.

The **Welch House Inn** (56 McKown St., 800-279-7313, welchhouseinn.com, \$125-\$155 winter, \$175-\$205 summer) sits on a hill overlooking town with terrific views of the harbor from each of its nine winter guest rooms (14 available in summer). Fine art and antiques decorate this classic New England-style inn. Enjoy a gourmet breakfast and the innkeeper's homemade granola.

The **Hodgdon Island Inn** (374 Barbers Island Road, 207-633-7474, hodgdonislandinn.com, \$140 winter, \$185 summer) is a top choice if you want to get away from it all. Located a few miles from town near the Porter Preserve, this grand-looking, 1810 sea captain's home overlooks Hodgdon Cove and has nine bedrooms, a family-style dining room and, in case you can't entirely unplug, a parlor with books, games, videos, a TV, wireless Internet, and free phone calls anywhere in North America.

Just east of town, on the road to Ocean Point, is the **Linekin Bay Bed and Breakfast** (531 Ocean Point Road, 207-633-9900, linekinbaybb.com, \$95-\$120 winter, \$135-\$185 summer). The rooms in this New England-style farmhouse have spacious bathrooms, fireplaces or gas stoves, down comforters and hand-painted details and stenciling throughout.