

Maine

Into Thoreau's Woods

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Geographic Region: **ME, USA**

Tankbag Maps: [Download Map 1](#)

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The biggest, wildest state in New England, Maine is also the first state in the union to catch the light of the rising sun. As a September dawn wakes me in Kennebunkport, the nearby routes along this storied coast exert a very strong pull – nearly 3,500 miles of beaches, bays, inlets, and harbors – but I have other intriguing plans for the day.

Day 1: Coastal Getaway

I follow US 9 north to Saco, where I catch SR112. Passing under Interstate 95, I leave the lobsters and coast behind. I'm heading inland, to the land of the moose, and the mountains and lakes and woods that begat Paul Bunyan and inspired Thoreau.

SR117 is on my escape route, a quiet road that becomes more rural with each passing mile. As the morning progresses, mountains appear in the distance and small vistas reveal themselves on open stretches. Trees, trees, and more trees, parting only for the numerous lakes or odd farm that dot the countryside. These are the Maine woods, covering 90 percent of the state and standing thick as thieves.

After a mellow morning ride, Bridgeton is a good stop for lunch. Like other small towns in the state, Bridgeton has an unassuming air and a character all its own – Ricky's Diner, replete with fifties-era décor and an old jukebox, is next to a leather and tattoo shop with a miniature custom cruiser parked out front.

I stay on SR117 until Buckfield, where I join SR140 north to SR219 west. Pavement flecks flash in the afternoon sun as the road continues to twist and rise. In West Paris, I head teasingly toward the White Mountains of New Hampshire on SR26. They're growing on the horizon, but in Newry I turn on SR2 east and end the temptation. New Hampshire will have to wait. I have more of Maine to see.

I meet the legendary lumberjack Paul Bunyan in Rumford. Other states may claim him as a native son, yet here he stands, over 15 feet tall and towering above the Kawasaki. State lore maintains he and his blue ox Babe were born in Maine, and as loggers traveled west they carried tales of the outrageous pair with them. This particular statue of Paul used to greet customers of a local hardware store but was brought to the information center at Rumford Falls when the store closed.

On SR17 in Mexico, ME, I start the final stretch of the day with a sense of urgency, eager to find shelter and a warm meal before the sun sets. The road bisects a farm-lined valley before following a crooked, raging river. Without warning, the road rises, and then rises some more to a breathtaking view of Lake Moselookmeguntic. A little further along there's an equally stunning twilight view of Rangeley Lake. I ride for moments like this – to be shaken from the stupor of everyday life and renewed by the incomparable beauty in this world.

I reach the town of Rangeley in the fading light. Located halfway between the equator and the North Pole, the town feels like a sleepy vacation outpost, and much farther from Kennebunkport than the 200 miles and 1,507 feet in altitude change might suggest. The sidewalks are rolled up for the evening except for the ruckus at Sarge's, a country-sports/karaoke bar, if you can imagine that. Some patrons are willing the Red Sox to victory, while others are belting out classic Country/Western tunes. It's a fun way to close out the day.

Day 2: The Wild, Wild East

I leave Rangeley on SR16 after having some strong coffee and a great omelet at the BMC Diner. In Stratton, SR16 turns southeast and passes the Sugarloaf Mountain ski resort before shadowing the Carrabasset River into Kingfield. The mountains fill the mirrors as I climb out of town. Part of the beauty of riding is watching the land transform beneath your wheels and arriving at places where that transformation is projected in sharp relief. Kingfield is one of those places. East of town the land flattens and in fifteen minutes the mountains are gone.

For me, a resident of New Jersey (the most densely populated state in the nation), Maine (the least densely populated state east of the Mississippi River) feels desolate. Towns are miles apart and usually defined by little more than an intersection and a small collection of weathered homes. Maybe there's a gas station and convenience store. In between you'll roam miles and miles of wild that but for the road appear untouched by man, the way I thought it only existed out West or to the north in the Canadian woods.

I find gas and lunch on SR201 in Solon and watch life go by as the late-summer sun takes the edge off the early autumn chill. Refueled, I continue along the Kennebec River, the land and sky expanding in my field of vision as I head north towards the Canadian

border. The next "big" town, Jackman (pop. 718), is nearly 50 miles away, leaving just me, the logging trucks that run this road and a Canadian racing for the border in an SUV. The Kawasaki devours the generous sweepers, the long arrow-straight climbs on the hills, and the flat sections where the vista extends for miles. The logging trucks aren't doing that badly either, their drivers confidently pushing the rigs. Frost heaves and patchy pavement keep my top speed in check while the Canadian's dogged persistence keeps him a dot in the mirrors – sometimes growing, sometimes shrinking, but always there.

From Jackman, I head east on SR6 toward Moosehead Lake, the largest lake in Maine, and feel even more isolated. No more logging trucks, no more high-speed Canadians – just me, the bike, and the woods. It's easy to be charmed by their quiet splendor, and I know that I'm not the first to feel this way. The naturalist Henry David Thoreau wandered these woods alone too, canoeing and hiking, and climbing Mt. Kineo, the sheer, flinty prominence that rises 700 improbable feet above the lake's surface.

Moosehead Lake is a tranquil giant, 120 square miles of secluded coves and bays punctuated by 80 forested islands. A handful of late-season vacationers quietly ply the waters, as though mindful of the mystical mood. I desperately want to stay awhile, settle on a porch somewhere and just stare at the mountain and lake in the changing light. But with dusk approaching I have many miles to go, and continue down SR6, racing again to find a room. Greenville, Guilford, and Dover-Foxcroft are dispatched with a twist of the wrist, and a warm bed, clean bath, and hot meal are found in Milo.

Day 3: Keep Maine Beautiful

Figuratively and literally, the morning is dominated by another mountain – Mt. Khatadin. The northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail and the jewel of Baxter State Park, it soars dramatically over its flat surround much like Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and Ayer's Rock/Uluru in Australia. I ride up SR11 to get as close as I can.

But before the mountain, I take a detour down an active logging road in search of the Khatadin Iron Works. In its heyday (the mid-1800s), the Iron Works produced 2,000 tons of pig iron a year with the help of 200 men, 16 charcoal kilns, and a towering blast furnace. A small company town and railroad grew from this venture, but all that remains six miles down a gravel road is the shell of the blast furnace and a lone charcoal kiln.

I return to asphalt and continue to Khatadin. SR11 stretches to Millinocket, where I follow the signs to Baxter State Park. The mountain looms larger by the minute: a small feature on the horizon this morning has become an imposing, hulking mass. Suddenly, Khatadin disappears. I've entered Baxter State Park and the road shrinks – tight, winding, and covered by a thick canopy of limbs and leaves that blot out the sky. This is as close as I'll get. As part of its original intent, to remain "forever wild," the park is closed to motorcycles. And as wild as the landscape has been to now, even this brief glimpse of Baxter exceeds it, feeling even more primitive and dark. The thick woods seem ready to devour the sun and any hints of man's presence.

Leaving the mountain behind, I stop to examine the mural on a huge, garage-sized boulder. First painted in the 1970s by high-school students, the mural is a panorama of forest life, showing a bear beside a raging brook, a fish leaping upstream, and a deer looking off into the distance. Geese fly overhead near Khatadin, and above them the words "Keep Maine Beautiful" float in the sky. Two local artists, Abbot and Nancy, have restored the mural a few times before, and here they are again, on a bright September day, giving their time to preserve the sentiments of Thoreau and others who have visited the Maine woods and been similarly awed.

I stop in Millinocket for lunch and roll on. SR11 turns left and SR157 continues ahead, crossing Interstate 95. I pause. By crossing I-95, I'll be leaving the Maine of the moose and returning to the Maine of the lobster. I'm not ready. I turn around and turn north on SR11 in Medway. The road borders a small creek for awhile and then rises. Over my left shoulder, Khatadin guards the western horizon, shadowing my progress for a few more precious miles before I give in, turn east, and cross I-95 on SR158.

The land, rolling and tilting softly, eventually flattening, is hatch-marked with more intersecting roads, then farms and houses and traffic than I've seen altogether in the past few days. SR158 blends into SR2 south, which flows into SR2A south. They're fine country roads but they elicit little excitement. Maybe it's the drag of another long day. Maybe it's what's behind, the magic of the Maine woods... SR170 south begets SR169 south begetting SR6 east where the final folds of earth unfurl onto the sea-level plain.

On US1 south I join a line of cars bound for Calais. I refuel there and consider stopping for the evening. But I've been spoiled – and even in my fatigued state, the idea of spending an evening here holds little appeal. I decide to press on a bit further south and wearily drag myself into Robbinston, as far as I can safely go. The drab motel and cramped room make me feel like a caged animal. Fresh mountain air has been replaced with the pungent odor of chemical cleaning products. I open all the windows for relief, eat a simple meal, and fall asleep to the sound of the receding tide.

Day 4: Final Surprise

I awaken to morning fog – and construction. The ZX-14 soldiers on, its prodigious horsepower held in check as I ride on patches of soft soil. My breakfast is served at the WaCo Diner in Eastport, the easternmost diner in the easternmost settlement in the US. It's a popular spot for watching the surging waters of Passamaquoddy Bay (an inlet of the Bay of Fundy noted for its massive tidal swings), including the Old Sow, the largest tidal whirlpool in the Western Hemisphere.

It's raining and cold when I leave Eastport. I tuck my gauntlets into my sleeves and shove off. There's not going to be a lot to see in this meteorological soup, so I make my way to US 9 (via 214, 191, and Cooper Road) on a beeline for Bangor. I'm so focused on the road that I barely notice the spare beauty of the rolling, desolate terrain. It's a tough slog – I'm still fatigued and chilled to boot – using the velocity of the Kawasaki to keep safe gaps between myself and others. I'm not the only nut on the road though: other bikers are pressing onward in the opposite direction.

Bangor brings relief. The showers abate. I catch US 1 South, and all of the traffic and development come as a slight shock to the system after days of solitude. Fleeting glimpses of the sea float by as I focus on today's lunch stop in Camden, a charming little town, with lots of shops and people out on a Saturday afternoon. And it's worth the trip for Cappy's Chowder House alone, a great recommendation I owe to a virtual friend (SmokeEater from ApriliaForum.com).

The last miles dwindling, I think the trip is over, the highlights logged, the cameras put away; but I'm in for one final treat by taking SR105 from downtown Camden. As I head inland with Mt. Battie over my right shoulder, the pavement is drying, and the road becomes a quirky collection of dips, rises, and apexes all the way to Augusta. All that's left now is a hop on Interstate 95 to get back to Kennebunkport.

Strangely, in my four days of wandering, I didn't run across a single moose – the closest I got was a black cat in Rangeley. But I was able to linger a while in the woods and by the waters Thoreau found so mesmerizing, and wouldn't be surprised if, like him, I found myself visiting them once more.

Waldo Emerson Inn

108 Summer Street
Kennebunk, Maine 04043
(877) 521-8776

www.waldoemersoninn.com

Just outside of downtown Kennebunkport the Waldo Emerson Inn is the quintessential New England Bed & Breakfast. There's history (the inn was built by the great uncle of Ralph Waldo Emerson), charm (wide plank floors, fireplaces in the rooms), and a filling, multi-course breakfast. Innkeepers John and Kathy Daamen even have a poodle named Waldo!

Rangeley Inn and Motor Lodge

2443 Main Street
Rangeley, Maine 04970
(207) 864-3341

www.rangeleyinn.com

The new owners of the Rangeley Inn and Motor Lodge toured Southeast Asia on a Kawasaki many moons ago, so they're biker-friendly. They let me park the bike out back, away from prying eyes.

They have great plans for the inn, a hotel in the grand old tradition with spacious hallways, a formal dining room, and dimly lit pub with a good selection of beers and great apple crisp. Rooms may not be the most modern, but they are simple and clean and a refreshing break from typical budget hotel chains. The Motor Lodge has a view of Haley Pond out back and you can park right outside your door.

Down Home Bed & Breakfast

51 Elm Street
Milo, Maine 04465
(207) 943-5167 or (888) 909-3422

www.downhomebnb.com

The owners of the Down Home, Leanne and David, were a long-haul trucking team for twelve years and they always have another great road story in reserve. Once they retire, they hope to haul for NASCAR and follow the oval circus.

This B & B's five simple and clean rooms aren't too frilly or overdone. Wireless Internet is free of charge and the parking area is lit for safety.

FACTS AND INFORMATION

Total Mileage: Approximately 983 miles.

In General

Maine is the biggest state in New England, with short summers and long winters. Much of the inland recreation revolves around outdoor activities (hunting, fishing, kayaking, and hiking). It's the least densely populated state east of the Mississippi, so most roads are lightly traveled, except for tourist areas during the summer and fall foliage seasons. Mild and quiet, September is a good time for touring.

The farther you get from the coast, the greater the distance between gas, food and lodging. In more remote areas, lodgings are primarily camps, Maine-talk for vacation cabins. Over half of the state consists of "unorganized territories" with no local government. If you're thinking about exploring out-of-the-way regions of Maine, plan ahead. The small towns roll up their sidewalks early.

How to Get There

Interstate 95 is the primary access road from points south and southwest. There are several points of entry from Canada and New

Hampshire, the only state that Maine borders. Bangor and Portland have international airports.

Food & Lodging

Treat yourself to lobster and chowder when near the coast. For a quick, delicious boost of energy, a lobster roll (toasted hotdog bun brimming with lobster meat) is hard to beat.

Roads & Biking

A Maine winter is harsh, and logging trucks are heavy, hulking beasts. The combination very often damages the road surface, quickly changing it from billiard-table smooth to frost-heaved and heavily patched. Look far ahead, up the road, and pass logging trucks with care. They know these roads better than you.

Northern Maine contains many dirt roads that invite exploration with a dual purpose/adventure touring bike, but most of the roads on this trip can be ridden on anything from a standard to a tourer.

Addresses & Phone Numbers

- www.visitmaine.com
- Street Cycles (405 U.S. Route 1, Falmouth, ME, 207-781-4763, www.streetcycles.com) has a collection of parts and gear for any last-minute motorcycle provisions. They carry BMW, Suzuki, and Triumph models.

Motorcycle Rental

- Portland: 1-800-harleyD
www.bigmooseharley.com
- Augusta: (800) 934-1653
www.northcountryhd.com
Manchester, NH
(Harley-Davidson and Honda)
(760) 249-1105

Books & Maps

- Maine: An Explorer's Guide,
by Christina Tree and Nancy English, The Countryman Press,
ISBN 9780881507188, \$19.95
- The Maine Highway Map,
Hartnett House
Distributed by AutoMap Dealer
16 Pineview Street
Lewiston, Maine 04240
- GreatRoadsGreatRides.com offers a "Moto-Map" of Maine

Motorcycle & Gear

Kawasaki Ninja ZX-14
Helmet:
HJC AC-12 Carbon "Elbowz" replica
Jacket and Pants: Aerostich Roadcrafter
Boots: TourMaster Solution
Gloves:
BMW Allround, Joe Rocket Highside
Saddlebags: Givi T449

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