

## **Biking Tour of the New Hampshire Seacoast** By Ian Aldrich

From sidewalks and beaches overlooking the Atlantic to a scenic road snaking its way into sea-side towns buzzing with activity, New Hampshire's 18-mile long coastline offers visitors the perfect daytrip. And it can be done without adding to your carbon footprint. The coast lends itself particularly well to parking the car and hopping on a bicycle to experience the region at a more leisurely and environmentally-friendly pace.

Along those 18 miles, Seabrook and Hampton serve lots of colorful flair, while North Hampton and Rye do the water's edge with magnificent mansions, manicured lawns, and long, sandy beaches. Route 1A is, for the most part, an ideal road to bike. Traffic moseys along, the road's shoulders are generously wide, and in many areas there are bike paths or sidewalks to follow if you feel inclined to distance yourself a bit more from the cars. You can do it as a one-way adventure, beginning or ending in either Seabrook or Portsmouth, or, if you're up for it, as a 36-mile loop.

For those travelers who've come to the region without a bike, there are two great rental options to consider. The first is **Bicycle Bob's Outlet** (21) on Route 1 in Portsmouth. Located just 2 miles south of the Traffic Circle, Bob's, which has been around for nearly three decades, offers a full selection of hybrid cycles. Helmets and car racks are also available. In town and in the heart of Portsmouth, is **Papa Wheelies** (20) on Islington Street. Papa offers a range of options, too, from road and mountain bikes to tandems and hybrids. For those inclined to go a little more Lance Armstrong, the shop offers to rent its exclusive line of high-end road and mountain bikes. All rentals include helmets and bottle cages.

I have my own bike, so my journey begins where the water begins—at the southern end of New Hampshire's coast, in Seabrook, home to the only four-lane section of Route 1A, where travelers can smell the ocean close by. Four miles into the ride, I cross the Neil R. Underwood Jr. Memorial Bridge (1) into Hampton. **Hampton Beach State Park** (2) is the first available stop, home to the only RV park on the New Hampshire coast and the starting point for miles of sandy beach. A little less than 0.5 miles later, I find myself coasting into Hampton Beach, where there's a wonderful mix of contrasting scenes. To the right, the crisp blue Atlantic. To the left, an action-packed lineup of arcades, pizza joints, surf shops, and souvenir merchants. Sunbathers and beach umbrellas blanket the sand, while teenagers line the sidewalk, laughing, celebrating summer's freedom.

For the next 0.75 miles, your job is to take in all that the "strip" has to offer. Hungry? **Happy Fried Chicken** (3) is one of the first places you pass. Just 0.3 miles along, you'll find **Blink's Fry Doe** (5), and 0.4 miles from there, you may just want to park your bike and cool off with an ice cream cone at **Stat's** (6). The fun continues just a few doors up at **Playland Arcade** (7), or if you're up for it, at the nearby **Hampton Beach Casino Ballroom** (4). A mainstay here in Hampton since it first opened its doors in—get this—1899, the Ballroom welcomes A-list performers (think John Hiatt, B.B. King, and the Indigo Girls). Best of all, the Casino itself—a sprawling complex of some 50 shops, including the Funorama arcade, kiddie rides, and food—offers something for the entire family.

Popular places to stay along this part of the route include **Ashworth by the Sea** (8) and the **Hampton House Hotel** (9). Time it right and you may never leave Hampton, thanks to the town's annual Seafood Festival. Held in early September, it's the largest event of its kind in New England, pulling in thousands of hungry visitors each year. On the docket: seafood of course, as well as fireworks, live music, dancing, even skydiving.

Continuing north, I leave the strip behind and suddenly 1.5 miles later, I find myself riding along the quieter North Beach section of Hampton. The traffic thins, the beach crowd dwindles, and the smell of salt air is intoxicating. A little over 1 mile after leaving North Beach, I make a stop at **The Beach Plum** (11), a little seafood and ice cream shack located directly across the street from **North Hampton State Beach** (10). Here, a lobster roll at one of the Plum's picnic tables, under a grove of cool pines, is a must.

Fortified, I push 0.5 miles farther into North Hampton and eventually, Rye. The challenge on this section of road is deciding what to look at. The mansions? The boulder-strewn coast? Or the blooming pink rose hips that line the edge of the sidewalk? My eyes dart back and forth, trying to take it all in.

Then, 0.5 miles from the Beach Plum, I venture for the first time off 1A, turn left onto Willow Avenue, and let my bike coast for 0.1 miles before pulling into the parking lot of **Fuller Gardens** (12). Flower and plant enthusiasts have been coming here since the 1920s, and no wonder. The cozy Japanese garden is a marvel, and the scent of thousands of varieties of roses bite softly through the salt air.

Upon leaving Fuller, I'm faced with a choice: Turn right to continue north along the water, or take a left and ride out the remaining 0.5 miles of Willow Avenue as it loops behind the area's lush summer homes before reconnecting with 1A. I opt for the opulent homes and coast the remaining 0.5 miles down the middle of the quiet street, not a car in sight.

Back on 1A, and into Rye, where the cycling is stop-and-go—too much to take advantage of, too many opportunities to kick your bike shoes off. Another 1.5 miles along, **Jeness State Beach** (13) offers riders a chance to get off their bikes again and play in the sand and water. Another eating option beckons 0.5 miles from there, in the form of **Saunders at Rye Harbor** (14). To find it, turn right onto Harbor Road, a narrow dead-end street that hugs the water and leads to this popular no-frills seafood restaurant. A 75-year institution, the menu here includes favorites such as the lobster melt (complete with a croissant and cheddar cheese), lobster roll, and the haddock sandwich.

The water views continue for the next few miles, as the road offers gentle bends and twists, taking me past **Rye Harbor State Park** (15); 0.5 miles later, Wallis Sands; and then, 1.7 miles from there, the starring attraction, **Odiorne Point State Park** (16). Once known as Fort Dearborn, Odiorne Point came under ownership of the Federal Government during World War II, when the area was used as a defense point to protect Portsmouth Harbor and the Naval Shipyard. Today, the Point's 330 acres form the largest stretch of undeveloped real estate on the New Hampshire coast. Trails and picnic spots abound, and the Seacoast Science Center, which highlights the region's natural and cultural history, is a must for kids.

From Odiorne, I continue 2 miles north along 1A, dipping into the outer edges of Portsmouth, briefly leaving the water behind as I pedal through more residential terrain. At the junction of Route 1B, I turn right and ride 1.5 miles into New Castle, where the restored red-roofed **Wentworth by the Sea** (18) hotel towers over everything else. Totally renovated in the last decade, this elegant 135-year-old facility includes a large and luxurious spa, where weary riders can relax their feet at the end of the long day. Even better: local foods help flavor executive chef Daniel Dumont's menu at the hotel's exceptionally exquisite restaurant. Less than 1 mile from the Wentworth is **Great Island Common** (19), a 32-acre on-the-water recreational park that, like Odiorne, is rich with military history.

For the next 2 miles Route 1B continues through New Castle, whose Main Street is jam-packed with some of the finest New England architecture—beautifully restored Colonials, Capes, and saltboxes—in the six-state region. Then 2.5 miles after leaving the Wentworth, you cross the water again, into Portsmouth, where boutiques, restaurants, and other fun gift shops beckon. But with close to 20 miles beneath my wheels, I decide to retrace my steps and head back to my car. Before I can even get back to Route 1A, however, I'm derailed by **The Ice House** restaurant (17) on Route 1B in Rye. The prospect of a chocolate frappe is too enticing. I sit on the front steps with my ice cream amid people popping in and out of air-conditioned cars. They just don't know what they're missing.