

## Take me away to Casco Bay

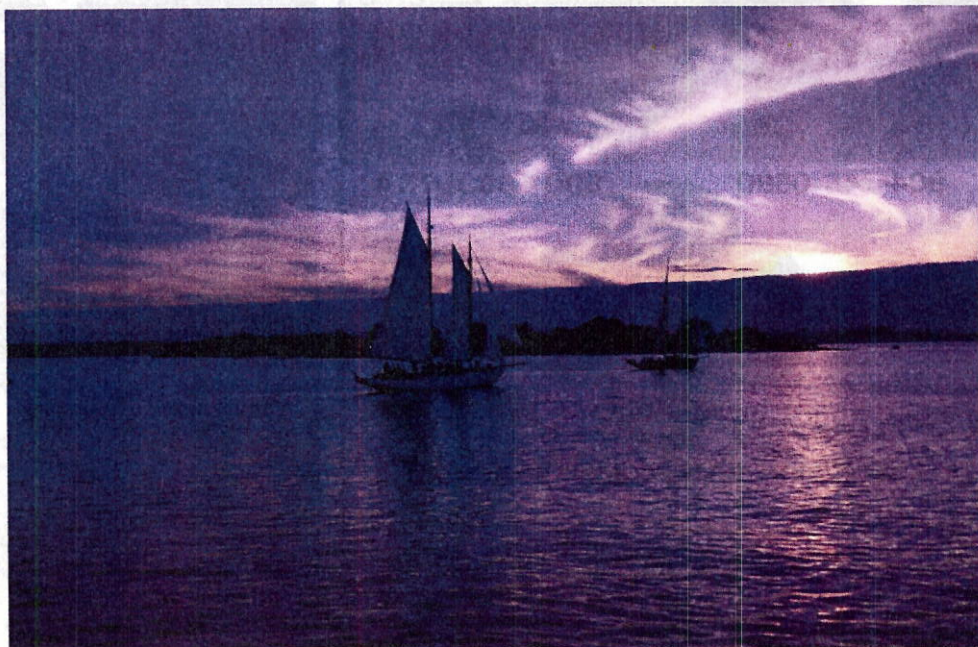
**D**id you know that Portland, Maine, is only a two-hour drive from Boston? Here's another interesting factoid: this bustling city is actually a peninsula, surrounded by water on three sides, a port among ports. Needless to say, water views abound, and they don't get any better than those from the Eastern Promenade at the tip of the peninsula, a large grassy park leading down to East End Beach.

Refreshingly compact, Portland is nonetheless Maine's largest city with 64,000 people. It has a charming small-town feel and is an ideal place for walking, especially along the cobblestone streets of the Old Port with its Victorian-style brick buildings, gas light fixtures and independently owned boutiques. You will quickly find that you're never more than a few blocks from the water.

If you crave some classic coastal scenery, some of the finest beaches in the country lie along Maine's Southern Coast en route to Portland. Historic Old Orchard Beach is a broad seven-mile stretch of white sand, known for its glorious town pier extending 500 feet into the Atlantic Ocean. Kennebunk Beach and the nearby charming town of Kennebunkport, a former shipbuilding center with palatial summer homes, are also well worth the stop.

As you can imagine, fabulous seafood restaurants with succulent lobster and tasty microbrews line Portland's wharf, tantalizing the tastebuds of any "foodie." However, finding a chicken nugget is a much more challenging proposition. If your kids are into peanut butter and jelly as most are, you will find the perfect eatery on Monument Square, aptly called Peanut Butter Jelly Time.

Children's Museum & Theatre of Maine is well worth the visit with four stories of fun and educational exhibits with a clever Maine twist. Where else can kids learn to drive a lobster boat or commandeer a life-sized pirate ship? If you get a chance to slip away for some adult time, next door you will find the world-class Portland Museum of Art, designed by the legendary I.M. Pei, master of



*A ferry ride on Casco Bay at sunset provides incredible views of the Maine coast. You may even see a majestic schooner with sails full of wind. (Photo by Libby Carty McNamee)*

modern architecture.

Back to reality: The Portland Fire Museum is located in an old station house filled with antique engines and pieces of equipment sure to captivate any budding rescue hero. And if you time it right, you may be able to hoist the Jolly Roger flag and cheer on the Portland Pirates hockey team.

Kids can express their own artsy side with a visit to Color Me Mine. At this paint-it-yourself studio, they can select from 400 ceramic pieces and glaze, paint, and fire their souvenir that they will later receive in the mail. (This means one less thing to lug on the plane.)

In addition to taking the Wicked Walking Tour of "Haunted Portland," there are many other modes of transportation to help you take in Portland, such as the seasonal Duck Boat and trolley tours. For young train aficionados, the Maine Narrow Gauge Railroad chugs along the scenic waterfront every hour. Powered by antique steam and diesel locomotives, this unique two-foot gauge

train once linked Maine with the rest of the world.

Another unique form of transportation is to hop on a ferry. Head to the Casco Bay Lines Terminal and take one of its 10 daily cruises with an upper and lower deck. Especially at sunset, you'll take in some incredible views of the Maine coast, working lighthouses, and have the chance to check out a picturesque island. The sight of a majestic schooner with its sails full of wind is bound to be a highlight of your trip. Keep your eyes peeled for the spacious Visitor Information Center handily located on the bay 500 yards from the ferry terminal.

Only 20 minutes north, the village of Freeport is an easy day trip. As the home of L.L. Bean and countless upscale outlet stores, it has emerged as the Pine Tree State's No. 1 destination. L.L. Bean is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and even has a café. If your kids wake up early, you will actually have somewhere to go! Be sure to check out the

aquarium where kids (and adults) can literally insert their heads without getting wet.

When you need a pick-me-up after all that shopping, head across the street to Wilbur's of Maine Chocolate Confections or down the street to their factory for some sublime chocolate and candy creations. My favorites are the butter almond toffee, homemade peanut butter cups and divine chocolate bars. (Because my aunt and uncle own the store, I've gotten lots of free samples over the years, qualifying myself as an "expert taster.") The highlight of the excursion for my 5-year-old son was the novelty of eating at a McDonald's in a HOUSE, an antique one at that. Well, he sure liked his chocolate lobster, too. **RPM**

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*Libby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer, traveler, and mother so happy to have seen her cousin get married on the ferry to Peaks Island. You can visit her at [www.libbymcnafee.com](http://www.libbymcnafee.com) and read her blog at [www.libbywithay.blogspot.com](http://www.libbywithay.blogspot.com)*