

A TASTE OF

Maine

BY MARY BLYE HOWE

Lobster buoys
are a familiar
sight in Maine.

Finding lobster in Maine is like finding a McDonald's in the rest of the country. Lobster shacks border the main streets of many of the small coastal towns, with huge black smokers churning out meals for ravenous tourists. Lines form at all the windows, where customers wait for platters of lobster and chips, which they'll eat at one of a dozen picnic tables squeezed together on the lawn.

Pickups park alongside the roads between towns, tailgates open, displaying baskets of fresh blueberries, sweet corn and buckets of live lobster.

Yet Maine is about far more than lobster. My memories are of standing on the patio of a lighthouse while watching the fog, thick as a forest fire, roll in off the sea.

They are also of island hopping, hiking along trails where miniature chipmunks scamper around you in abrupt, strobe-like movements, of old graveyards, fiddle jam sessions and in virtually every restaurant, incredible homemade breads and desserts (as well as plenty of entrees that don't consist of lobster).

During our most recent visit, my husband Mike and I made our home base in the tourist town of Bar Harbor, but we spent most of our time in quiet, uncrowded harbor villages. Our first morning, we drove to nearby Bass Harbor, a small working harbor, where we hitched up with a photographer who gave us a tour of the town.

Cameras in hand, we zoomed in on brightly painted lobster buoys hanging from long lines outside tiny shops, sunflower-yellow algae growing on the side of red-brick buildings, and lobster boats bobbing along the shore.

Leaving the tour group, I strolled out onto a dock to watch several children diving for scallops. Even wearing a warm jacket, I shivered from the crisp sea air, yet one of the children was swimming in nothing but a pair of shorts.

Standing on the edge of the dock, the children leaped into the air on the count of three, plunging into the cold water and then diving towards the bottom. Springing to the surface, one flung a sea cucumber near my foot, while another held up a crab for inspection. Then



down they went again, looking for whatever else might impress me.

A fisherman lumbered onto the deck and rolled his eyes good-naturedly at the boys. "What are you going to do with that little crab?" he asked them.

"Put it in your lobster trap."

The fisherman grinned.

According to our guide, there are 11 islands visible from Bass Harbor, almost all of which were once inhabited. Now only one is—Swan Island, to which you can catch a tour boat. One island tour that originates from Bass Harbor goes to Frenchboro. Like all other tour destinations in this part of Maine, Frenchboro is a quiet town where you can walk along the seashore, breaking for lunch as the rhythmic, hypnotic sound of waves follow one another onto the shore.

Driving back to our hotel, we noticed a lovely little cafe in Southwest Harbor. Seated on the small patio where everyone was chatting, we browsed the menu. The waitress brought out twists of bread in a flamboyant flower pot with a cup of oil and herbs. The lantern she lit was made from a wine bottle, and our table from a giant rustic door.

Mike ordered black pepper fettucine with fresh garden vegetables and herbs, and I chose the crab cakes served on angel hair pasta with black beans, corn, red pepper and a lemon and honey salsa. All the desserts were homemade: blueberry bread pudding, numerous cheesecakes, blueberry crisp topped with whipped cream, and an assortment of pies, brownies and cookies.

The next morning, we pulled into the harbor at 7 a.m. and boarded the ferry for the three-hour trip to Yarmouth.

Our guide drove along the shore, stopping so we could watch a load of

baby herring gush from a chute into gigantic vats. The maximum allowable catch for each day is 280,000 pounds.

We were told that on the East Coast there is such a shortage of fish that they are brought in from Norway. She explained that while lobster is most valuable in terms of the dollar, herring is most lucrative through its large catch.

As we hiked along the shore and further inland, we stopped to taste rose hips (not native to this area), wild caraway and Dulse, a seaweed that's packaged and sold as a snack. "We eat seaweed at the theater instead of popcorn," said our guide.

Halfway through the tour, we stopped at the garage of a lobster man who opened a box to show us dozens of bloodworms burrowing through moist sand. He buys the bloodworms from local worm harvesters for about 12 cents each, then sells them to fishermen in Virginia for 50 cents each. Sea worms can't be raised, but they make superior bait, so fishermen order them by the hundreds.

At the end of the tour, we sat in a local restaurant until our ferry arrived for the trip back to Bar Harbor. ■



AAAWAY TO GO

August 2, The Best of Maine, 8 days, AAA escorted. \$1789, twin; \$2269, single. Air included from Tampa.