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ADVENTURE FORTY-FOUR — AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2024

HEADING TO THE HIGHLANDS

By Jenny Wisniewski

While many of us hit the road in search of new places and experiences, sometimes the most rewarding experiences can be found in the places that feel somehow familiar.

With any luck, if you fish on Moosehead Lake, you might have a lakeside fish-fry for dinner.



Where I come from, there's a destination with vague boundaries, dense woods, and lakes aplenty. It is the Northwoods of Wisconsin, a place Wisconsinites fondly refer to as "Up North."

Mainers have an "Up North," too, I learned recently while on a trip to the state with my 16-year-old son, Ryan. They call it "The Maine Highlands."

I definitely felt déjà vu the first time I went out on Maine's Moosehead Lake; the spot looked and felt so much like home. There's a good reason for that—though Maine and Wisconsin are many miles apart, both are dense with similar forest. Moosehead Lake, Maine's largest body of fresh water, is encircled by dense birch, evergreen, and maple trees.

However, the lake differs from any in Wisconsin in one dramatic way—it is ringed by a group of low-slung mountains (a part of the Appalachian range), giving it a lofty dimension that is absent in the Midwestern woods. During my recent visit, I discovered that it is a soul-soothing place to spend a few days.

Almost There

Heading north along State Route 6, we made a pit stop in Monson, a lovely town less than an hour's drive from the southern tip of Moosehead Lake. The French music we heard while flipping through the radio stations tipped us off that we were also close to Quebec. (Monson is a 90-minute drive from the Quebec border.)

I pulled over at the General Store: a shop with a large dollop of small-town nostalgia, a sprinkle of artsy fartsy, and a smattering of practical items for hikers and other recreationists. It also has a deli counter featuring specialty sandwiches and an assortment of fruit, yogurt, and Maine's signature whoopie pies. With extra time, I would have explored beyond the General Store, as Monson, though tiny, offers antique shops, galleries, and award-winning restaurants; however, road-weary and hungry, we decided to buy a few sandwiches and trail mix and press on to our destination.

Moosehead is a large lake, approximately 120 square miles in size. Our destination was located on the western side of the lake at one of Maine's historical and much beloved sporting camps. These camps, which have been around since the 1860s, appeal to families and outdoor enthusiasts wanting to escape the trappings of modern society and spend time tucked away in the woods. Accommodation options are rustic—some even primitive—but they provide a place to lay your head after a day of outside play. Most include a lodge with a dining room and various outdoor pursuits to choose from.

When I opened my car door at one such camp, called The Birches Resort, I immediately heard the rhythmic slapping of waves on rock. In fact, the cabins

stand just a few yards from the water's edge. Someone with long legs and a sense of adventure could probably jump into the lake from the wide front porch stretching across the front of each cabin.

Early-Morning Fishing

We spent our first morning on Moosehead Lake in a boat with a fishing guide named Al. Ryan couldn't wait to cast for the lake salmon, lake trout, and brook trout reportedly living beneath the lake's surface. Al took us inward about 11 miles from the town of Greenville, where we had launched.

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A lifelong resident of Greenville, Al grew up above his mom and stepdad's bait and tackle shop. He clearly knew all there is to know about fishing on this lake, and was happy to share his wisdom. The lake trout, called togue, are the largest native freshwater fish in Maine, we learned.

Because two-thirds of the land around the lake is in a conservation easement, the area remains relatively peaceful. Sure enough, we shared the lake with only a few other boats that morning.

Our keeper that day was an 18-inch togue, which we lightly breaded and pan-fried for dinner that night—perfect for the two of us.

Upward to Mount Kineo

Stepping away from the water on the second day of our adventure, we decided to tackle a hike and get a view of Moosehead Lake from up high. Opportunities for hiking abound in this region, including a challenge called the Moosehead Pinnacle Pursuit. Hikers receive their "stripes," summiting each of six mountains around the lake. We chose one of these six, Mount Kineo, for our day out on the trails.

Because Mount Kineo is on a peninsula with no roads, the adventure requires a lake shuttle from a Rockwood dock to the trailhead. Two trails, Bridle Trail and

Indian Trail, wind up to an old fire tower with spectacular views from the top. Ryan picked Indian Trail, which led us along steep inclines on rock-laden paths and narrow trails along cliffsides. To further challenge us, it had rained nearly every day the previous month, so the trail was muddy and slick.

My 16-year-old soccer-playing son shimmied right up the trail, barely breaking a sweat. I am no couch potato, but I am neither 16 nor a soccer player. In my world, this was a tough hike.

At one point, we came to a 60-degree incline covered with thin, flat rocks that slid beneath our feet. Using all fours, we clawed our way to the top of the treacherous stretch.

Finally reaching the peak, our hike earned us the right to climb eight flights of stairs at the fire tower. Whew! At last, the prize appeared: a panoramic view of Moosehead Lake and the peaks in the surrounding landscape.

After a picnic lunch, we hiked the manageable Bridle Trail back down, and I realized that this was the trail we should have taken on the way up. I made a mental note to usurp trail navigation from my son.

Later that afternoon, when we returned to our cottage, I plopped down on one of the Adirondack chairs on the front porch. Ryan

began casting from the shore, but within 15 minutes he lay down on the narrow lane of grass and fell asleep. The kids from the neighboring cabin wandered over, playing make believe with their water toys. Ryan became a part of their caper as they crawled around him in the grass, their high-pitched voices jabbering away. Sleeping right through the noise, Ryan was apparently more tired from the hike than he let on—and for this, I felt just a little bit vindicated.

A Moose Safari

As I amused myself watching the scene on the grass in front of me, a small seaplane lifted from the water in the distance. I assumed that John Willard was either taking visitors out on an expedition or perhaps heading to his home across the lake; Willard is both the owner of The Birches Resort and the pilot of the seaplane. He took over ownership from his father, who bought the property in 1969. Its original owner hired Quebecois loggers in 1930 to build the cabins and dining lodge with hand-hewn logs, the structures facing eastward so visitors could view the rising sun over Mount Kineo, the mountain that Ryan and I had hiked.

Today, the original cabins, although remodeled, still stand. The current owners have added

Above: At The Birches Resort, the porch is almost leaping distance from the lake.

Above, center: The panoramic view of Moosehead Lake from Mount Kineo.



other stay options, including yurts and RV camping.

Like most sporting camps, The Birches Resort offers all manner of outdoor pursuits, including expeditions in the seaplane, whitewater rafting, and kayaking. We spent an afternoon kayaking before embarking on an adventure I just couldn't pass up—a moose safari. Along with about a dozen others, we climbed aboard a boat late in the afternoon for what we hoped would yield a sighting—or several—of the area's thriving moose population. At worst, it would be a guided tour of the lake on a beautiful evening, sans moose. Not the worst result!

For the most part, it was a guided lake tour. We did catch a glimpse of a cow moose and her calf in the woods, but it was a fleeting look as both got spooked when they caught sight of us.

Still, it was a relaxing way to spend our final evening at Moosehead Lake. Prior to venturing across the lake to an adjoining stream in search of moose, Eric, our tour guide, took us to the base of Mount Kineo for a final perspective of the flat-topped, peninsular mountain. I had read that in times past, Native Americans had traveled long distances to Mount Kineo for its deposits of rhyolite, which is ideal for making arrowheads and

tools. Eric reported that artifacts made from this rock have been found as far away as Missouri.

Our stay at Moosehead Lake was coming to a close, but we had one thing left to look forward to: dinner at the lodge. We had spent our other evenings cooking in and sitting in front of a campfire, but we decided on this final night to have someone cook for us. The dining room couldn't have been any cozier, with hand-hewn logs, a giant fieldstone fireplace, rustic decor, and a view of the lake. The menu offered plenty of comfort food for visitors who had spent the day playing hard outside. For me, that meant eggplant parmesan, and for Ryan, a rack of ribs.

As we returned to our cabin, the moon was rising, dropping glitter upon the lake on its ascent. The brisk evening air smelled of pine and campfire, and I was ready to be lulled to sleep by the rhythmic spilling of the waves. I felt lucky that I'd had the opportunity to spend these days with my son, who is growing up so quickly, and it was fitting that I did it in a place that felt just a little bit like home. **R**

Jenny Wisniewski is a freelance travel writer based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her work can be viewed at jennywisniewski.com or on LinkedIn.



After a difficult hike, Ryan tried a spot of fishing before needing a nap.

