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travel

Follow the LIGHT

A road trip through New England

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The old & the new

Audrey Young sheds light on the delights of New England, from sobering Kennebunkport to illusive Mystic

The Boston weather forecasters had promised storm clouds on the first day of my road trip through New England which seemed fitting for the anniversary of September 11. It turned out to be anything but gloomy.

In fact, romance was in the air. The wind was up a bit, quite evidently, from the way it held up the many American flags flying that day, but the sun was out.

Falling on a Sunday, it was a day of togetherness for families and friends, and for flag-flying. Many headed to Nubble Lighthouse, the first of 65 lighthouses along the Maine coast heading north. It was my recommended first stop out of Boston, too.

Besides the attraction of the lighthouse, it's a convenient place for a day out: there's a good souvenir store with clean toilets, the Fox family's takeaway canteen with a restaurant out the back, a big carpark almost to the cliff's edge and plenty of space on the rocks from which to look across the gully to the lighthouse.

James and Lauren, from Dracut, Massachusetts, arrived in the carpark with a few friends. James led Lauren down the rocks for a better view of the lighthouse and — with the Atlantic thrashing against the rocks below — asked her to marry him.

Not by megaphone. It was the applause of friends that alerted us to a happy moment, and the joyful weeping of Lauren, the showing of the ring, the hugs, and more tears and hugs.

It called for a private celebration of my own which I found in the form of a lobster roll at Fox's take-out joint.

Maine was giving me an excellent first impression.

My only reference point for Maine before now was through a recipe book, *Lobster Rolls and Blueberry Pie*, subtitled "three generations of recipes and stories from summers on the coast of Maine", which I bought in New York at the Pearl Oyster Bar a few years ago.

The book and the bar were both the work of Rebecca Charles and inspired by summers at Kennebunkport. Just the name makes you want to see it, and say it. Kennebunkport. Kennebunkport. Kennebunkport. It would make a good sobriety test.

So I took a brief detour after Nubble Lighthouse to find Kennebunkport, which turned out to be a picture-perfect seaside village.

The sense of a private discovery evaporated, however, when I learned that the little gem of Kennebunkport has been discovered by George Bush senior's father and grandfather. So big is the Bush footprint in Kennebunkport, that they have a family "compound" for them and their security detail, and have inspired a summer pastime called "Bushwatching".

Portland, Maine, was my primary destination,



NEW ENGLAND

- Is not New.
- Is not in England.
- Is not a state.
- Was settled by English Pilgrims in 1620.
- Comprises six states: Massachusetts (MA), Maine (ME), New Hampshire (NH), Vermont (VT), Rhode Island (RI), Connecticut (CT).

the city with just 67,000 people. The other Portland on the opposite side of the country has 600,000.

Maine has familiar features to New Zealand: it's a big farm, with an outdoors culture and nowhere is far from the sea. A local cinema happened to be showing *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* when I passed through, not a film that would translate well to all US states.

It's known for its lighthouses, blueberries, and lobsters (its basketball team is known as the Red Claws).

Portland is a proper port town, with proper working wharves that accommodate its thriving lobster industry, seafood restaurants, museums and the trendy Sea Bags shop turning old sails into fashion items. It's impossible to get lost, and easy for pedestrians, except that some old streets still have cobblestones.

Portland also has artistic credentials. Its most famous son is the writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a celebrity poet of his day and author of *Paul Revere's Ride*, and whose work was so admired by Neil Diamond, he wrote the song *Longfellow Serenade*.

Longfellow's family home on Congress St has been restored, there's a square named after him with a statue of him wearing a beard, something he did only after the death of second wife, Fanny. She suffered fatal burns when her dress caught fire and he suffered burns on his face trying to smother them.

Another legend, Bette Davis, lived in Portland, in the posh suburb of Cape Elizabeth. According

to local history, one of her husbands — who would not have passed the Kennebunkport test — missed a plane from New York so caught a taxi and not having the right amount of cash on arrival, popped inside and paid the driver with one of her Oscars.

He soon joined the club of ex-husbands. The same ex-husband, Gary Merrill, bought one of the region's lighthouses in 1971 — if the Oscar wasn't enough, maybe the lighthouse would have clinched it, had she not already divorced him by then.

But the most iconic lighthouse of the area, and reportedly the most photographed lighthouse in America, is the Portland Head Light, the oldest lighthouse in Maine at 225 years old.

Longfellow was a frequent visitor to the place, often walking several miles out from town to visit his friends, the keeper and his wife.

Also on Congress St is what I'd call a proper art gallery, the Portland Museum of Art.

You can usually tell in the first 10 paces whether a museum is more dedicated to its customers or to its own importance, and this museum was the former.

It has a confident display of modern and historic pieces as well as the other two essentials, a good shop and a good cafe. It's a real asset to what is essentially a small city or a big town that sports the tallest building in all of Maine — 16 storeys.

I took a taxi from the museum for an appointment across town.

When I asked the driver what distinguished the people of Maine from other New Englanders, he said: "People say we are slow. We do things more slowly. We talk slow. We drive slow."



Clockwise from left: Sunrise at Portland Head Light; Audrey Young on Mt Washington; Andrea McHugh lunching at Castle Hill; Sea Bags turns old sails into fashion items; James and Lauren got engaged on the Maine coastline (inset). Pictures / Getty Images; Audrey Young



Checklist

NEW ENGLAND

GETTING THERE
United Airlines flies daily between Auckland and Boston, with a stopover in San Francisco. Prices from about \$2170 for Economy Class return travel in February. united.com

DETAILS
House of Travel's Best of New England Road Trip starts at \$1869 pp with 11 nights accommodation and car hire. hot.co.nz

ONLINE
discovernewengland.org
VisitTheUSA.com

He proved the point by arriving late. When I asked the same question of a driver in New Hampshire, he pointed to their independence.

"Live free or die" is the motto of New Hampshire," said Chuck. "And we are the least religious state," he adds with such pride that I had to congratulate him.

Chuck is the bus driver at Flume Gorge, one of the must-visit nature destinations in New Hampshire if only for the fabulous drive through miles of national parks to get there.

The spectacular Kancamagus Highway would make another good sobriety test, if only you could work out how to say it sober.

The name Flume Gorge is a bit like having La Mer Sea, or Awa River because a flume, like a gorge, is a vessel through which water flows, but it was named in 1808 when pioneers had more of a say than pedants.

Back then, one tough 93-year-old lady, Jess Guernsey, came home from fishing one day to announce to her family: "I've found a flume, I've found a flume."

What she had found was a natural gorge with straight granite walls rising 25m from the bottom of the narrow gorge.

She was initially disbelieved but today thousands make the trek up a valley to see this rock that began life 200 million years ago as molten lava.

The best thing is the close-up view, because the Franconia Notch State Park maintains a sound wooden walkway up the side of one of the walls which are only about six metres apart.

I took the shorter one-hour trip, which included a bus ride with Chuck part of the way over a cute covered bridge.

Some prefer their encounters with nature to be on the wilderness end of the spectrum. I don't mind a bit of assistance be it bus or train. Yes, train, the Cog Railway. Not far from Flume Gorge is Mt Washington, and you can catch a train carriage to the top — not a zig-zagging train, but one that climbs straight up the side and has done so for tourists since 1869.

Part of the White Mountains, Mt Washington is the highest peak in New England at 1917m, which is only 600m shorter than Taranaki.

Train-assisted mountain climbing would never get past America's equivalent to the Resource Management Act these days but on the sustainability side, it does have biodiesel or steam engines.

There's a road to the summit on the other side of the mountain and part of the Appalachian Trail also crosses near the top — it's good to see plenty of trampers doing it with no props.

As the name suggests, the Cog Railway is run on a cog system so there is no chance of slipping down.

"This is the first time today they've let me do this by myself," the driver tells the carriage with a grin. But it sounds like a very well-worn line.

If you like your nature with political connotations, at the bottom of Mt Washington is a tiny place called Bretton Woods with a rather large hotel where a conference on monetary management was held in 1944 and which gave rise to the Bretton Woods Institutions, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Vermont was my next destination, the home of

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Discover America »



Explore the many historic landmarks in New England's unofficial capital, one of the oldest cities in the United States.

BOSTON

BURLINGTON

Situated on the shores of Lake Champlain, Vermont's largest city is often referred to as one of the most liveable in the US. Take advantage of its delicious local cheeses while you're there. **26km from Boston**

PORTLAND, MAINE

Try the famous Maine lobster in one of this thriving city's renowned eateries. **172km from Boston**

ARCADIA NATIONAL PARK

Be sure to take in the sites of one of the country's greatest and most visited wildlife areas. **444km from Boston**

RANGELY LAKES SCENIC BYWAY

Keep your eyes peeled for moose, bobcats and bears on this stunning stretch of road traversing the pristine lakes and mountains of Maine. **344km from Boston**

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maple syrup and now its newest icon, Bernie Sanders.

And what a drive. You could fly into Maine but to miss the drive through New Hampshire would be to miss one of the area's highlights, long stretches of road surrounded by beautiful unspoiled forest.

Vermont, something of a verdant eco-state, also has a sense of being the great outdoors because it has the second smallest population of any US state (after Wyoming,) with about 627,000 people.

Being small and rural doesn't mean being conservative.

This was the first US state to begin the abolition of slavery, in 1777, and the first US state to legalise civil unions in 2000. Its biggest city, the lakeside city of Burlington, has only 42,000 people, which makes it very easy to navigate.

It is also the home of Senator Sanders, the firebrand who fought Hillary Clinton for the Democrat nomination.

There are no Bernie souvenir shops but you get the feeling that it is the sort of city where, if you were to sit in the shopping mall for a week or two, he would probably walk by.

Failing that, Bernie — who started out as the mayor of Burlington — makes a permanent appearance on a mural of local luminaries in the middle of the mall.

One of the people who helped turn him into a hardened operator is Rick Sharp, himself a battle-hardened activist who now runs Burlington Segways.

A guided tour with Sharp is a human history tour through Burlington's local body battles of the 70s and 80s when he fought Bernie's plans to build a high-rise apartment on the edge of Lake Champlain.

"There was a time when he would see me and cross the road," says Sharp.

Sharp and allies won the battle and helped to pave the way for the waterfront park and bike trail which are key tourist attractions. Bernie announced his bid for the presidency at a rally held in the same spot that the condominium would have stood.

"Everyone thinks Bernie saved the waterfront," says Sharp ruefully.

Would someone please just say thank you to him?

Lake Champlain — named after a French explorer who claimed the area for France in 1601 — is a staggering 200km long and stretches into Canada. Montreal is only a 90-minute drive away.

The lakefront freezes over in winter but in-between times ferries operate across to New York state and the belle, or beau, of the dock is the Spirit of Ethan Allan, a 42m passenger cruise ship, which does a buffet dinner cruise with an old-style pianist.

Fed and watered by the warm and friendly Davis family at the Willard St Inn, a B&B mansion, I drove not far out of Burlington for a look at the weirdly wonderful Shelburne Museum complex.

It is the result of the magnificent obsession of Electra Havemeyer Webb, who loved collecting American things and had the wealth to do so on an unparalleled scale.

The Shelburne Museum is a campus of 39 structures within which are collections of quilts, dolls, duck decoys, hat boxes, glass canes and horse-drawn carriages, plus historic buildings themselves that have been transported to the site — a schoolhouse, a merry-go-round (for adults



Clockwise from left: A mural of Bernie Sanders in Burlington's mall; Nubble Lighthouse, one of many along the Maine coast; Flume Gorge in Franconia Notch State Park; the Vanderbilt's Breakers Mansion; Bernie Sanders on the campaign trail (inset). Pictures / denisbin; Eric Nilby; Robert Linsdell; Audrey Young; AP



too), a round barn, a covered bridge, a lighthouse and a 200ft steamboat among them.

But wait, there's more. Her children recreated parts of their parents' Park Ave New York apartment on the site which contained one small clue as to the proclivity for collecting — Monet, Manet and Degas works abound.

The museum also has a couple of conventional art galleries and changing exhibitions. You need a full day to absorb the extent of the eccentric Mrs Webb's "collection of collections".

She came from money herself, but it helped that she married James Webb II, whose mother was a Vanderbilt.

I made a fleeting stopover in Newfane, southern Vermont, and my next proper stop was Newport, Rhode Island, another place not unfamiliar to the Vanderbilt family.

You don't need to be wealthy to go there, but legends of fortune are inextricably linked to its fame. Some of the mansions along Bellevue Ave would be called palaces in other cultures. They are manifestations of extreme wealth, or obscene wealth if you like, that was curbed in 1913 with the permanent introduction of that revolutionary concept, income tax.

Some are still in private hands — Larry Ellison of Oracle fame is doing one up. But several are owned and preserved as museums by the Preservation Society, for public jaw-dropping.

The most famous one, the Breakers Mansion, was commissioned by Cornelius Vanderbilt II,

the great-grandfather of the CNN anchor Anderson Cooper — Cooper is the son of Gloria Vanderbilt, who is the granddaughter of Cornelius II. (Cooper and his mother this year released an HBO documentary on their lives, *Nothing Left Unsaid*.)

Built in the ostentatious manner of an Italian Renaissance-style palace with crystal chandeliers and gold gilt, it has 70 rooms, and 20 bathrooms. Cornelius' marble bath has four taps, for hot and cold running saltwater as well as plain water.

But the audio tour suggests that the thrills came cheaper than that: the favourite sport of the children of the household and party revellers was sliding down the stairs on silver trays — a feat apparently accomplished by President John F. Kennedy in 1962 when he was guest of honour at an America's Cup party at Breakers.

JFK and Jackie Bouvier were married in Newport and the reception held at her family's summer seaside home, a more modest affair than Breakers.

One of the most elite clubs in Newport is the Spouting Rock Beach Association, membership of which gains one access to the private Bailey's Beach, its deck chairs, towels, drinks and waiters. Newport local Andrea McHugh tells me over lunch there is a strong rumour that Donald Trump applied to be a member 20 years ago but was declined. Not "old money". It sounds like the sort of place that would still decline him today, despite his new status.

There are cheaper ways of getting to experience the good life of Newport without having to

KENT

Regarded as the best spot for viewing New England's signature autumn (fall) foliage, Kent and the surrounding woods offer stunning hikes and drives. **246km from Boston**

NEWPORT

Home to the richest of the rich, this historic seaside town on Rhode Island offers a chance to see how the likes of Vanderbilts and Rockefellers live. **114km from Boston**

BOSTON

After all that scenery you're probably in the mood for a hot dog and some serious sport. You can't miss a chance to watch the New England Patriots or Boston Red Sox in action.

MT WASHINGTON

Photo opportunities abound as you ascend the highest peak in the northeastern US, but be careful of the notoriously changeable weather. **267km from Boston**

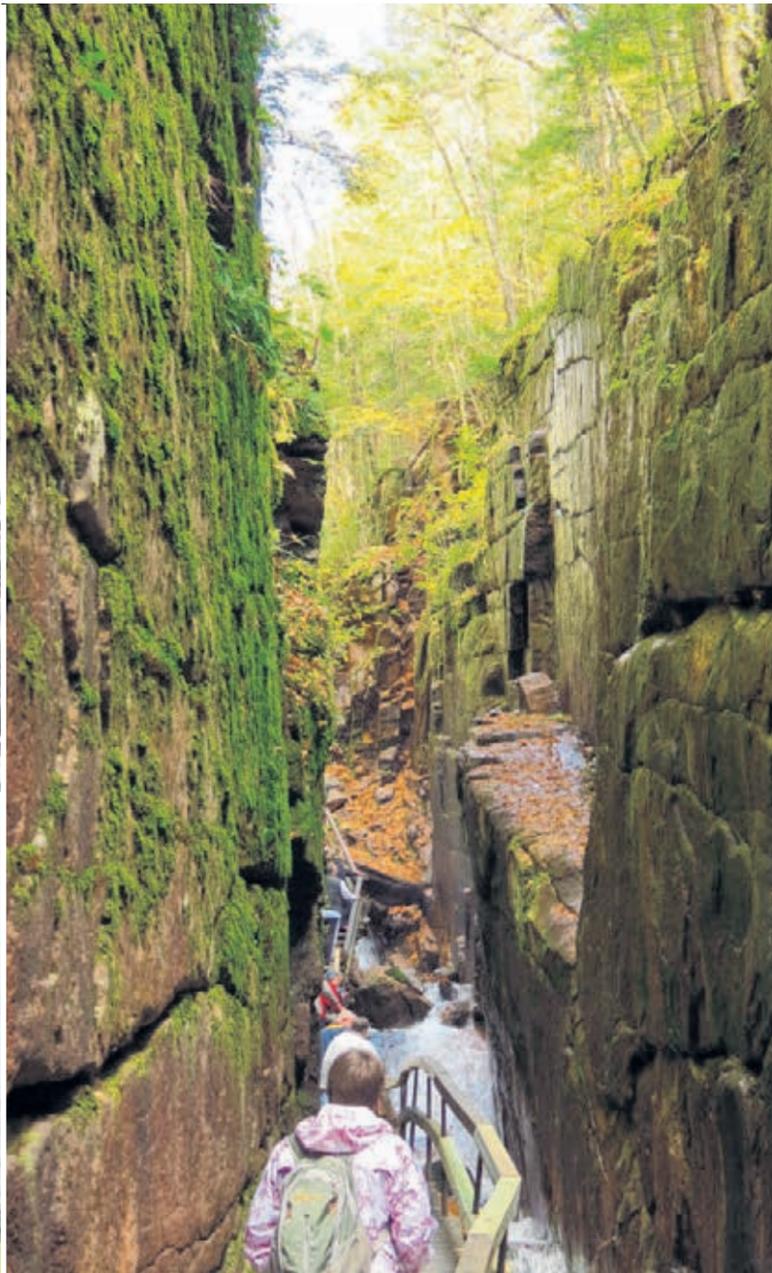
MARTHAS VINEYARD

Hop on a ferry and meander along Edgartown's picturesque streets past Victorian era manors, or just enjoy a day or two at the beach. **156km from Boston**

CAPE COD

A popular holiday destination known for its beautiful beaches and world class seafood. **112km from Boston**

BOSTON



century seafaring village. Visitors can take to the water on all manner of vessels but the stars of the show are the historic sailing ships on display, which are there to explore.

(Actually the balladeer who roamed the village belting out old sea shanties was a star, too.)

The 105ft whaling ship the Charles W. Morgan is the last wooden whaling ship in the world. It was commissioned the same year as the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840. In its 80 years of action and 37 voyages, it was a frequent visitor to the Pacific including to New Zealand, Chris, the volunteer guide tells me. Voyages could take three years and the hold could store barrels of oil from about 60 whales. The ship was last sailed in 2014 when it had a three-month outing along the New England coast. It was a case of being appalled and impressed at the same time.

My last stop in New England was New London. It was a short drive from "Mystic" across a river called the Thames, not to be confused with the one in old London. In New England the locals adopted a new pronunciation; here the river rhymes with "James" and the "Th" is sounded, as in "think".

I finished almost as I started my New England road trip, with a lighthouse visit — not just one lighthouse but eight of them, on the Lighthouse Cruise from New London.

I shared the voyage with a couple from Virginia, Rusty and Roland, who grew up not far from New London, and had returned for a 75th birthday party.

They pointed out the half-submarine construction company on the Thames (the other half is made in Virginia and transported north to be welded to the New London half) and the home of Pfizer pharmaceutical company (it must be rich because it makes Viagra, one elderly passenger declared).

Each lighthouse has its own story but perhaps the most iconic is the Ledge Light, near the mouth of the Thames. It is reportedly haunted by an old keeper, Ernie, who threw himself off it when his wife ran off with a ferry captain.

Another, the North Dumpling Light, is now owned by the inventor of the Segway, Dean Kamen, who, the tour guide said, had declared it the Republic of North Dumpling and produced a flag and national anthem.

A lovely boat trip to be sure but like Nubble Lighthouse, the real pleasures are encounters with the people — past and present — along the way.

marry a Vanderbilt or join the Newport polo club.

A sunset harbour sail on the Madeleine is one way; lunch and a drink at the Castle Hill Inn another. Not far from Bailey's Beach and poised on a hill, it arranges deck chairs on its grass slopes to give a dress-circle view of the harbour traffic.

The last day of my New England tour began

in a place that didn't exist. Not Brigadoon, but Mystic, Connecticut.

Before even arriving I thought it had to be a darling of a place, with a name like that.

Much to my disappointment, the place some call Mystic is officially part of Groton (west of the Mystic River) and Stonington (east of the Mystic river). What does exist, indisputably, is Mystic Seaport, a stunning recreation of a 19th-

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