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## Expert Answers Biking in New England

### John's Question.

I am planning a tour from Boston to Searsport, ME, and then inland to the VT/NH border, back through MA and out to the cape before returning to Boston. Wondering if you could give me an idea of what to expect in general for road surface conditions, areas of auto traffic, and especially how hilly the terrain is on the coast of Maine.

— John Staroba, Santa Rosa, CA

### Ethan Gelber's Answer.

I have to be honest: I love New England. I spent all of my childhood summers in Maine and did my first solo bike trip (at the plumb age of 16) in New England: from Springfield, MA, to my parents' home not too far from Searsport, ME, via the northwest corner of Massachusetts, the length of the state to Boston, out the stretch of the cape to Provincetown, the ferry back to Boston, and then up the Atlantic coast.



Ethan Gelber

Not having had the same kinds of experiences anywhere else in the United States, I confess that I am biased. But while I wouldn't dream of saying ill about the miraculous riding in other states of the Union, I could never give enough attention to the glories of New England. I still dip into the Down East down whenever I can.

So, a tour as you have described it sounds great! New England really honestly is the land of quaint townships and clapboard farmhouses. It's hospitality, warm smiles, famous accents, good food, and delicious variable scenery.

But first, here's a little something about road conditions:

In New England, major non-controlled-access United States highways are of excellent quality and the straightest line between two destinations. Many of them

are only two-lane thoroughfares for long stretches, but in most cases there are wide shoulders, good services, and a solid paved surface. That said, because of the quality of the ride, these roads are also the primary traffic axes, especially when there is no parallel freeway or tollway alternative.

A step down from these are the two-lane state roads. Smaller, more rural, less well-serviced, less carefully maintained, and shorter of shoulder, these roads and their even smaller county road kin (often just local lanes without road paint) are ideal for biking. They may not follow the most majestic crest line the way a U.S. route does (attracting all of the gawking-driver-driven wide-vehicle recreational tanks that can be so hazardous to a cyclist's health), but the dip into the true green of the countryside — complete with buzzing birds and insects that you can actually hear! — more than makes up for it. And though you may face more poorly filled potholes than you would on a more major artery, you have the time and the space to navigate around them.

So what are some potential traffic snags? Many, depending on what you are planning.

First of all, coastal Route 1 in Maine, particularly between Brunswick and Camden, sees heavy circulation, especially during the summer. That's basically because it is the only road sweeping up the seaboard. The shoulder is, however, wide enough to not make this torture, but be attentive. Especially when you are on the rolling hills, which, as you surmised in your question, you will see plenty of.

For the return trip across Maine to the New Hampshire/Vermont border, a lot depends on how far north you will be. From Searsport, Route 3 to Augusta is a scenic, pleasant ride. As John discovered, Route 137 from Belfast to Waterville is a great alternative, but it ropes you into a ride on Route 2. From Augusta you can head northwest on 17 to U.S. Route 2. Alternately, take county roads through Wayne, North Leeds, North Turner, East and West Sumner, and North Paris to Route 26. North on 26 will take you to Route 2; south will take you to 117 and then Route 302. Both Routes 2 and 302 are major east-west roads that see a lot of traffic, but Route 2 can be particularly distressing. The better bet is Route 302. Go to Conway and pick up Route 112. The Kancamagus Highway across the White Mountains is awesome. (During the summer, avoid the roads around the otherwise beautiful Lake Winnepesaukee!) Stay on 112 across Route 3 and then fork left on 118, which you can follow all the way to Canaan, and then take Route 4 into and beyond Lebanon. Route 12A to Route 12 to Route 5 is a great way along the Connecticut River.

Crossing Massachusetts, you will be much happier on Route 119 (which you pick up in New Hampshire at Hinsdale) than anything else. If you don't mind the extra miles, get off on tertiary roads as much as possible. Finally, on Cape Cod, avoid Route 28 as long as you can. Route 6A is muuuuch better. At least until you hit Route 6. During the summer, this road can be very, very busy.

A few last thoughts communicated by John (the question-asker himself): From a West Coast cyclist's perspective, irregular intersections take some time to get used to, including rotaries. He also found that most

streets are not marked (or have only cross street names marked), which, if you're going off of cue cards, makes navigating pretty much impossible. He ended up following main roads the entire way.

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