

3 Days in Acadia

Cadillac Mountain, the Park Loop Road, and the famous sunrise claim that is only true for five months of the year.

⚠ READ THIS BEFORE YOU SET AN ALARM

Cadillac is the first sunrise in the country — from October 7 to March 6. That date range is the park's own, printed on its own Cadillac Mountain page, and almost nobody repeats the second half of the sentence.

Vehicle reservations run May 20 to October 25. So for nearly the whole season when people are setting 3 AM alarms and refreshing Recreation.gov, Cadillac is not the first place in the country to see the sun come up. It is still a magnificent sunrise. It is just not *that* sunrise.

QUICK FACTS BEFORE YOU GO

- **The claim and the season overlap by 19 days** — October 7 to October 25.
- **\$6 per vehicle reservation** for Cadillac Summit Road, Recreation.gov only, never sold at the park.
- **\$35 per vehicle** entrance pass, valid seven days. Separate from the reservation.
- **Non-US residents pay \$100 per person** on top, from January 1, 2026.
- **No hotel inside the park.** Bar Harbor is the base for three days.
- **Low tide moves an hour each day** — three of the best things here are gated by it.

Cadillac Is First. For Five Months.

The park says so itself — and the qualifier never travels with the claim

Everyone knows Cadillac Mountain is where the sun first touches the United States. Here is the National Park Service, in full, on its own page:

“From October 7 to March 6, Cadillac Mountain is the first place in the country you can see the sun rise.”

Now set that against the only season you are allowed to drive up it.

THE SUNRISE CLAIM

Oct 7 – Mar 6

The window the park actually states. Outside it, first light lands somewhere else — for much of the year, elsewhere in Maine.

THE RESERVATION SEASON

May 20 – Oct 25

When a vehicle reservation is required, and broadly when the summit road is open to drive for sunrise at all.

19 days

THE ENTIRE OVERLAP — OCTOBER 7 TO OCTOBER 25

What this changes about your trip

If the first-sunrise-in-the-country line is the reason you are going, **go in October** — the back end of the month is the only time both things are true at once.

If you are going in July, go up anyway and enjoy it for what it is: a sunrise from a bald granite summit over the Gulf of Maine, with the ocean starting at the bottom of the hill.

And know that **a reservation buys access, not a sunrise**. Fog is common here in June, July and August, and it does not care that you booked ninety days ago.

Cadillac Reservations, Explained

Two categories, two release drops, and three things people get wrong

1 Sunrise and daytime are separate reservations

Different inventory, different entry windows, different rules. Sunrise gives you a **90-minute** entry window where daytime gives you 30. You may hold **one sunrise reservation per seven days**, against one daytime per day.

\$6 PER VEHICLE

RECREATION.GOV ONLY

2 Most of the inventory drops two days out

30% is released at 10 AM Eastern, 90 days ahead. The other **70% at 10 AM Eastern, two days before.** Missing the 90-day drop is not missing your chance — most of the tickets have not been sold yet.

90 DAYS

TWO DAYS

10 AM EASTERN

3 The reservation is not your park pass

You need both. The entrance pass is \$35 per vehicle for seven days; the reservation is \$6 and covers nothing except driving up one road.

YOU NEED BOTH

4 It does not come with a parking space

The park says so plainly. You have bought permission to drive up a road. Summit parking is often full at sunrise and sunset, and arriving with a reservation and no space is the gap most people fall through.

ARRIVE AN HOUR EARLY

5 There is no re-entry, and no departure deadline

Go up once and stay. Nothing forces you down until the road closes to vehicles at 9 PM.

ONE WAY
UP

The 2026 season ran May 20 to October 25. **No 2027 dates had been announced when this was written** — check before you plan around them.

“I Couldn't Get a Reservation”

Four ways up — and two of them are better than driving

The reservation applies to **vehicles on Cadillac Summit Road**. It is not a permit to be on the mountain, and people who miss it routinely conclude Cadillac is closed to them. It is not.

1 Wait for the two-day drop

70% of the inventory is still unsold until 10 AM Eastern two days before your date. Set an alarm for that, not for the 90-day release you already missed.

70% OF TICKETS

10 AM EASTERN

2 Walk up the North Ridge Trail · 4.4 mi round trip

Two to four hours over granite slope and stairs. No reservation, no \$6, and a far better morning than a car park — you get the ridge while everyone else queues for a space.

NO RESERVATION

2–4 HOURS

3 Or the South Ridge Trail, the long way · 7.1 mi round trip

Forested path onto open granite ridgeline with one iron rung. Trailhead is off Route 3 in Otter Creek past Blackwoods Campground — no road sign, shoulder parking only. It is also the one route up where **dogs are allowed**, leashed.

NO RESERVATION

DOGS ALLOWED

NO ROAD SIGN

4 Bike it, or take a taxi

Neither needs a reservation. The road is narrow and you share it with cars, so the bike option is for confident cyclists rather than a casual ride.

NO RESERVATION

What will not work: waiting for a bus. The Island Explorer does not go up Cadillac. The free shuttle that solves your parking problem everywhere else in the park does not serve this one mountain — and a campground booking does not come with summit access either.

Acadia Runs on the Tide

The reason this itinerary is not a schedule

Most park itineraries are a clock. This one cannot be. **Low tide moves roughly an hour later each day**, so the right thing to do at 2 PM on Tuesday is the wrong thing at 2 PM on Wednesday. Three of Acadia's signature experiences are gated by it.

Look up one number the night before — the day's low tide for Bar Harbor — and build around it.

UNDERWATER

1.5 HRS BEFORE • LOW TIDE • 1.5 HRS AFTER

UNDERWATER

1

Bar Island • about three hours, twice a day

1.9 miles round trip from the bottom of Bridge Street in Bar Harbor. You walk out across the sea floor to an island, past boats sitting on mud that was ocean an hour ago.

People genuinely get stranded. Miss your return and the park puts it at **nine hours** before the bar is safe to walk again. Set the alarm for your turnaround, not your start.

LOW TIDE ONLY

NINE HOURS IF YOU MISS IT

2

Thunder Hole • 1 to 2 hours before high tide

The opposite end of the cycle, and the reason most people come away unimpressed. Turn up at the wrong hour and it is a wet crack in some granite with forty people photographing it. The boom needs the tide and some weather behind it.

HIGH TIDE

NEEDS WEATHER TOO

3

Tidepooling • the same window as Bar Island

1.5 hours either side of low tide, which means tidepooling and Bar Island compete for exactly the same slot. One per low tide. Choose.

LOW TIDE ONLY

Bar Island is the only stop in this guide we have not assigned to a day. **It belongs to a tide, not to a Tuesday.**

The Park Loop Road

Twenty-seven miles, and nearly everything you came to photograph

No vehicle reservation today — that is Cadillac only. What you need is an early start. **Sand Beach and the right-hand lane toward Otter Point are routinely full by 9 AM**, and because most of the loop is one-way, overshooting a parking area means driving the whole thing again. **Sleep: Bar Harbor.**

1

7:30 AM — Hulls Cove Visitor Center

Park map and the day's tide chart. Buy the entrance pass here if you have not already — and note the park is **cashless**, so bring a card.

CASHLESS PARK

2

8:15 AM — Sand Beach

A sand beach in a granite park, tucked behind the arm of Great Head. Park before 9 or accept that you will not. The water at its warmest, in August, is **55 to 60°F** — people go in, people do not stay in.

FILLS BY 9 AM

NO DOGS IN SUMMER

3

8:45 AM — Great Head Loop · 1.9 mi

One to two hours, or a shorter 1.3-mile option. Starts up a steep sand-covered staircase at the end of the beach. Waves here run **three to five feet and higher** — never turn your back to the ocean.

1–2 HOURS

STAY OFF THE EDGE

4

10:30 AM — Ocean Path to Otter Point · 2.2 mi one way

Two to four hours round trip, gravelly and uneven with two staircases about 1.4 miles in. You pass Thunder Hole, then **Otter Cliffs at 110 feet**, then the granite slabs at Otter Point. Walk it one way and ride the shuttle back if it is running.

2–4 HOURS

SHUTTLE BACK

5

2:00 PM — Jordan Pond Path · 3.3 mi loop

One to three hours, with the Bubbles at the end of the water looking exactly like the postcard. **The western half is significantly harder than the eastern half** — the flat boardwalk at the start lulls you, and the east shore out and back is a perfectly respectable day. Finish with tea and popovers on the lawn at **Jordan Pond House**, seasonal and worth it.

WEST SIDE IS HARDER

POPOVERS ARE SEASONAL

Cadillac and the Carriage Roads

The reservation day — and forty-five miles of gravel with no cars on it

Built around the **\$6 vehicle reservation** you booked 90 days out or in the two-day drop. If you did not get one, do not move this day — swap the summit for one of the ways up on page four. **Sleep: Bar Harbor.**

1 One hour before sunrise — up the summit road

Arrive about an hour early. Parking is often full at sunrise, and your reservation is an entry window, not a seat. The summit is only **1,530 feet**, strikingly low for the reputation, and that is part of why it works.

NO RE-ENTRY

ARRIVE EARLY

2 Sunrise — the thing itself

Cold, windy, exposed, and busier than any photograph suggests. Whatever the forecast says, the summit is colder and the wind is doing something it did not mention. Bring the layer you think you will not need.

Between **October 7 and March 6** this genuinely is the first sunrise in the country. The rest of the year it is simply a very good one. Then come down and take the morning back over breakfast in Bar Harbor — you have been up since four.

BRING GLOVES

MORE LAYERS

3 11:00 AM — the carriage roads by bike

Forty-five miles of broken-stone road with no cars on them, paid for and fussed over by John D. Rockefeller Jr. between 1913 and 1940. Crushed stone, not pavement, so a hybrid is happier than a road bike. Eagle Lake is the usual first loop.

Rules that matter: **20 mph, everyone yields to horses, cyclists yield to walkers.**

45 MILES

NO CARS

YIELD TO HORSES

4 Tide-dependent — Bar Island, if it lands right

If today's low tide falls in daylight, this is where it goes. If it does not, move it. See page five.

CHECK THE TIDE

5 Evening — Bar Harbor

Walk the Shore Path, eat, and look at tomorrow's tide chart before bed.

Choose Your Adventure

Four genuinely different days — pick one

Day three exists so the trip is not a forced march, and so a missed reservation or a tide that landed at midnight costs you nothing. **Sleep: Bar Harbor.**

OPTION A — THE IRON RUNGS

Beehive Loop: 1.4 miles round trip, 1–3 hours. The first part ascends a **450-foot cliff with exposed edges**, with iron rungs, stretches where you walk across iron bars rather than ground, and ladders. Summit 520 feet.

Precipice Loop: 3.2 miles round trip, 2–3 hours, rising over **1,000 feet in 0.9 miles**. The park's wording, unedited: “not recommended for small children, for people with a fear of heights, or for anyone in wet weather,” and “descending the Precipice is dangerous and not advised.” You come down the North Ridge Trail instead.

Both close from **March 1** for nesting peregrine falcons, with no reopening date published in advance. No pets. If it rained overnight, go elsewhere and let the granite dry.

OPTION B — THE QUIET WEST SIDE

The other half of Mount Desert Island with a fraction of the people. Acadia Mountain and St. Sauveur, the working harbour at Southwest Harbor, and **Bass Harbor Head Light** at the southern tip.

OPTION C — SCHOODIC PENINSULA

Acadia's only mainland section, **about an hour by car** from Hulls Cove, or by seasonal passenger ferry from Bar Harbor to Winter Harbor. Deliberately kept minimally developed and lightly visited, which is exactly why people who make the trip rate it so highly.

OPTION D — ALL FORTY-FIVE MILES

If yesterday's ride was the best part of the trip, spend today doing the rest of the carriage road network properly. There is no reason to ration it.

Not on this list, deliberately: Isle au Haut. Passenger ferry only, first-come first-served, Duck Harbor served only mid-June to late September. A wonderful place, and a trip you build around rather than a day you slot in.

Practical Notes

The things that change a day, in one place

Money

\$35 private vehicle for seven days · **\$30** motorcycle · **\$20** per person on foot or bike. The Cadillac reservation is **\$6** and entirely separate.

Non-US residents aged 16 and over pay \$100 per person on top of the entrance fee from January 1, 2026, unless admitted on a qualifying annual pass — commercial tour groups included. For a family of four from abroad that is \$400 before the vehicle pass, so price an annual pass before you arrive.

The park is **cashless**. Cash only? Buy a pass from a third-party seller outside the park.

Seasons and closures

Park Loop Road opens around April 15. In winter only a limited section stays open, broadly from the entrance station to Otter Cliff Road.

Peregrine falcon closures begin March 1 on the rung and ladder trails and reopen when nesting allows — no date is published in advance.

The carriage roads close in mud season, typically March and April. In 2025 it began March 18 and held until the surface dried.

Black flies are worst mid-May to mid-June. **Peak foliage** is usually mid-October.

Getting around without a car

The fare-free **Island Explorer** serves trailheads, carriage road entrances, campgrounds, the towns and the airport, so a car-free first visit based in Bar Harbor genuinely works — which is not true of most national parks. What you lose: the west side, Schoodic on a tight schedule, and everything after the shuttle season ends. And it does not go up Cadillac.

The only lodging inside the park is camping. Blackwoods, Seawall, Schoodic Woods, and the Duck Harbor shelters on Isle au Haut. For the three main campgrounds, 90% of sites release six months ahead on the first of each month at 10 AM Eastern, the rest fourteen days out — all through Recreation.gov.

The Full Guide

Scan to open the live itinerary — every stop, current closures, and updates whenever the reservation system changes.



SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE CAMERA

● Day 1 — Park Loop Road ● Day 2 — Cadillac ● Day 3 — Your choice

Tip: cell service on the island is patchy and gone entirely in parts of the park. Download what you need before you leave Bar Harbor, and check nps.gov/acad the morning you go — road openings, closures and reservation dates all change here.