

## Greatness Restored - New Hampshire's Great Bay

New Hampshire's seacoast is only 18 miles long. That's the smallest in the nation. Luckily it has one of the largest estuaries in New England to paddle in.

by Craig Romano

*A Canoe & Kayak Web Exclusive*

New Hampshire's seacoast is only 18 miles long, the smallest in the nation. However, Great Bay, the Granite State's "inland sea," is one of the largest estuaries in New England. Fed by seven rivers and containing almost 5,000 surface acres of water, Great Bay is rich in wildlife, plant life, and history. On a warm and calm October Sunday, I set out with my two brothers, Doug and Jeff, along with our guide, Lucy, for a paddle of Great Bay that would take one full day but span 400 years of history. We launched at Chapman's Landing on the languid Squamscott River, and I soon began thinking about all the vessels that once plied these waters. Just upriver is Exeter, one of New Hampshire's oldest settlements, and once a hotbed of revolutionary fervor. The state of New Hampshire was born here.



Settled in the early 1600s by British colonists, Great Bay became one of the first major commercial waterways in the American colonies. It has played a pivotal role in the region's development, but today, ironically, it's one of southern New Hampshire's least-developed ecosystems. In 1989 it was added to the National Estuarine Research Reserve system.

There are no tall ships here now, nor gundalows, the once-ubiquitous flat sailing barges of the bay. Gundalows carrying bricks, wood, fish, and hay were once as common on these waters as the geese, ducks, herons, and gulls are today. We continued downriver, past clumps of hardy spartina grasses that swayed gently in the soft autumn breezes. As the bay opened, views of the surrounding basin revealed very little in the form of man-made development. Forest and field embraced the shoreline.

---

**The river was lined with hickory and oak, and maple and birch adorned in resplendent autumn colors, their crimson and golden canopies reflected in the calm coves.**

---

Lucy guided us up the Lamprey River, named for a settler, not the parasitic fish. The river was lined with hickory and oak, and maple and birch adorned in resplendent autumn colors, their crimson and golden canopies reflected in the calm coves. A few large white pines interrupted the deciduous display. These emerald giants brought gold to the early shipbuilders of the region; their tall, slender trunks made the perfect mast.

But the region's abundant waterpower brought even more wealth to Great Bay entrepreneurs. By the early 1800s the area's rivers were harnessed for power, giving birth to scores of textile and lumber mills. We paddled farther up the Lamprey to the town of Newmarket and found ourselves surrounded by a fortress of 19th-century mills, five stories tall. The mood was surrealistic. Upon contact with the morning sunlight, the granite walls of one behemoth gave off a soft sheen. The mill dam's tumbling waters broke the yard's silence. The looms stopped churning in the 1930s, and these thick-walled landmarks have since been converted into condos and offices.

We took out at the town boat launch for an early lunch break. Across the river, children played at the Heron Point Nature Sanctuary. One hundred years earlier, those children would have been working in the mill buildings that I'd admired. Beyond Newmarket, the Lamprey, New Hampshire's first National Wild and Scenic River, makes for a good paddle, but we returned instead to the bay. We rounded Moodys Point and glided past the gently rolling pastures surrounding Lubberland Creek. The farms have been in use for more than three centuries and, thanks to the Nature Conservancy, will continue to remain as open space.

Our bearings were now on the peninsula known as Adams Point. The tide was going out. Although it's 10 miles from the Atlantic here, the tidal difference can be eight feet. This leaves plenty of nutrients behind in the salt marshes. The area deer and raccoons are well aware of the bounty. Lucy surveyed the shoreline trees for eagles and ospreys. I scanned the waters for harbor seals. Doug and Jeff looked for migrating loons, grebes, and northern harriers.

Adams Point was the site of a resort in the early 20th-century. The retreat is gone, replaced by the University of New Hampshire's Jackson Estuary Laboratory. The rest of the point is now part of the Estuarine Reserve. During the 1970s energy crisis, the entire area almost succumbed to becoming a massive oil refinery. The residents of Durham resoundingly rejected the plan.



To paddle beyond Adams Point requires passing through Furber Strait, the narrowest section of the bay. The currents can be rough. With a lowering sun, we turned our kayaks back toward the Squamscott. As we paddled across the unusually placid open waters of the bay, I gazed out at the eastern shoreline. Until the 1980s most of that land was part of an Air Force base. Now it's a national wildlife refuge.

Like the entire Great Bay region, those lands have seen a lot of uses and have a long history. But now in the 21st century, thanks to conservation and preservation measures, the Great Bay is the healthiest it has been in 250 years.

**1 2 - Next Page**

#### *JUST THE FACTS*

**Getting There:** Chapman's Landing is located on State Route 108, three miles south of Newmarket and four miles north of Exeter. Reach Exeter from Manchester via State Route 101. From Boston or Portland, Maine, access State Route 101 in Hampton via I-95.

**Logistics:** Great Bay is best paddled from mid-spring to mid-fall. Summer sees plenty of boating activity. Fall and spring are ideal, especially for observing birds. Monitor the weather—the bay is subject to strong winds. Also be aware that Great Bay is popular with duck hunters in the autumn. For information on the National Estuarine Research Reserve, visit [www.greatbay.org](http://www.greatbay.org) and <http://nerrs.noaa.gov/GreatBay/overview.html>.

**While You're There:** Hike one of the reserve's trails at Sandy Point, Adams Point, or the Nature Conservancy's Lubberland Creek Preserve. The Sandy Point Discovery Center is a good place to learn about the estuary. Visit colonial homes and museums in the area, or take a historical walk in nearby Exeter, Portsmouth, and Durham—three of the oldest communities in America.

**Camping/Lodging:** Great Bay Camping ([www.greatbaycamping.com](http://www.greatbaycamping.com),) in Newfields offers sites right on the Squamscott River, and they have a dock. Overlooking the Oyster River in Durham is the eloquent Three Chimneys Inn ([www.threechimneysinn.com/durham](http://www.threechimneysinn.com/durham)), originally constructed in 1649. A public boat launch abuts. Nearby Exeter and Portsmouth offer a full range of accommodations .

**Outfitters/Resources:** Outdoor Escapes New Hampshire ([www.outdoorescapesnewhampshire.com](http://www.outdoorescapesnewhampshire.com), 603-528-0136) will customize tours of the Great Bay for any level and group size. Portsmouth Rent & Ride ([www.portsmouthrentandride.com](http://www.portsmouthrentandride.com), 603-433-6777) offers kayak rentals and will also customize tours of the bay. For a complete list of guides and outfitters, see our [Adventure Paddling Directory](#) .