



FEBRUARY 8 - 10, 2019



The beauty of Kennebunkport, Maine, comes to the forefront when the crush of tourists dies down. GETTY IMAGES

Bushes' Maine attraction

In the off-season, you still can vacation like the first family

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Special to USA TODAY

"There are three things people in Maine are proud of — lobsters, Stephen King and President (George H. W.) Bush!" says Carl Greeley, a waiter at the Grace White Barn Inn and Spa in charming Kennebunk. That's especially true in the neighboring coastal oasis of Kennebunkport, location of the Bush family's stunning summer residence at Walker's Point.

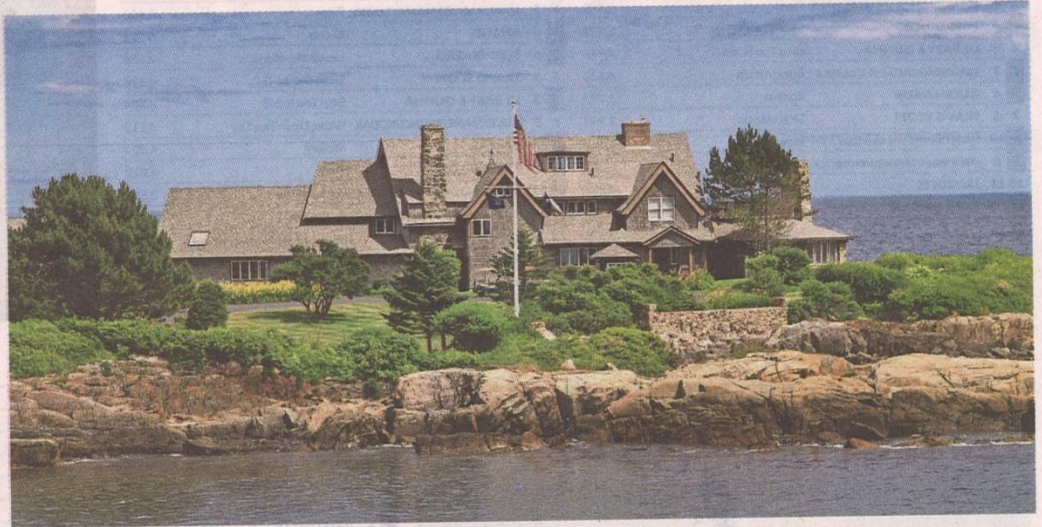
In addition to the Bush clan, Kennebunkport hosts tourists galore at its beaches, golf course and the cluster of shops and restaurants (lobster, fried clams, anyone?) in Dock Square. But in mid-October, as the last of the revelers and leaf peepers head home, things quiet way down, and the fierce beauty of this seaside town awakens. It's true that some businesses close for the season, including Mabel's Lobster Claw, said to have been a favorite of President H.W. Bush. But there's a trade-off: When the crowds decamp, you can live like a president — if only for a weekend — for less, thanks to off-season rates at Kennebunkport's most luxurious digs.

In winter, the views from the ocean-front Cape Arundel Inn & Resort reveal a palette of silvery grays and moody blues. It's different from the sun-washed summer hues, but every bit as beautiful. Arrive before dark so you can admire the frothy Atlantic Ocean across the street as you sip your welcome glass of bubbly.

Bundle up for a walk along Ocean Avenue, winding alongside a tumble of boulders at water's edge. Turn right, and you'll head past St. Ann's Episcopal Church and down to Colony Beach, where the Kennebunk River meets the Atlantic Ocean.

Head left, and you'll view the Bush family compound at Walker's Point, jutting into the ocean and adorned with a towering flagpole. While the public isn't permitted to enter the grounds, there are benches along the water that invite ogling at a distance.

For dinner, settle in at Ocean, the Cape Arundel Inn's acclaimed dining room, and have chef Pierre Gignac whip up some local favorites. This is dining at its finest, featuring seasonal Maine delicacies with a hint of Provence, and definitely first-family worthy.



Benches along the water offer views of the private Bush compound. OLEG ALBINSKY/GETTY IMAGES



Lobster Thermidor is one of Maine's delicacies on the menu at Ocean, in the Cape Arundel Inn.

The 28-room Cape Arundel Inn is the closest hotel to Walker's Point — and those ocean views are exquisite — but it's not the only option. The Grace White Barn Inn and Spa is the ultimate in cozy chic, and its stunning dining room, set in an antique-filled barn, has won the

coveted AAA five diamonds and Forbes' five stars. Live piano music adds an extra touch of elegance. (Most romantic room: the Loft Suite, with a fireplace and a Jacuzzi tub for two.)

Stroll to Kennebunk Beach, or along the walking path at the Franciscan monastery across the street. If you love that old-inn charm, consider the historic and comfy family-owned Captain Lord Mansion. All 21 rooms in the main and garden houses have gas fireplaces, upping the cozy factor. And, it's a short walk to town.

Although several shops and restaurants are shuttered for the season, some wonderful spots remain open, including the Boathouse restaurant at The Boathouse Waterfront Hotel. Open for lunch and dinner, the Boathouse offers fresh seafood with an Asian twist at its lobster bar, plus such winter-hearty fare as New England clam and corn chowder.

Kennebunkport is especially Instagram-worthy under a blanket of snow. It gets an annual average of 40-plus inches of the white stuff. Make the most of it at nearby Harris Farm. This dairy farm, run by the Harrises for four generations, morphs into a winter wonderland of fun when the snow flies and nearly 25 miles of trails open for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and fat-tire biking. Gear rentals and lessons are available.

Still not sure that chilly (OK, sometimes really cold), snowy, coastal Maine in winter is your cup of chowder? The town puts on a monthlong Valentine's party called Paint the Town Red with an ice bar, pop-up restaurants, and dining and hotel package deals.

Let the crowds have it in summertime; this presidential locale is pretty awesome all year-round.