

The perfect itinerary for first-time visitors to New England

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What is so special about New England?" Whenever I am asked that question, one particular image comes to mind: a village with a green, clapboard houses, an old tavern and a white wooden church topped by steeple. Providing a backdrop is the gaudy red, gold and orange of New England's renowned autumn/fall foliage. Photographs cannot capture the intensity of the blue sky or the vibrant colours of the leaves. Trust me: you have to see it for yourself.

But this region, up in the north-eastern corner of the USA, offers far more. However, before I enthuse about what to see and do, first-time visitors need to know that "New England" always refers to just six states: Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and Rhode Island. And, although Americans bemoan their lack of history, there is plenty here – and it is very much part of the present. In Newport, Rhode Island, for example, I have eaten in a pub that opened in 1673, toured North America's oldest synagogue (1763) and played tennis on the world's oldest competition grass courts (1880). Then there are the living history museums. Among the best in the USA, these are well-researched, not dumbed down – and loads of fun, for adults as well as children. A favourite is Plimoth Plantation, south of Boston, where "Pilgrim Fathers" – and "Mothers" – go about daily life in the 1620s.

My advice is to start in Boston. Not only is it the gateway to the region, the city is worth a visit in its own right. Compact and walkable, it has brick pavements and handsome Georgian-style houses. Add in world-class museums, galleries and concert halls, and the flavour is almost European. Yet nowhere has more all-American credentials. The battle for independence was kick-started here, with the first shots of the Revolution fired in 1775, just outside the city. Today, Boston is known for its business savvy, fine universities and passion for sport. It also offers great shopping, from international brand names to individual boutiques and outlets crammed with bargains.

Away from Boston, New England boasts a wide variety of landscapes in a relatively small area. For 150 years, holidaymakers have headed for its coastline, particularly Cape Cod's broad sandy beaches and Maine's rocky shores. Artists, too, have been inspired. Most famous is Edward Hopper, but worth discovering are Winslow Homer, George Bellows and Andrew Wyeth. See their work in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and, in Maine, the Portland Museum of Art and the Farnsworth Art Museum.

I am one of those active types, who likes nothing better than getting into the Great Outdoors. New England is one big natural playground, perfect for all ages. Paddle a canoe or a sea kayak; cycle the quiet back roads; hike the well-marked trails, ranging from easy rambles to challenges in the rugged mountains. For thrill seekers, rafting on white water rapids and zip-lining guarantee an adrenaline rush. But sometimes I prefer sitting back, breathing in the clean air and taking in Mother Nature's handiwork, much of which is zealously protected in what has long been one of America's most eco-conscious regions.

A frequent question is: "When is the best time to go?" As this is a four-season destination, the answer is: pretty well anytime. The most obvious period is autumn, the American fall. Starting in mid-September, the "color" arrives in northern Maine and slowly moves south; peak time for "leaf peeping" is usually the first two weeks of October, when skies are blue and the sun is still warm.

Summers are nothing like Old England. Think hot; think swimming in the sea, picnics and outdoor concerts, from jazz and rock to top-quality concerts by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the Berkshire Hills. In winter, with more blue skies, skiers and boarders head for popular ski resorts in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Spring comes later than in the UK, in a rush of daffodils and tulips, followed by lilacs, rhododendron and roses.

As for food and drink, New England has long been the place for seafood. The cold Atlantic waters provide fish, clams, oysters and – above all – lobster. More recently, chefs piloted the farm-to-fork movement, promoting local produce, from top-quality fruit and veg to artisan cheeses. And to drink, what else but craft brews and ciders made in the region?

Then there are the New Englanders themselves. From Bostonians, with their love of politics, to the folks in Maine, with the driest humour on the planet, the region is chock-a-block with interesting people. Chat to them as you follow this 12-day itinerary, which starts and finishes in Boston – and shows you what is so special about New England.

Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Boston, New England's historic gateway; your base for two nights is the contemporary [Envoy Hotel](#) on the waterfront in the burgeoning Fort Point District. To get a sense of the city, head for the Prudential Center (take the "T", the efficient subway, from South Station to the Prudential stop). Glide up 50 floors to the [Skywalk](#)

[Observatory](#) for spectacular views. If you are feeling peckish, the Top of the Hub lounge is two floors up. Then, stretch your legs on nearby Newbury Street, with its art galleries. From the Arlington stop, take the T back to the Envoy for dinner in their hip Outlook Kitchen.

Day 2

Get to grips with US history on Boston's [Freedom Trail](#), linking 16 sites that are part of America's DNA. Do it yourself with an audio tour, or on an entertaining walk led by costumed guides, playing 18th-century Bostonians. Finish at Faneuil Hall Marketplace; lunch is five minutes away at the Boston Public Market, a cornucopia of yummy edibles.

Take the T from Haymarket to Harvard, with good views as you cross the Charles River. At Harvard Square, join a tongue-in-cheek – but informative – [Hahvahd Tour](#), led by Harvard students. Catch the T back to South Station; walk to [Row 34](#), a cool, industrial-chic restaurant serving New England seafood and craft beers. Finish with nightcaps at the Envoy Hotel's Lookout Rooftop Bar; views of downtown are terrific.

Day 3

Start your tour by driving north to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, one of several once-gritty New England cities that have re-invented themselves. The 39 conserved houses at [Strawbery Banke](#) tell the story of the community from 1695 to 1943. Chat to role players to discover more. Continue to Portland, Maine, which has had an equally impressive facelift. Check in to the [Portland Harbor Hotel](#), then stroll round the revamped Old Port District. On a fine evening, take a sunset [cruise](#) around Casco Bay. Sit on deck; sip local beers; spot islands and lighthouses. Portland is recognised as a foodie destination, so dine on line-caught halibut or local, dry-aged ribeye steak at [Central Provisions](#).

Day 4

From Portland, take I-295 to Freeport, known for outlet bargains and, most famously, L L Bean. You can't miss it: outside is the world's biggest boot! Inside is practical clothing for outdoorsy people. From here, follow Route 1, the coastal road, all the way to Camden. Stop in Bath, whose Maine Maritime Museum is devoted to the state's 300 years of ship building. Have lunch in Wiscasset, where Sarah's Café is informal and welcoming. In Rockland, spend time at the [Farnsworth Art Museum](#), which specialises in artists, who painted in Maine: Winslow Homer, George Bellows and three

generations of Wyeths. Overnight in Camden at the [Lord Camden Inn](#) ; walk round the harbour to [Rhumb Line](#) and order the freshest of seafood followed by blueberry pie, made by the chef's mum.

Day 5

Drive west across inland Maine, where people are few and the endless trees are punctuated by lakes and tiny communities. At the Wayne Village Pottery, ceramics are made from the local blue clay; next to Bryant Pond's post office, the 14-ft sculpture of an old-fashioned telephone commemorates America's last manual telephone exchange – in service till 1983. In charming Bethel, the Millbrook Tavern is ideal for a quick bite. From here, scenic Route 2 leads through the mountains into New Hampshire. Watch for moose that may wander onto the road. For the next two nights, your base is the century-old [Omni Mount Washington Resort](#), where the main dining room has grand views of Mount Washington, the Northeast's tallest peak.

Day 6

Rise early for a special experience: the first run (8 or 9am) on the world's oldest [cog railway](#) is under steam. On Mount Washington's 6,288-ft summit, the change in temperature can be as dramatic as the views; take additional layers, even on a hot day. In the afternoon, hike in Crawford Notch State Park; zip line on one of America's longest canopy tours; play golf on the hotel's historic course. Or relax in a rocking chair on the veranda.

Day 7

Press on south-westwards to the Connecticut River Valley and pleasant towns, such as Hanover. In Quechee, watch craftsmen at work in the Simon Pearce Glass Blowing Mill and Pottery Shop; have lunch at Pearce's stylish restaurant overlooking the falls. End the day in photogenic Woodstock, with its boutiques, art galleries and village green. Stay and dine at the elegant [Woodstock Inn](#).

Day 8

Vermont is known for its scenic roads, lovely valleys and rolling Green Mountains. Drive to delightful Weston, with its nostalgic country store; carry on to Manchester. Here,

anglers make a beeline for Orvis, the fly fishing emporium founded here in 1856; fashionistas prefer the designer outlet shops. A good spot to eat is Marsh Tavern, Manchester's "local" since 1769. Follow Route 7 south into Massachusetts and the equally pretty Berkshire Hills. Your destination is the [Red Lion Inn](#) in Stockbridge. From the porch, watch the comings and goings on the carefully-preserved Main Street, then enjoy dinner in this hotel, which opened in 1773.

Day 9

Before leaving town, visit the [Norman Rockwell Museum](#), dedicated to the artist, whose folksy paintings celebrated everyday life in 20th-century America. Continue south on Route 7, dotted with antiques and craft shops, into Connecticut. Among New England's picture-book sights are wooden "covered bridges" – and in West Cornwall, there is a rare chance to drive through one. This part of Connecticut, the Litchfield Hills, may be rural but it provides hideaways for New York City celebs. With its historic homes and upmarket boutiques, the hub is Litchfield, where your hotel is the classy [Litchfield Inn](#), with its Tavern Off The Green Restaurant.

Day 10

Drive over to Newport, for two nights at the [Mill Street Inn](#). There is much to see in this small city, transformed from port to resort by millionaires in the 19th century. They played tennis and sailed – and so can you. Decent players should book a court to serve and volley on the world's oldest grass courts (1880). Or, take a cruise aboard an [America's Cup-winning 12-Metre yacht](#). Dine on local seafood at the modern, stylish [Fluke Wine, Bar & Kitchen](#).

Day 11

Newport dates back to 1639 and was a major player in Colonial times. Learn more on a walking tour with Newport Historical Society. For lunch, the Newport Lobster Shack on Long Wharf serves straight-from-the boat crustaceans provided by the lobstermen's co-op. In the afternoon, delve into the [Gilded Age of Newport](#) by exploring the glitzy mansions. At The Elms, the Servant Life Tour recalls true Upstairs, Downstairs stories; move on to The Breakers, the Vanderbilt's opulent "summer cottage". For dinner, the [White Horse Tavern](#), America's oldest pub, serves contemporary dishes.

Day 12

On your last day, go back to New England's beginning – the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers near Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. See what life was like and talk to role-players at [Plimoth Plantation](#), one of America's best living history museums. Your last night is at [Mirbeau Inn & Spa](#) at The Pinehills, with its French-influenced bistro.

Next morning, Boston is only an hour away.

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