

Top Running Routes in Portland, ME

By Warwick Ford

Portland, Maine, is a city with enormous character. It has been primarily a shipping port since the American Revolution. The Old Port area has been recently rejuvenated into a lively and popular tourist area, complete with cobblestone streets, appealing shops, and some excellent restaurants and pubs. Outdoor exercise is high on the city's agenda and, thanks largely to the efforts of the Portland Trails organization, there are some well-marked and well-maintained pedestrian trails.

We found three routes that easily satisfy our *Fun on Foot* criteria. For a training or recreational route to be motivating and enjoyable, the *Fun on Foot* model says it needs to have four attributes: **Comfort** from both the safety and underfoot perspective; **Attractions** to make it interesting; **Convenience** to city center and public transit; and a worthy **Destination** to help motivate you to finish the route.

Eastern Promenade and Back Cove Trails (7.7 miles)

The Back Cove trail is a beautiful loop on a well-maintained trail around scenic Back Cove. The loop is 3.5 miles around, making for one of the most pleasant 5K race courses in the country. What makes it even more interesting is that you can get from and to the Old Port area and downtown via the equally scenic Eastern Promenade trail, adding up to a total of 7.7 miles including one loop of Back Cove. Start at Maine State Pier, on Commercial Street at the lower end of Franklin Street. Pick up the shared-use trail heading east. Proceed past the narrow gauge railway and some great scenery. At the highway bridge, join the Back Cove Trail. There are seasonal restrooms and water fountains along the way. Do a loop and return to downtown via the Eastern Promenade Trail. If you need a food or beverage break at the end, you have plenty of choices not far from the pier.

Peaks Island (4.0 miles)

We have flagged this route, as well as the previous one, as a *Fun on Foot* Classic route – one that is just too good to miss. Allow half a day for this one. Catch the Casco Bay Lines ferry to Peaks Island from the Maine State Pier, on Commercial Street at the lower end of Franklin Street. The outbound ferry delivers you to Forest City Landing at the end of Welch Street near Island Avenue. While there are various roads on the island, the simplest approach for the runner is to circumnavigate the island, using Island Avenue on the west side and Seashore Avenue on the other sides. You may encounter the occasional vehicle, but they generally travel slowly and drivers are patient and relaxed. Be sure to carry water since there is none along the way. When you get back near the ferry terminal, you will find a few excellent bar-restaurants where you can while away the time waiting for the next ferry back to downtown Portland.

Portland-South Portland: Harborwalk and Greenbelt (8.1 miles)

We try to avoid out-and-back routes but this one has so much going for it we would be remiss in omitting it. You get to run in an excellent environment on the South Portland Greenbelt and also take in many views of scenic Portland Harbor. In fact, you can even avoid the out-and-back characteristic on all days except Sundays, by using a bus for either the outbound or return. Start at Maine State Pier, as with the previous routes. Follow the Harborwalk trail signs south down Commercial Street. Keep following the signs until they lead you onto the east-side sidewalk of the Casco Bay Bridge. The walkway is dedicated to pedestrians – bikes must use the road – and the view is nothing short of spectacular. Across the bridge, go down to the streets and proceed to Mill Creek Park, where you pick up the South Portland Greenbelt. Take the Greenbelt trail out to Bug Light Park, a popular boat launching and kite flying venue. When ready, retrace your steps back to downtown Portland, or take the bus if you prefer. There are more details of all the above routes, plus many others, in “Fun on Foot in New England.”

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[Warwick Ford is author of "Fun on Foot in America's Cities" and “Fun on Foot in New England,” the books that describe and map the best on-foot routes in U.S. cities. Check out the www.funonfoot.com site for more information and to purchase books or maps.]