

# Going to Great Lengths for Good Water

## *Coming home to the Maine Island Trail*

BY JENNIFER VAN ALLEN

The Maine Island Trail begins in Kittery, but my own journey to it began a thousand miles away in the Midwest.

My parents were water people in suburban exile. My dad grew up sailing a wooden Penguin named *The Flirt* on the Chesapeake. He'd settled in Indiana for work, but he and Mom ached to be back on the ocean. Somehow, amidst the cornfields and shopping malls, they found a 26-foot O'Day named *Sanctuary* and a 4-mile long reservoir with an open slip.

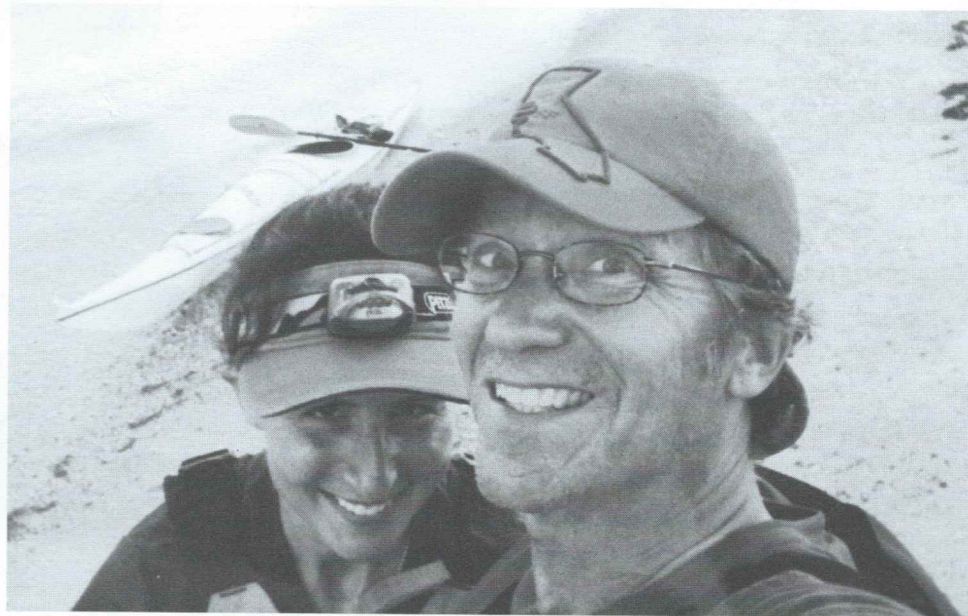
So from the time I was four years old, Saturdays were reserved for sailing. When the wind, motor, and my sister's iffy stomach cooperated, we spent hours in the stillness that being afloat affords, breaking only periodically when Dad barked, "COME ABOUT!"

At the time, and in that place, sailing seemed downright weird. All my friends spent their summers on soccer fields and at swimming pools. I didn't know anyone else whose parents gravitated to boats. That is, until about 20 years later, when I met Peter, the man I'd marry.

His parents, too, had gone to great lengths for good water. Each June in Iowa, they packed Peter into a station wagon, and drove 16.5 hours to Long Island, so he could learn to paddle, swim, and fall in love with the salty Atlantic. They stayed all the way until September, and it would be weeks after school started before Peter swapped surf trunks for long pants.

After years of feeling like fish out of water, we were thrilled to have landed one another.

Of course, sharing the water that you love with the one you love doesn't always go so smoothly. Attempts to paddle in tandem ended in tears. In my first sculling lesson, I slipped while carrying the rowing shell to the water. The boat sliced through my ear, and required 22 stitches to repair.



Jen and Peter Van Allen, taking a break from a 14-mile paddling excursion in Long Island Sound

It wasn't until we gave one another the latitude to go solo that synchronicity ensued. I started running more. He sculled thousands of miles on Philadelphia's Schuylkill River.

But together we built a life that revolved as much around the winds and the tides as it did in our fondest memories. We covered our walls with maps, crammed the bookshelves with seafaring tales, and always kept nautical charts within reach.

In 2001, Castine became our paradise found, a vacationland that felt more like home than our permanent address. The principal source of action was the procession of boats in and out of the town wharf, and Peter spent hours exploring Penobscot Bay by kayak, his MITA guide close at hand.

Each year became a matter of one week in Maine and 51 weeks of waiting for it.

And as we waited in Philadelphia, Peter got on the water any way he could, in a rowing shell, a kayak, or on a stand-up paddleboard. And when the waves were good, he'd set the alarm for 3:30 AM, drive 90 minutes to Ocean City, New Jersey to surf, and finish in time to be

at his desk by 9 AM—sand between his toes, skin ripe with sweat and saltwater.

Each spring, the MITA Trail Guide arrived like a rescue rope that connected us to the life we dreamed about. It prompted hours of conversation about next year's adventures on the Maine Island Trail, which evolved into hours more of talk about how to create an outside life that wasn't possible from where we were.

Last April, we finally moved to Maine, closer to the Island Trail we treasure. Family and friends warned about blizzards and black flies and all those darn bridges. By reaching for a dream that was a decade in the making, they cautioned, we were setting ourselves up for major disappointment. After all, workaday life wasn't vacation; there was no way it could live up to our vaunted expectations. And they were right. Permanently residing along the Trail has been radically different than week-long visits. It's so much better.

In barely a year, we feel more at home than we did after many years in Philadelphia. That happens when you live among so many people who define quality of life the same way you do.