

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/maines-bar-harbor-debates-saying-no-to-big-cruise-ship-crowds-11665799486>

Maine's Bar Harbor Debates Saying No to Big Cruise-Ship Crowds

Ballot measure in tourist town would limit number of cruise visitors that some locals say have become overwhelming

By *Jon Kamp* [Follow](#) | *Photographs by Ashley L. Conti for The Wall Street Journal*

Oct. 15, 2022 9:00 am ET

Voters in Bar Harbor, Maine, a tourism hot spot in the state known as Vacationland, are set to soon decide whether to turn back incoming waves of cruise passengers.

If the ballot question passes on Nov. 8, it would require Bar Harbor to limit the number of disembarking cruise-ship passengers to 1,000 a day. Today, ships with a capacity of roughly 4,000 guests regularly anchor there, sending thousands of people into the small downtown's streets or vehicles bound for nearby Acadia National Park.

Some days feature multiple ships of varying sizes. Charles Sidman, a 72-year-old investor behind the citizen's petition, said cruising passengers are clogging the small town of roughly 5,200 people and have become off-putting for locals and visitors alike.

"We are overrun," Mr. Sidman said. "We think tourism is a good thing, we like to share it. But too much of a good thing turns into a bad thing."

The cruise volume is typically heaviest in September and October as leaf peepers arrive to see the heavily forested state's colorful foliage. And numbers have been growing, with the ships back in force—167 are expected to call on Bar Harbor this year, and there are sometimes multiple ships a day—after a temporary pandemic halt.

Bar Harbor has tried some measures to manage cruise-volume concerns. The town's primary ship anchorage is now tucked behind a small island near the downtown area, obscuring ships from view. The town also reached an agreement with the cruise industry this year that would cap monthly passenger volume at 65,000 in September and October, a reduction of about 30% from current limits.



Bar Harbor's primary ship anchorage is tucked behind an island near the downtown area, obscuring ships from view.



In an agreement between Bar Harbor and the cruise industry, passenger volumes would be capped in some months.

An industry group, Cruise Lines International Association, said it and its members are committed to sustainable tourism practices in port communities around the world.

“Collaboration with community leaders, residents, port authorities, and others is key to providing solutions that also safeguard the economic health of communities,” the group said.

Some residents say the town didn’t go far enough. “Smaller ships are what we think we need for sustainable tourism,” said Jackie Levesque, 68, who is concerned about the environmental impact of big cruise ships.

The local chamber of commerce generally supports the town and industry agreement, said Alf Anderson, the chamber’s executive director. But he said the ballot measure’s tighter limits are too drastic.

Elsewhere in coastal Maine, voters in the state’s largest city, Portland, are also to decide via a referendum next month whether to cap the number of disembarking passengers at 1,000 a day. In a wrinkle, that item remains on the ballot despite its backers pulling support after reaching an agreement with union groups meant to address emissions concerns by developing shore-based power stations.

The concept of tighter restrictions remains a live debate in Bar Harbor, which is located on Maine’s Mount Desert Island and is a stopping point for many tourists heading to Acadia. The park is grappling with a rising tide of tourists, too, and logged a record four million visits last year.

Some business owners there say the passengers don’t overwhelm the town and have become vital contributors to the economy. Many passengers also return to Bar Harbor for longer vacations, hitting hotels and other businesses, after getting a brief introduction during a cruise stopover, opponents of the ballot measure said.



Some Bar Harbor residents complain about streets clogged with tourists, while some business owners welcome the foot traffic.

“We live and die by the cruise-ship schedule,” said Robin Wright, who owns a local deli, bakery and pastry shop. Her deli sold 157 lobster rolls on a recent October day after a big ship arrived with thousands of passengers, triple what her sales would look like without the influx, she said. She said she also moves a lot of blueberry pie and whoopie pies when the ships call on Bar Harbor.

For Ron Wrobel, who opened his coffee shop, Acadia Perk, with his husband last year, the returning passengers this year quickly boosted business.

“You can tell when it’s a big cruise-ship day,” he said.

The town courted cruise ships decades ago to help extend the tourism season beyond Labor Day. But concerns about the ships’ impact were growing before the pandemic and continued after cruising resumed, said Kevin Sutherland, Bar Harbor’s appointed town manager. A consulting firm in 2021 found slightly more than half of those surveyed there held negative views on the impact of cruise tourism.

“We are experiencing this feeling of too much,” Mr. Sutherland said. “So what is the right balance? And it isn’t just cruise ships. It’s just the sheer volume of people coming to visit Acadia National Park and where they go when they can’t even get into the park.”

He said counting visitors and enforcing limits would pose logistical challenges for the town. Mr. Sidman, who is pushing for the visiting-passenger limits, believes the changes are manageable with existing town personnel.

If the measure passes, “you won’t have these incredibly congested few hours” when the ships come in, he said. “I actually think it’s good for all.”



Fall months are typically the busiest cruise months in Bar Harbor, as leaf peepers arrive to see the heavily forested state's colorful foliage.

Write to Jon Kamp at Jon.Kamp@wsj.com