

Escape to these hidden lakes of New England

This summer, some travelers will be avoiding the most popular freshwater destinations. Here are some gems off the beaten path.

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Bolton Lakes | Connecticut

By Jeff Harder

Driving an hour inland to reach the water when Long Island Sound is barely a mile from my house sounds completely unjustifiable. But it's a holiday weekend: I'll trade the usual parking-lot congestion and sandy claustrophobia for a calmer, shadier, hassle-free destination, no matter the distance.

That destination is Bolton Lakes, three side-by-side bodies of water straddling four eastern Connecticut towns 20 minutes from Hartford. Once a key power source for 19th-century saw and grist mills, by the time the state took ownership in 1939, a dam and paved road trisected the nearly 350-acre lake system. In theory, you could put a kayak in at the public boat launch on Lower Bolton Lake, hop out and over those two partitions, and paddle the whole trilogy while logging just a few footsteps. (In reality, the dangers of transplanting invasive plant species mean portaging is frowned upon.)

Not long after exiting Interstate 84, my family and I cruise down Hatch Hill Road until the trees recede and water appears on either side of the pavement. At the Middle Bolton Lake boat launch, a man unloads a tackle box from one light pickup in a row of them; native bass and pickerel swim in the middle section's steely waters. Across the street, the shallower, swampier-looking upper lake—the natural filter for what flows to its siblings downstream—is free of traffic. A few more turns and a \$15 out-of-town entry fee, and we're at Indian Notch Park on Lower Bolton Lake, the trio's 175-acre big brother.

We set up on a tiny patch of mercifully uncrowded sand in the shade of trees with two-toned trunks as the sun climbs and the air turns redolent with burning briquettes. My 3-year-old son—inexplicably tentative at our home beach on the sound—is all too eager to drag me to splash at the buoyed-in swim area, and then stroll to the adjacent boat launch to gawk at the yogis contorting on paddle boards while my wife keeps sand out of our 12-month-old daughter's mouth. The ducks are swimming, the geese are fluttering, and the anglers are tossing out lines from their kayaks. I wish I'd brought something to paddle, too. When the next holiday weekend comes, I just might.

Jeff Harder is a freelance writer quarantined in Connecticut.