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KITTERY, Maine - In a way it's like a mall, anchored at one end by the 42,000-square-foot Kittery Trading Post and at the other end by 90,000-square-foot L. L. Bean store in Freeport. But no mall ever has this much stuff crammed inside: 55 traffic lights, eight towns, four cities, eight McDonald's franchises, five miniature golf courses, two water parks, a minor league baseball stadium, a zoo, an aquarium, a potato chip factory, the state's first drive-in-movie theater, dozens of antique shops, scores of motels, and lots, lots more.

Route 1 stretches some 2,500 miles from Key West, Fla., to Fort Kent, Maine but you need only drive the 66-mile leg from Kittery to Freeport to experience all that this classic highway has to offer. Summer is still the old road's high season, a time when many businesses are unshuttered, motel rates rise with the temperature, traffic in certain spots becomes as thick as salt water taffy, and the smell of fried seafood is in the air.

Flanked by the ocean to the east and I-95 to the west, the lower Maine segment of Route 1 is by terms run-down, semi-elegant, touristy, residential, commercial, tacky, woodsy, marshy, ancient, and new. It is part country road, part Main Street, past suburban mish-mash. "A hodgepodge that changes just about daily," is how Will Anderson, a Portland writer who has chronicled Maine's roadside delights in three books, puts it.

Dick Henry is amazed. Fifteen years ago he and his two brothers, Myles and Bruce, borrowed a chunk of money from friends and took over the Maine Diner on Route 1 in Wells. They survived on the tips that first winter, but both the building and the business have slowly grown to the point that last August 16, the 70-seat eatery set a personal best - drum roll please - of 1,455 customers in a single day.

But the funny thing is that folks don't want just chicken pot pie or codfish cakes. They want to take home a little slice of Route 1. So this year Henry has opened another facility just to house all the Maine Diner merchandise he's now peddling, everything from T-shirts to beach towels to directors' chairs. Even he is flummoxed by the demand for items with the Maine Diner name on them. Leaning across the restaurant's baby-blue Formica counter, he describes the phenomenon in two words: "Absolutely unreal."

Luxury lobster served in an unsurpassed atmosphere.