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Taking summer refuge at Block Island

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When you're looking for the perfect summer refuge, you may find yourself reconsidering the star-studded Hamptons. Or maybe, in this year's economy, and with offensive gas prices, you're thinking twice about pricey Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Just 14 miles east of Montauk, and 12 miles off the Rhode Island coast, Block Island is an alternative getaway that's a world unto itself.

With a ragged coastline reminiscent of North Atlantic isles, it's 11 square miles of vintage charm, where cycling and picnicking, exploring and kite-flying are favorite pastimes, along with nautical pursuits such as bathing, sailing, yachting, kayaking, surfing and diving. Block Island's no secret among fishermen, either. Tourists can land striped bass and bluefish from the island's beaches or hook striper, blues and tuna offshore.

Formerly home to fishermen and farmers, and a place plundered by pirates, Block Island became a tourist destination in the 19th century after several imposing wooden hotels were built on sweeping headlands overlooking the sea and ferry service started to and from Point Judith on the mainland. These days, the hotels are as grand as ever, situated among trees twisted into odd shapes by the stiff sea breeze and a growing number of cedar-shake shingled second homes of multimillionaires. (The salty winds weather homes so quickly that many homeowners leave them unpainted.)

The vibe on Block Island is relatively subdued, as beach resorts go, with the most famous residents being rather low-key as well - actor Christopher Walken, comedian Steven Wright. Vacationers may sneak a bit of rock and roll into their rest and relaxation, with a handful of venues that serve up live music in summer months, but most take along a good book or a sketch pad and prepare to seclude themselves in their oceanside retreats and take in natural pleasures.

And for good reason. The beaches sequestered among Block Island's formidable bluffs, along with a long sandy strip on its northeastern shore, are an invitation to frolic in the sea.

Getting to these beaches can be half the fun. You can cycle along the island's winding roads, wander among its hundreds of picturesque ponds dotted with lily pads and sunning turtles, and slide down the clay banks of its towering bluffs over glacial rocks of magnificent colors to reach the ocean.

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With 800 to 1,000 year-round residents, Block Island has been the focus of a successful effort to preserve its fragile and distinctive ecosystem. As it has some of the best migratory birding sites in New England, bird-watching is also a popular activity. Through the work of conservation groups, about half of the island has been preserved in perpetuity.

As tourists continue to deluge the island each summer, that's good news.

Where to stay

Spring House Hotel

Spring Street just outside of Old Harbor

www.springhousehotel.com, 800-234-9263

Rates: \$250-\$450

Block Island's architectural crown jewel, this sprawling, 150-year-old Victorian charmer is the oldest hotel on the island and has had among its guests Mark Twain, Ulysses S. Grant and Billy Joel. A mansard roof and a cupola top off the hotel, whose perch on a promontory affords it stunning views from a wraparound veranda. Fifteen acres of well-tended grounds surround the hotel's two historic buildings, one of which houses a fine restaurant. Breakfast is included.

1661 Inn and Hotel Manisses

Spring Street, just outside

Old Harbor

blockislandresorts.com, 800-626-4773

Rates: \$220-\$445

While not quite as impressive in stature as the Spring House, these two hotels make up for it by offering ornate rooms chock full of antiques, Early American paintings and other amenities. Many rooms have spa tubs, gas fireplaces and ocean views. In an old-world touch, along with your coffee maker, you also get a decanter of brandy. A complimentary full champagne breakfast is served as well as afternoon nibbles. The Hotel Manisses has both an elegant restaurant and the jazzy Gatsby Room.

Inn at Block Island

Old Town Road near Chapel Street

theinnatblockisland.com, 877-324-4667

Rates: \$269-\$375

This old sea captain's home has been lovingly transformed into a small, family-friendly hotel. Furnished with antiques in every nook and graced with a wraparound porch, the inn serves a complimentary full breakfast and afternoon snacks. The hotel's amiable general manager is on call 24-7.

Where to shop

If the weather turns (or even if it doesn't), Block Island's shopping strip in historic Old Harbor has dozens of stores that are more upscale (with the requisite shift in price) than the standard T-shirt and seashell shops seen in many beach resorts.

234 Water (Water Street, 401-466-8600) has unique gifts. Lazy Fish (Dodge Street, 401-466-2990) specializes in antiques. Head to Wave (Water Street, 401-466-8822) for sportswear and Strings N' Things (Fountain Square, fullmoon.tide.com) for laid-back island fashions for women.

Keep your eyes open for blackberry blossom honey from the local Littlefield Bee Farm, which is sold at many island shops (blockislandhoney.com). There are also a handful of art galleries in Old Harbor and nearby that display the fruits of the island's lively arts scene.

Where to eat

Meals on Block Island can range from the creatively elegant to the deliciously hearty. For a succulent lobster roll, chock full of lobster meat, try Rebecca's Seafood Restaurant (401-466-5411).

Standard seaside and pub fare is the specialty at Swashbucklers (Ocean Avenue, 401-466-9990), a favorite with locals where you can eat at the Albion pub next door or outside on the porch. The chef takes his "stuffies" (the traditional Rhode Island stuffed quahog, which is a clam) to a new level, topping them with a flavorful hot sauce.

More refined dining can be enjoyed at the Atlantic Inn (High Street, 401-466-5883), where the family of then-President Clinton dined in 1997. The 1661 Inn/Hotel Manisses (Spring Street, 401-466-2421) serves a varied menu with imaginative and tasty specials like a spicy tuna appetizer with Siracha and ginger aioli.

If you're looking for filling seafood staples, head to Finn's Seafood Restaurant (Water Street, 401-466-2473), which overlooks Old Harbor. For something completely different, Eli's Restaurant (Chapel Street, 401-466-5230) offers bistro-style dining with an emphasis on inventive dishes borrowing from several different cultures, including chicken and Thai curry fried rice, and the rather unexpected but delicious tuna nachos.

For dessert or snacks, Cheesecake Castle & Café (Dodge Street, 401-465-4740) offers a coffee and dessert bar that includes frozen cheesecake pops in a variety of flavors.

What to do

We found plenty to see on Block Island - enough to fill up a long weekend. A bicycle is a must when it comes to exploring the arresting landscape of the island, where any destination can be reached in less than 20 minutes. Bicycles can be rented for \$20 a day at Island Moped & Bike on Chapel Street just off Water Street (401-466-2700).

Lighthouses

The towering red-brick Southeast Lighthouse is a National Historic Landmark that was moved back from the sand and clay bluffs in 1993 for fear it might topple over them. The lighthouse is open for touring.

The North Light, built of granite in 1867 on a sandy spit of land, and now located within the Block Island National Wildlife Refuge, is currently undergoing roof and tower restoration, and its museum is closed through early July. The lighthouse is near Sachem Pond, and up-close viewing requires a three-quarter-mile beach hike from a small parking lot. The pond is a good place to view cormorants, Canada geese, yellowlegs and other birds.

Nature excursions

Mohegan Bluffs, the 150-foot cliffs on the southern side of the island, can be descended on a set of wooden stairs at Payne Overlook, near the Southeast Lighthouse. Montauk Point on Long Island is visible from the top of the bluffs.

Avid hikers will enjoy Rodman's Hollow, a glacial outwash basin lined with pathways, and the Lewis-Dickens Farm and Elizabeth Dickens Trail off Cooneymus Road, encompassing some 200 acres of seaside farm fields that provide habitat for the unique and endangered American burying beetle (which buries the carcasses of small animals), among other rare species.

Horseback riding

Another way to enjoy the island's hills and dales is on horseback. Guides at Rustic Rides Farm (West Side Road, 401-466-5060) take riders of all levels on the island's roads and beaches. If you're lucky, you may even get a chance to swim in the ocean with your horse. Rides range from \$40 for a slow hourlong ride to \$180 for a four-hour ride.

On the water

For those interested in piscatorial pursuits, Block Island Fishworks (Ocean Avenue, bifishworks.com, 401-466-5392) is a reputable business specializing in fly fishing, light tackle and surfcasting gear. You can charter a boat to do a little inshore fishing for "albies" or head offshore to try to hook shark and dorado. Though most fishermen spend their time in the brine, Block Island's freshwater ponds also provide opportunities for catching perch, pickerel, bass and pike.

Block Island's inland waterways can also make for a fascinating jaunt, especially from a kayak. Pond & Beyond Guided Kayak Tours (401-578-2773) takes patrons of all experience levels on two-hour excursions to view wildlife and the scenic shoreline of the Great Salt Pond at New Harbor. Tours are \$50 a person.

If you really want to get your pulse racing, you could try a little shark diving with Montauk-based Sea Turtle Charters (seaturtlecharters.com, 631-335-6323), which picks up and drops off divers at Old Harbor. The shark cage outing, \$200, brings divers up close with mako and blue sharks.

Getting there

Car or no car?

There's really no need to add your car to the summer glut of vehicles on Block Island's winding, narrow roads, as most hotels can be reached easily by taxi or even on foot, bag in tow, from the ferry landing. From there, much of the fun is exploring the island's 6,400 acres on a rented bicycle or moped (though mopeds are restricted from traveling on the many dirt roads).

BY FERRY

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Montauk-New Harbor

Viking Fleet Interstate Passenger ferry, vikingfleet.com, 631-668-5700

Type: Passengers only

Cost: About \$70 round-trip, \$10 extra for bicycle

Time: 1 hour (high speed) to 1 hour, 45 minutes

BY CAR & FERRY

Time: About 5 hours total

From Long Island, it's roughly a four-hour drive to Point Judith, R.I., where the Block Island Ferry takes vehicles to Old Harbor on the island in an hour for about \$90 round-trip (plus \$21 each for the driver and passengers over 12 (www.blockislandferry.com, 866-783-7996).

Parking is available in Point Judith from private lots, which charge \$5-\$20 per day, depending on the season.

Point Judith's passengers-only high-speed ferry makes the trip in 30 minutes. Adult fares cost \$32 round-trip.

Port Jefferson-Bridgeport Ferry

bpjferry.com, 631-473-0286

Cost: \$102 round-trip including driver; passengers \$29.50 each

Time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

From Bridgeport, it's about a 2 1/2-hour drive along Interstate 95 to Point Judith and the Block Island Ferry.

Cross Sound Ferry

longislandferry.com, 631-323-2525

Orient Point-New London, Conn.

Cost: About \$88 round trip including driver; passengers \$26 each.

Time: 1 hour, 20 minutes

From New London, it's about an hourlong drive to Point Judith.

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