

New England

A just plain lovely Star in the sea

A day or overnight on this gem in the Isles of Shoals pares away centuries of clutter

BY PHIL PRIMACK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

STAR ISLAND — Visible off the coasts of three New England states, the Isles of Shoals are that familiar neighbor you never quite get around to visiting. That's partly because for years the islands were largely inaccessible, and not just because six miles of Atlantic Ocean separate them from their closest mainland point.

Regular service on the biggest ship serving the isles, the steamship replica M/V Thomas Laighton

from Portsmouth, was shut down in 2001 after 9/11 and did not resume until 2009. And until recently, the only easy way to spend a night here was to be connected to either the marine research laboratory on Appledore Island or to attend conferences run by the non-profit Star Island Corp., which has historic ties to the Unitarian Universalist Church.

But starting this weekend, Star Island — the second largest of the nine isles — is open to anyone wanting to spend a night or more at the Oceanic Hotel with its 600 feet of wraparound covered porch lined with

rocking chairs that recall the grand wooden hotels of 19th-century coastal New England.

"I keep hearing people say they've lived around here and looked at these islands all their lives," says Captain Tom Davis as he skips the Uncle Oscar, a converted lobster boat operated by Rye-based Island Cruises, which runs between Rye and Star Island. "Then after they visit, they usually say they wish they'd come sooner."

Nearly four centuries after John Smith set foot on

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TARRAH HASKELL

The Oceanic Hotel is over 100 years old, a reminder of the era of grand hotels, when celebrities such as author Nathaniel Hawthorne and painter Childe Hassam stayed there.

RHODE ISLAND

Aunt Carrie's makes diners as happy as clams

By Patricia Harris and David Lyon
GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

Fourth in a series on James Beard Foundation America's Classics Eateries in New England.

NARRAGANSETT, R.I. — Who would think such a small state could make clam chowder so complicated? There must be a recipe for every Rhode Islander, but they fall into three main categories: red, white, and clear.

Naturally, Aunt Carrie's, which entered the pantheon of the James Beard Foundation's America's Classics in 2007, carries all three. Which one you order "all depends on your mood," says our waitress Alison Watson. It might also depend on your geographic allegiance. "Most people go for the white, but New Yorkers order the red," she says. Locals forgo both milk and tomato and opt for the clear.

For the record, the clear chowder has the most pronounced clam flavor, and it is best for dunking clam cakes, the dish on which Carrie Cooper made her name. Like many Rhode Island food specialties, the clam cakes are not quite what their name suggests. Cooper started making them by tossing chopped clams into her recipe for corn fritters, and at least in this corner of Narragansett, a clam cake is a whomping big fritter, not a puny breaded patty.

Aunt Carrie's has been serving the big doughballs since the original Carrie and her husband, Ulysses, opened the restaurant in 1920. "We don't really change too much," says Elsie Foy, whose late husband, Bill, was the grandson of the founders. The classic menu includes the chowders and clam cakes, as well as clam rolls, fried clam dinners, steamed clams, and stuffed clams. But make no mistake: This is no funky, take-out-only clam shack. It's been a shore restaurant with a dining room from the outset.

The cedar-shingled exterior — which looks virtually unchanged since the 1930s photos on the walls — gives way inside to a main dining room of varnished wooden tables, bentwood-

style chairs, and buttercup yellow walls with kelly green trim. Windows dressed with lace valances look out on swaying marsh grasses. The dining room has a wonderfully homey feel. Indeed, eating at Aunt Carrie's is a bit like a visit to your favorite great aunt (assuming she's a genius with a grill and a fryolater and has access to fresh-off-the-boat seafood). Everyone young and old is on his or her best behavior as tray after tray laden with generous plates of food emerges from the kitchen.

In fact, if there's any problem with Aunt Carrie's, it's that portions can be too generous. The standard order of clamcakes, for example, is six. Given that each is nearly the size of a tennis ball, that should be enough to feed a family. You can also order an inexpensive combo plate of three clamcakes with a bowl of clam chowder.

Even one of the rare newcomers to the menu practically overflows the plate. The lobster BLT was added in 2011, says Foy, at the suggestion of her son-in-law. "He's from northern Vermont, and he puts bacon on everything," she says. To his credit, the sandwich has proven to be very popular. Served on toasted bread made in house every morning, the sandwich piles on crisp bacon, crunchy lettuce, big slices of tomato, and a mound of sweet lobster meat. It's so big it's hard to wrap your mouth around it. "You have to smooch it down a little," Foy advises.

Be careful with those big portions, as you will certainly want to save room for a slice of pie. They are made fresh on the premises, many of them from Aunt Carrie's own recipes.

1240 Ocean Road, 401-783-7930, www.auntcarriesri.com. Open daily Memorial Day-Labor Day, weekends in September, Fri-Sun April-May. Clamcakes, sandwiches, and plates \$3.99-\$22.99; some items market price. BYOB.

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PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

'We don't really change too much.'

ELSIE FOY, owner of Aunt Carrie's

MASSACHUSETTS

Listening lately in Lowell



KATHLEEN PIERCE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Peter Lavender's band at The Back Page.

LOWELL — Midway through Peter Lavender's set, the evening started to take shape.

Channeling Elvis Costello, the local crooner reached a loud and quirky crescendo. Martinis were downed. Fans stormed the dance floor. A well-inked couple made out in the corner. Through the windows of the snug blues club, the Eastern Canal seemed to shimmer and shake.

On this Friday night, the city of Lowell was

as alive as London and The Back Page felt like a swinging club along the River Thames. It's hard to imagine that reporters, myself included, once clacked out stories here.

Located in the former Lowell Sun building, the year-and-a-half-old nightclub is giving downtowners a reason, beyond sushi and suds, to stay out after dark. Tucked down a canal off Kearney Square, it took time for crowds to come. But last November, "it was like a switch was turned on," said owner Bob Ramirez.

Marquee musicians such as James Montgomery, local uke hero Melvern Taylor, and a steady cavalcade of tunesmiths who perform regularly in Cambridge clubs have turned The Back Page into front-page news.

Most nights, 30- and 40-somethings who have snapped up luxury lofts in this revitalized urban village settle into swank booths for martinis of the moment called s'mores, the Louis Armstrong, and the Dirty Canal (\$12).

Similar to the beloved Toad in Cambridge, here patrons will find no cover, live music nightly, and plenty of local characters to liven up the joint. Spread the news.

15 Kearney Square, 978-455-4418, www.backpagelowell.com

KATHLEEN PIERCE

Paddling the Cape's kettle ponds

WELLFLEET — Gaining access to the Cape's coveted kettle ponds is always a hurdle, especially if you don't have a town sticker that allows you to park in one of the limited spaces.

GO PLAY Wellfleet's cherished swimming holes are particularly tricky if you're not familiar with their locales. Once you're swimming in the sublime fresh water, far from the masses at the nearby beaches, it's worth overcoming the obstacles. At Gull Pond, you can thank Jack's Boat Rental (jacksboatrental.com) for giving you the means to reach three dreamy pools nestled in the hillside.

Park in the large lot, rent a canoe, and paddle across Gull Pond. On the northern end, you will find a narrow bend of water cut through the land. This sluiceway, as it's called, was sup-

posedly created by Native Americans to catch herring making their seasonal run. Continue into Higgins Pond, and if you have the energy, float onward to a second sluiceway.

This leads to the placid waters of Williams Pond, a gem of a swimming hole that even has a historical bent. One of Henry David Thoreau's favorite characters in his book "Cape Cod" is the "old Wellfleet oysterman" John Newcomb, whom he runs into at this pond.

Rarely have I seen another person on Williams Pond, let alone an oysterman.

Take Route 6 into Wellfleet and turn right onto Gross Hill Road. A sharp left onto Gull Pond Road and Schoolhouse Hill Road will lead you to the parking lot.

STEPHEN JERMANOK



STEPHEN JERMANOK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

From Gull Pond (pictured), a sluiceway leads to Higgins and Williams ponds.