

# STAR ISLAND, New Hampshire

*A porch-rocking,  
photo-snapping kind of day ...*



**MORNING & AFTERNOON:** The Isles of Shoals are a group of nine islands, most of them privately owned, four in New Hampshire and five in Maine. Star Island is the more accessible of the two that permit visitors. (Appledore, belonging to Maine, is the other. It was home to famed poet Celia Thaxter, and visitors can tour her famous garden through excursions arranged by the **Isles of Shoals Marine Laboratory**, departing from New Castle, New Hampshire. Limited tours sell out quickly, so reserve early.)

With the more frequent ferry service departing from Portsmouth, let your morning begin here, just before the city's fully awake: That means a stop for specialty coffee and a flaky pastry at **Breaking New Grounds**. Then head down Market Street, home to the **Isles of Shoals Steamship Company**, and board the M/V *Thomas Lighton* (named for the 19th-century Isles of Shoals hotel builder, who was Celia Thaxter's father), bound for Star Island. This triple-deck ferry seems



**A 7-mile cruise from Portsmouth aboard M/V *Thomas Lighton*, top, delivers passengers to small, rockbound Star Island, above, lined with dirt paths ideal for exploration. The few buildings are connected with the Star Island Conference Center.**

small and stubby given its stated capacity (more than 300 passengers). But sure enough, once everyone's jostled aboard, there's sufficient room to stake out your own gazing space.

The seven-mile cruise to Star takes just over an hour. As you chart your course down the Piscataqua River toward the open ocean, the captain begins his narration, pointing out the

bustling Naval Shipyard, in sharp contrast to the Portsmouth Naval Prison, empty since 1974. Local lore suggests that Walt Disney actually served some time there, but our captain assures us that that's not factual (though the building does rather resemble Disney's Tower of Terror). If the day is clear, you may well see all five lighthouses along your journey's way; Boon Island Light is the tough one to spy, set off in the distance. Star Island is easy to spot as you draw closer, for looming large is the substantial, wood-clad, and weathered **Oceanic House** (owned and operated by the nonprofit Star Island Corporation), with its covered front porch lined with rockers, inviting you to climb its steep stairs and sit a spell.

Your time on the island will vary depending on whether you've selected the "Walkabout" or the "Stopover" cruise (one and four hours, respectively). With the shorter cruise, there's just time to peck inside the Oceanic for a glimpse into its grand past, stop at the bookstore, and stroll along the worn dirt pathways lined with blooming beach roses before heading back to Portsmouth for lunch. The more leisurely timeframe allows for the possibility of a meal in the Oceanic's classic dining room (reservations required). Or just grab a bagel or an ice cream from the snack bar, before putting those porch rockers to use. Star's best for exploration on foot, and for snapping photos, given its picture-perfect rocky shoreline. A lightly pebbled access point to the ocean sits dockside, irresistible to kids sporting water shoes and coated in coconut-scented sunscreen. It leads into a narrow seaweed-free path, providing just enough room for dabbling under a parent's watchful eye.

Whichever excursion you choose, settle into island time while you can. All too soon, that gangplank will be lifted, the ferry's engines rumbling back to life, readying to chug on back to mainland reality. —*Deborah Despres*