

Simplicity, seabirds, sights, and silences

► ISLES OF SHOALS
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the isles in 1614 — his “discovery” came more than 5,000 years after Native Americans were already living there, according to archeological finds in a fascinating “Under the Shoals” exhibit at the Portsmouth Discovery Center — Star Island is slowly getting on the summer travel map. That is not to say that it ever will — or want to — compete with New England siblings such as Martha’s Vineyard or Block Island.

“In the last few years, we have made a really concerted effort to welcome the greater community to Star Island,” says Victoria Hardy, Star Island Corp. CEO. “There is absolutely nothing like this up and down the coast. Our greatest attraction is to people who very much would like to experience the quintessential New England experience. Come here and you can sense what it was like for people like Nathaniel Hawthorne to sit on that porch.”

That porch is still mainly used by day trippers (about 9,000 visited Star last summer, Hardy says) and attendees to conferences that range from writing and art workshops that begin this weekend to sessions through the fall on dance, photography, nature, yoga, and other topics, including “Mystery and Mayhem on the Isles of Shoals and Beyond.”

Though most of the sessions last up to a week, people now have two ways to spend just a night or two at the Oceanic, which consists mainly of two smaller hotels that were moved together in 1876. Depending upon the conference, people can sometimes come as a “conference overnight guest” and attend just a day or two of a longer session. But the easiest and least structured way to spend a night is the “personal retreat,” for those staying for a night or longer without being tied to any particular group or event.

The Oceanic booked about 100 personal retreat nights when the program began in



PRISCILLA HODGKINS/STAR ISLAND

The M/V Thomas Lughton, which for years suspended its service to Star Island, arrives from Portsmouth, N.H.

2008, says Hardy. That number rose to nearly 500 last year and nearly 200 reservations already have been made for this season. “If you need specific dates, they should contact us as soon as possible or go to our website,” which details current availability, she says.

To be clear: A night in the Oceanic is not for everyone. In some ways Star and the Oceanic are the anti-Nantucket. Rooms are Shaker simple, with mismatched antique furniture on wooden floors and shared bathrooms down the hall. (A much smaller “motel” unit on the island does offer private toilets and sinks.) No TV. No bar. No locks on the doors. Many rooms lack plugs, though a Wi-Fi signal is available. Meals are served family style at long ta-

bles in a dining room little changed since the hotel was built. Hot tub? Forget about it. Showers are available only every other day, courtesy of a rain-water cistern.

If that seems too much like indoor camping for you, consider just a day trip to Star Island, which is an easy boat ride from either Portsmouth or Rye. You can give the 46-acre island a quick exploration in under two hours (the boats often include guided on-island tours), with enough time left to sit on the Oceanic’s porch or check out its gift shop.

Walk past the small cemetery next to the hotel up to the hilltop gazebo. Wander over to the Gosport Chapel, which stands atop the island’s highest point. (It’s the third chapel on

this spot. The first was built in 1685 from the wreck of a Spanish ship.) Look for snowy egrets, cormorants, and seagulls (Be careful: At this time of year, gulls will dive-bomb strollers who get too close to their nests.) and maybe even catch a whale spout offshore.

Stop almost anywhere on the island to gaze across the sea, past the White Island lighthouse built in 1859 to the distant coasts of Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. Try to find “Miss Underhill’s Chair” on a rocky ledge on the back of the island, from which in 1848 the young teacher and her fiancé were swept out to sea by a wave (he survived).

On Star, some things feel little changed since the 1800s, es-

pecially when you spend a night. Longer stays give guests time to visit other islands (you can row yourself to Smuttynose). And you can wander Star at a much more leisurely pace. After falling asleep to the steady rhythm of waves and the fog horn next to the lighthouse on White Island, you awake to the early morning squawking of sea gulls. Walk down the long hotel hallway to the broad wooden staircase and have coffee on the porch as a red lobster boat silently passes through Gosport Harbor. Then take a walk past the 18th-century wooden cottages and the cluster of newer stone buildings toward the sea and watch the sun rise over low fog and sea spray.

“It’s completely different when you spend the night,” says

If you go . . .

Star Island Corp.
30 Middle St., Portsmouth, N.H.
603-430-6272
www.starisland.org

“Personal retreat” overnights in the Oceanic Hotel cost \$169 per night double occupancy, including meals (ferry extra).

Isles of Shoals Steamship Co.
15 Market St., Portsmouth
800-441-4620
603-431-5500
www.islesofshoals.com

Offers day trips and other tours of the Isles of Shoals aboard the 300-person, three-deck M/V Thomas Lughton. Adults \$34, children ages 6-12 \$24, 13-17 and seniors (60 and older) \$31.
Island Cruises of Rye, N.H.
Rye Harbor, Route 1-A, Rye
603-964-6446
www.uncleoscar.com

Tours of the isles and stops at Star Island using a converted lobster boat, the Uncle Oscar. Adults \$29, children \$25.
Discover Portsmouth Center
10 Middle St., Portsmouth
603-436-8433
www.portsmouthhistory.org
A free exhibit, “Under the Isles of Shoals,” features finds from ongoing archeological work. Running through August (a display of Isles of Shoals art and photographs runs through October), the show includes finds from a dig on Smuttynose Island. Open daily 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Meredith Richardson of Kittery, Maine, who was so smitten by an earlier visit that she got married here last summer. “You have time to unwind. Day trips offer a nice little taste in terms of just exploring Star Island. But to actually experience it, you have to stay overnight.”

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