



*Nahma* moored in Great Salt Pond, Block Island

# Two Sides of Block Island

**A Fourth of July stopover reveals contrasting impressions of a historic isle**

**By Ellen Massey Leonard**

**A**s a child, I had heard my mother talk about Block Island, a rugged fisherman's outpost shrouded in fog, an almost mystical place despite its proximity to Newport

and Long Island. She had sailed there with her parents before fiberglass, radar, and GPS, and her stories had roused my curiosity. So recently my husband Seth and I made time to visit Block Island on a cruise north from the Chesapeake Bay.

Our cruising guide conflicted with my mother's stories. The Great Salt Pond, connected to the ocean by a man-made channel, houses three marinas and 90 town-owned rental moorings, which are almost always full in summer. Around the Fourth

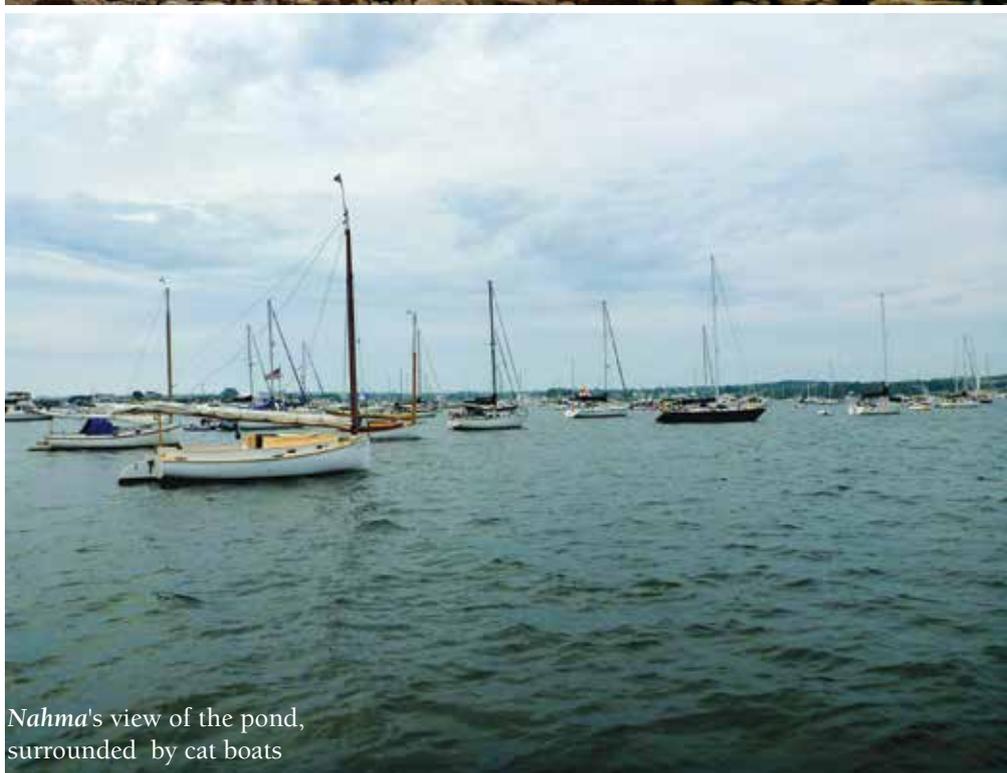
of July, when we were likely to arrive, up to 1,000 boats squeeze into the harbor, all trying to find good holding. It didn't sound like much of a deserted fisherman's island anymore, but I couldn't help wanting to see it anyway. If it turned out to be more of a zoo than a lonely outpost, we could celebrate a lively Fourth instead.

Seth and I approached Block Island on a sunny July 3rd day, and as we luffed our 34-foot Herreshoff ketch *Nahma* into the wind to drop the sails, four or five boats passed us heading into the anchorage. As our cruising guide had warned, the Great Salt Pond was full of boats. A topsail schooner we had seen rounding Montauk Point filled the southern end, and every array of cruising boat, luxury yacht, weekender and sport-fisher jostled for anchoring room. Drawing only four and a half feet, *Nahma* found a space close to shore in the northeast corner, near a flotilla of antique wooden catboats. This clearly wasn't the remote isle of my mother's day, but we could enjoy it nonetheless; chatting over the water with our neighbors, watching the fireworks after dark and laughing at the hundreds of enthusiastic foghorns welcoming in the Fourth.

Everyone spilled ashore the next day. Dinghies fanned out from the docks, and barbecue smoke and loud talk mixed with the smells of grilling and frying at all the marinas. Hoards of people gathered along the road for the parade and lined up at the firehouse for the town cookout. The village, New Shoreham, swarmed with ferry passengers, cruisers and hotel guests. Seth and I joined the crowds, squeezing onto a picnic bench at an outdoor greasy spoon where we ordered fried oysters and soft-serve ice cream. American flags waved from the white clapboard buildings and racks of brightly colored t-shirts advertised souvenir shops. It was good fun, but something told me this wasn't all Block Island had to offer. Maybe it was my nostalgic wish to recreate my mother's stories, but I suspected that if I looked hard enough the outpost she



Yacht approaching Block Island



*Nahma's* view of the pond, surrounded by cat boats

remembered would still exist.

Seth and I rented bicycles and pedaled until all the music and talking had died behind us. South of the harbor there were no parades, no marinas, no shops and few people. Instead of the noise of revelry, I heard wind rustling in the trees and a bird chirping. We turned off the paved road where a small sign indicated beach access and found ourselves entirely alone. Waves cascaded over boulders and pebbles. Two solitary houses crouched atop the bluffs, their shingles gray from count-

less winter storms. A sloop made her way toward us from the south and I could imagine the intrepid fishermen of the past that had made this cool, oceanic island their home.

From there we worked east, stopping to hike through the grassy nature preserve of Rodman's Hollow. We lost our way among the several trails winding loops over the low hills and valleys of thick shrubs, and there was no one around to ask for directions. When we finally reached our bikes, we set off to see the impressive Mohegan Cliffs



Along the southern shore of Block Island, Mohegan Bluffs rise nearly 200 feet, this page; Southeast Light, visitors along Main St. in New Shoreham, opposite page

them on the radar and those close to us loomed out of the dewy cloud, but we still felt the eerie isolation fog always brings. We nosed our way slowly towards the channel, checking off navigation markers on our chart as we passed them. Gulls and cormorants flew up from a beach as we pattered by.

The mist lightened as we came out into the Sound and saw a few early morning fishermen trolling nearby. Block Island was lost in an impenetrable mass of fog behind us. Then, as the sun rose, a few wisps of cloud parted at its northern tip to reveal a lonely lighthouse atop a bluff. Despite all the commotion of the harbor, the town and the Fourth, my last impression was the same as my mother's: an isolated fisherman's outpost, shrouded in fog.

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and the solid brick Southeast Light and Victorian-style keeper's house, completed in 1875. There were a few more people there, tourists viewing the brightest lighthouse on the East Coast, and local kids selling lemonade to swimmers bound for the beach below the cliffs. Yet, the bluffs still had the majestic feel of a windswept island estranged from its neighboring

mainland, the rolling ocean swell and the frequent bouts of fog keeping it far away.

A thick, white mist had settled over the Great Salt Pond by the time Seth and I got underway just before dawn the next morning. The thousand boats at anchor around us still slept. Through the fog and silence, they might not have been there. We saw

*Ellen Massey Leonard completed a four-year 32,000-mile circumnavigation with her husband Seth aboard their previous Heretic, their 38-foot semi-custom cutter. Their voyage took them westabout on the Milk Run Route via Panama and the Cape of Good Hope. Now based in landlocked Switzerland, Ellen is working on a book about their circumnavigation.*

## Two Sides of Block Island: Some Information

Charts and Cruising Guides:  
Maptech Chart Kit Region 2,  
Block Island to the Canadian  
Border.

Maptech Chart Kit Region 3,  
New York to Nantucket.

Dozier's Waterway Guide North-  
ern 2013, Long Island Sound  
and New England Waters

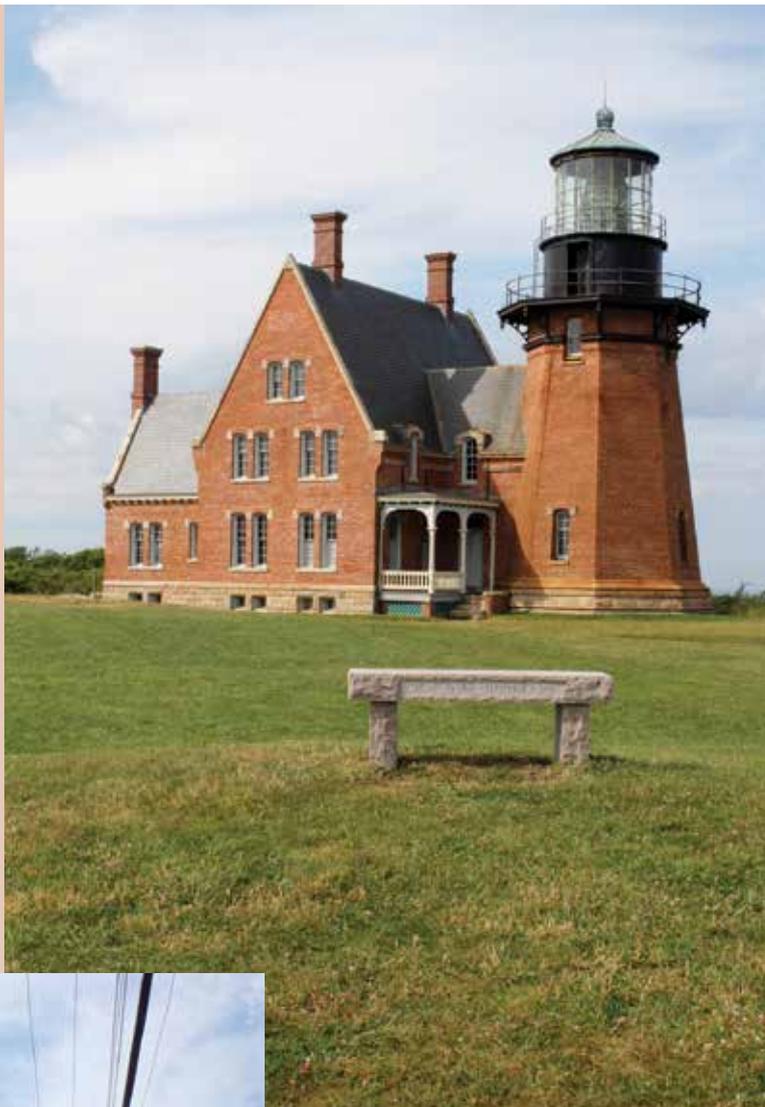
Marinas and moorings in Great  
Salt Pond:

Champlin's Marina <http://champlinsresort.com/marina/> (401)  
466-7777

Block Island Boat Basin <http://blockislandboatbasin.net/> (401)  
466-2631

Payne's Dock and Marina (401)  
466-5572

Town moorings: <http://www.blockislandinfo.com/harbors-and-boating> Harbors Depart-  
ment (401) 466-3204, VHF  
channel 12 from 0700 to 2100.  
[harbors@new-shoreham.com](mailto:harbors@new-shoreham.com)



Old Harbor on East side of  
island:

Limited anchorage, restricted  
to 7 days in a 14-day period.  
30-boat town-operated marina.  
Call Old Harbor dock: (401)  
466-3235

Bicycle and Moped Rentals:  
Aldo's Mopeds (401) 466-5018  
Beach Rose Bicycles (401) 466-  
5925

Block Island Bike and Car Rental  
(401) 466-2297 (Near Great  
Salt Pond)

Island Bike and Moped (401)  
741-2329

Moped Man (401) 466-5444  
Old Harbor Bike Shop (401)  
466-2029

Seacrest Inn Bicycle Rentals  
(401) 466-2882