Away From It All - ISLAND DREAMS

Escape with us to five emerald gems set in the Caribbean. (This article first appeared in the November 1999 issue of Connecticut Magazine. All rights reserved.)

Rose Island Lighthouse, Newport, R.I.
By Michelle Bodak Acri

It's hard to imagine rooms with better water views than those at the Rose Island Lighthouse. The lighthouse, after all, is on its own tiny island in Newport Harbor- and that means 365 degrees of true-blue views no matter which way you turn. But let's start at the beginning.

Civil War veteran George C. Williams was the first keeper of the Rose Island Light. That was in 1870, when the beacon that would shine its fixed red beam over lower Narragansett Bay for more than a century was first lit. The classic beauty was a sturdy piece of maritime architecture built on land anchored equally in the area's maritime and military history. Indeed, fortifications once located on the less-than-20-acre island included a 1778 British battery, a Revolutionary fort built between 1780 and '81 with the French under Rochambeau, and Fort Hamilton, built between 1798 and 1800 to defend the mouth of Newport Harbor, and upon whose circular southwest bastion the new lighthouse was erected. An 1873 article in the *Newport Mercury* reported that aside from assuring that his candle on the water was well lit, ol' George C. was known to have enjoyed the opportunity to "[unfurl] the Stars and Stripes to the breeze from his conspicuous standpoint." God Bless America and all that.

One brochure detailing the Rose Island Lighthouse of today calls it "a symbol of a vanishing way of life." That may be the reason why, when the lighthouse (which had been extinguished in 1971 when the Newport Bridge was built) had fallen into a sorry state of neglect, a group of area residents formed the nonprofit Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation in 1984 to bring it back from the brink. To make thousands of hours of a back-breaking story short, the venerable beacon was relit in 1993 and the Rose Island lighthouse as living-history museum reborn.

We arrived at the lighthouse via the Light-A-Rose, the retired lobster boat that the foundation uses to ferry guests to the island. The foundation's executive director, Charlotte Johnson, served as both our captain and tour guide. Johnson's stories were plentiful, and listening to them as we toured the first floor of the lighthouse, we were immediately drawn to a chair by a window in the living room that looks across the water to Newport a mile away. Turns out we had the best seat in the house, at least according to Charles Slocum Curtis, keeper of the

light from 1887 to 1918. A brass plate on the windowsill identified this as the keeper's favorite window-with-a-view. His wife, Christina, on the other hand, preferred to perch by the window in the kitchen. Smart lady-even when the wind was howling something fierce, it was toasty there next to the iron stove. It was not hard for us to imagine Charles and Christina, their chins in their hands, woolgathering and enjoying the bluesy views in between chores. Of course, our imaginations did not have to stretch all that far since the lighthouse has been restored to reflect in exacting detail-from the patterned slate on the roof right down to the red pitcher pump in the pantry-a period in history circa 1912.

Greatly aiding in the vision of restoration were locals such as Wanton Chase (grandson of Charles and Christina Curtis), who was able to provide the foundation with a firsthand account of the everyday go-ings-on of a keeper and his family.

Apparently the keepers liked to sing. In the living room is a grand old player piano with foot pumps and in the library an antique gramophone. Among the rolls of music atop the piano were classics like "Peg O' My Heart" and "Ol' Man River." We tried them out-it's a sure bet that the keepers sang better than we did. Each of the two bedrooms available for overnight rental is small, but extremely cozy due in large part to the beds piled high with quilts and the abundance of antique furniture-not that you'll consider it antique if you're into your role as a turn-of-the-century lighthouse keeper, which the foundation encourages.

The foundation, in fact, encourages such thinking to the extent that an overnight at the lighthouse is far from what you might expect-this is no B&B. Indeed, if you want some "B" you'll have to bring over the food yourself and cook it over the gas hot plate in the kitchen. You'll also have to change the bed linens and be sure to get the first floor ship-shape before 10 a.m., when the museum opens to visitors again.

And we might as well tell you now that Rose Island is entirely self-sufficient, which means no running water, wind-generated low-wattage electricity and trips to the environmental toilets outdoors. Was this a problem for us? Honestly? Not at all. There was a certain romance in reliving the past, not to mention "owning" our own lighthouse. Indeed, we've roughed it more on a camping trip-and our tent certainly didn't have hardwood floors shining with the fine patina of age, brass beds to get lost in, antique lighting fixtures, lighthouse memorabilia and, oh, those views.

Outdoors, a grassy expanse of meadow is ideal for picnics. You can fish for stripers from shore or go for a swim. Explore the sandy perimeter of the island

below the high tide line (except during bird-nesting season) or borrow the kayak. Harbor seals are known to dock on the east end of the island from October to April, in summer you can help tend the foundation's vegetable and flower gardens or, any time of year, simply pull up a lawn chair and watch the lazy parade of ships float along narragansett Bay.

Those who find this way of life especially appealing should check out the second floor of the lighthouse, where the true lighthouse keepers stay. Each week this separate-and quite spacious-apartment is rented out to a new group of keepers (up to four adults and two children), who are responsible for raising the flag on the island each morning, recording weather, electric and water data and performing one hour of chores each day, from polishing the brass to swabbing the deck. How popular is this getaway? Bookings are currently being taken for 2002. But, says Johnson, there are always cancellations, so be sure to call.

If you want a preview, the lighthouse is open daily for tours from July 16 to Labor Day or by appointment.

Rates range from $110 to $155 per night for a double. Keeper's apartment rates range from $650 to $1,200 per week for a double. For more information, call (401) 847-4242 or visit at www.roseislandlighthouse.org.

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