Way Off the Grid

Twenty-four Hours on Rose Island

By Rachel Carter
Photogaphy by Billy Black

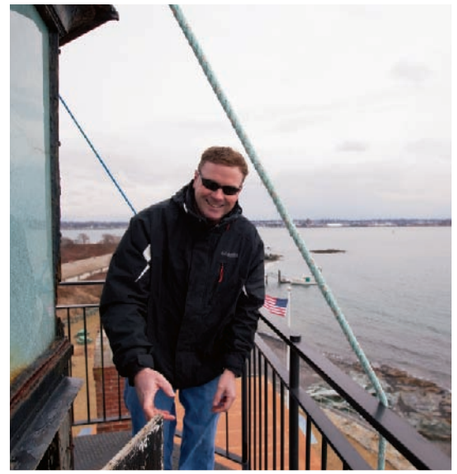
WHEN DAVE McCURDY DESCRIBES ROSE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE and its workings, he begins nearly every sentence with, "and what's great about this is ..." As director of the Lighthouse Foundation, he is the sort of man who, one might say, has a twinkle in his eye. To him, the 18.5 acres are like a second home, but one that has been in continual restoration since 1984. Now, the lighthouse is a thoughtfully appointed time warp for travelers looking for a quiet, altogether different sort of adventure from the usual shore house. In the middle of Newport harbor, the night my husband Nick and I spent 24 hours as "keepers" of the lighthouse this past winter, the silence and darkness seemed from another world. The restorative quiet in the lighthouse is astounding, and

more relaxing than any harried weeklong vacation. On Rose Island, silence is louder than words.

Aboard *Starfish*, a 32-foot lobster boat that transports guests from Goat Island to Rose Island, McCurdy's descriptions of the property and surrounding water are as energetic as if he were talking about his children. "We should see some seals today, you bet," he says, while we loaded our provisions into the boat. Leaving the S-dock at 10am on a Saturday morning, the tide was low, and the seals were sunning themselves on Citing Rock at the northeastern side of the island. Although tours run every winter, and are, typically, a tourist-y thing to do, a seal sighting still feels like something of a miracle in a busy harbor. McCurdy gave them a wide berth, but several seals jumped into the water and followed us toward shore, staring at the boat while their bald heads bobbed in the water. "They think we have snacks," McCurdy says.

Starfish docked on the south shore of the island. Rose Island is covered in mussels, and they crunched underfoot as we made our way uphill toward the lighthouse. McCurdy encourages keepers to pull the mussels off the rocks and steam them for dinner. "It's really something," he says of the wild-growing edibles. "People who eat the mussels here say they are some of the best they've ever had."

The lighthouse is divided into the upstairs keeper's quarters for people staying longer than one night, and the "museum" downstairs – rooms furnished with relics from the turn of the 20th century when a full-time keeper guided ships to shore. We quartered in the museum; hand-woven quilts covered the beds, and the simple kitchen was equipped with a cast iron, pot-bellied stove and a red hand pump at the sink for washing. On the orientation tour, McCurdy showed us the



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Dave McCurdy stands on the balcony of the lighthouse tower.

The tower light still shines at night for passing ships.

Rose Island Lighthouse is part inn, part meeting place. Visitors are welcome to dock their boats and hang out on the island for the day.

Harbor seals recline on Citing Rock at low tide.

Starfish transports Rose Island guest keepers to and from Goat Island.











FROM TOP An antique typewriter, binoculars and quill pen. The lighthouse is thoughtfully furnished with objects from the early 20th century.

The old-fashioned kitchen is cozy, kept warm by radiant heating in the floorboards.



Staying at the lighthouse is like a deserted B&B without the napkin rings and fresh-baked scones; we had the run of the house ... and didn't have to report for breakfast in the morning.

septic system installed on the toilet; to flush, the user has to pump a black handle until the suction power moves the water from the rainwater cistern in the basement to the clear, plastic tank above the pot. "This is pretty cool," admits McCurdy. Rose Island is nearly as off the grid as it was in the 1900s; the cistern supplies all of the plumbing water, and a windmill generates all of the electricity.

The downstairs rooms are more like a living ode to history than any of the off-limit rooms in the preserved estates on Aquidneck Island; in fact, McCurdy gleefully encouraged us to look around, pick up and touch everything as if we were in a hands-on children's museum. "Little by little, we've tried to furnish it just as it was," he says. In 1909, a boy named Wanton Chase came to Rose Island to live with his grandparents, Christina and Charles Curtis, full-time keepers of the lighthouse. Chase was a sickly baby, so his mother, following the wisdom of the time, thought the sea air might strengthen his lungs. In his booklet, *Boyhood Life at Rose Island*, Chase chronicled his life on the island from infancy to age seven. The details he left behind have helped the Lighthouse Foundation preserve his physical memories in the museum, right down to the twin bed in the living room where his grandfather used to rest while waiting for ships to pass through late at night. "When I think of my days on Rose Island I don't remember being cold in the winter or lonesome," Chase wrote. "I always found something to do on the beaches. Unlike these days of toys and programs and supervision for young people, I always found something to do for the day."

He's right. The property is isolated, but the modern, urban sentiment of boredom never factored into our stay – although, on Rose Island, "doing" is a relative term. As soon as McCurdy ended the tour ("See you tomorrow morning!" he called as he walked back to the dock), the soft noises of the water, wind, gulls and occasional honk of a Canada goose lulled us into a heavy two-hour nap at midday – the island's first golden gift to us at the end of a particularly tough work-week. After waking, we walked down a rough-hewn trail that leads to an eroded stone fortress populated by gulls and geese, where soldiers kept cannons during the Revolutionary War. Rose Island is a trove of U.S. war history; iron tracks for ammunition carts run along barracks used to house soldiers







during World War I, and, on the eastern shore, a torpedo refueling station and explosives shells are now home to birds and three species of snakes. From the top of the lighthouse tower, where the light still shines for ships as it did 100 years ago, each of these war remnants is visible.

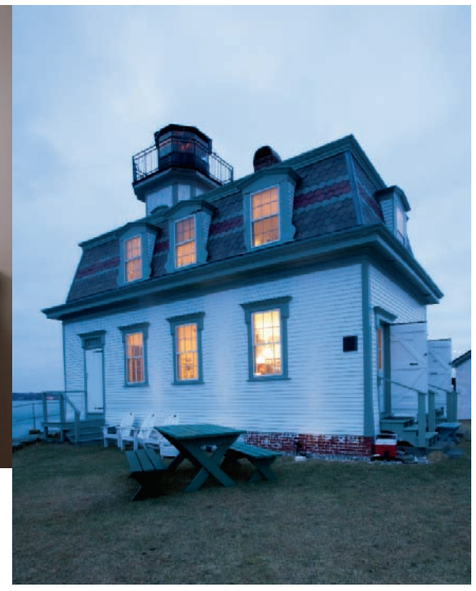
The trail drops down into a thicket, popping out again on the western shore that seems to be made entirely of mussels. We walked along, beachcombing for shells and sea glass. In the basement of the lighthouse, McCurdy collects wine and beer bottles on a shelf for volunteers to break; waves tumble the glass on the rocks for guest keepers to collect once its edges are buffed and rounded. My jacket pocket was full of snail shells and bits of blue, green and amber glass once we had circled the island.

Back at the lighthouse, the sun was setting and the geese had stopped honking. We scraped our shoes on an iron bar near the door to remove the goose droppings – the only drawback to the island. "You wouldn't believe the damage one goose can do," McCurdy says before leaving for the day. "It's a real problem for us." We believed.

The wind and temperature outside were turning harsh, but the kitchen was warm from the radiant heating in the floorboards. We padded around in wool socks and long underwear, drinking red wine and waiting for two lobsters to boil on the single gas burner. Staying at the lighthouse is like a deserted B&B without the napkin rings and fresh-baked scones; we had the run of the house, we cooked our own food and didn't have to report for breakfast with the other guests in the morning. We were alone, and this quiet solitude forced me to take notice. The sound of the current swirling against the rocks, the creak in the walls – all sounds seemed significant. Throughout the evening, we found ourselves in speechless vacuums, transfixed by the stillness while we sat under the dark window in the kitchen. The absence of noise and stimulation had made nighttime full again.

After dinner, we bundled up for another walk around the island. A spit of land that runs on the northern side, toward the bridge, disappears at high tide and then, when the water recedes, reappears as a squishy stretch of mussels and seaweed. We walked around the western shore and made our way onto the spit; the lights on the bridge lit up the land around us. Nick turned east and walked to the point to see if any seals were swimming off the rock. He walked back to the spit. "This is going to be hard," he says to me. "Writing about this place would be like writing an open recommendation for your best friend."

No doubt Wanton Chase felt the same way. When he was seven years old, he moved to Newport to live with his mother and father and attend a proper school. "What a sad night I had before the day I left for school!" Chase wrote. "I remember standing at the screen door facing Newport city lights and crying. My grandmother asked me, 'what's the matter, Wanton?' I said, 'I don't want to leave here and live in Newport!' My mother and father seemed like strangers to me."



We slept hard that night and woke early with the sun. When McCurdy pulled up to the dock at 10:30am on Sunday morning to ship us back to Goat Island, Nick and I were hoofing it around the island to see if the seals were out again. They were, and we stood and watched them flop for a moment before we climbed back over the rocks and war relics to the boat. The new keepers had ascended the hill and were waving to us from the lighthouse railing. "How long are they staying?" I asked McCurdy. "A whole week," he says, untying the boat from the dock. "Some people can't deal with the quiet for that long because they don't find enough to do here. Me, I could stay out here for a while."

To steal a line from McCurdy, what's great about Rose Island, for us, was that 24 hours felt like a month. The thing about silence is that it makes time go by slowly, every moment more meaningful without the drone of television, computer keyboards tapping and the white noise of small talk. You choose your words carefully because they are going to disrupt the peace, and suddenly you realize that half an hour has passed without so much as a sentence. So maybe Rose Island isn't for the prolix or the type As; maybe a lighthouse stay is only for people who don't realize that they need a *real* vacation – an entire Earth's rotation just to be still and listen.



