

# The Boston Globe

## The treasures of Block Island

By **Diane Bair and Pamela Wright** Globe correspondent, May 15, 2019, 4:00 p.m.

Under leaden gray skies punctuated with bursts of thunder and ice-cold rain, we pawed through the shrubbery along a muddy trail, looking for treasure. Because, why not? It's what you do here on Block Island, along with eating chowder fries and drinking mudslides — and about a million other outdoor activities when the weather is fine.

The weather was not fine, alas. It was a day made for sleeping in, or brunching. But that just made us dig a little deeper to uncover what is special, and different, about this pork chop-shaped island set 12 miles off the coast of Rhode Island.

Our immediate goal: To net a coveted glass orb, similar to the floats that once held down fishing nets, created by artist Eben Horton and hidden in secret spots on this island of 1,000 souls. Some floats are made of clear glass, others (more rare and desirable) are made of colored glass, and all are stamped and dated — constituting a public art installation called the Glass Float Project that began in 2012. Launched by Horton, who hides some of the floats himself, the project was modeled after a similar one in Oregon.

Among the 550 citrus-size orbs that were hidden last year, some are still unaccounted for, they say. Sounded like a challenge to us, especially during a nor'easter!

Most of the floats are hidden on the island's beaches and trails, says Jessica Willi of the Block Island Tourism Council. "It began as an art project, but this really gets people out on our hiking trails," she notes. Now, thousands of people go out to look for the floats. It's finders-keepers, but each person is only allowed to keep one orb each year, and asked to register its number on Block Island Tourism's website.



Camels, kangaroos, and a Scottish Highland bull (shown here) are among the exotic residents of Block Island, residing at an animal farm at the 1616 Inn (DIANE BAIR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

The first of this year's floats will be hidden on the first weekend in June, but that's not necessarily the best time to go searching, Willi says, since seekers will be out in full force. "It's all about luck, and timing," she says. Don't think you can buy a Block Islander a few drinks at Yellow Kittens bar and get them to spill the beans about the floats' hiding places. "A secret group of people hide them," Willi says. Hiding places are a well-kept secret. But there is a "Hints" page on Facebook. One clue: "You dirty rat!" revealed that a float was hidden on Rat Island.

### **HIKE, BIKE, AND CAMEL-WATCH**

We thought the rain and wind might help, knocking down floats that were hidden in trees. But, no — all we found along the trails and beaches was a furry tennis ball and a nip bottle. So we decided to focus on Block Island's other treasures.

They weren't hard to find. If you're a traveler who loves wide-open spaces and outdoorsy pursuits, welcome to your new favorite getaway. More than half of the 10-square-mile island is protected open space — fields, marshes, and woodlands maintained by three different nature conservancies. Hiking trails (about 25 miles in all) wind through places with beguiling names like Rodman's Hollow and Clayhead Hill (home to a maze).

It's easy to get a workout here, given that the favored mode of transport is a bicycle. You can get virtually anyplace on the island by bike. Four different bike routes make it easy to reach island landmarks like Mohegan Bluffs, Southeast Lighthouse, and North Light. There's even a self-guided bike tour marked with blue signs with QR codes that describe 12 of the island's must-see spots. One of these is 1661 Exotic Animal Farm & Garden, where you can see a kangaroo (no lie), camels, emus, alpacas, and other exotic wildlife. They also sell fiber goods and offer yoga classes. (Move over, goat yoga!)

Fishing is a popular local pursuit (you'll need a license if you're not aboard a charter boat), and there are several local captains who'll be happy to show you a good time. They can also take you to see the nation's first (controversial, of course) ocean wind farm, which has been supplying the island's power since 2017. Stand-up paddle boarding has taken hold here, too, and you can take lessons and/or rent gear at outfitters including DiamondBlue Surf Shop or Ocean Adventures. At Champlin's Watersports, you can rent SUPs or kayaks and even bumper boats with built-in squirters. In short, this is one of those places where you could hike, bike, fish, and paddle in the same day — and certainly on the same weekend.

Traffic can get bad on summer weekends, Willi notes, given that there's really only one road around the island. Plus, it can be tough to get a reservation on the carry ferry. Given that, in the half-dozen times we've visited Block Island over the years, we've never once brought a car, opting instead to bring bikes or rent them on the island.

### **Old school charm, zero flash**

Definitely skip the car if you're staying at one of the hotels in Old Harbor — there just aren't any parking spaces. These stately Victorian style properties, gracing the waterfront, are the island's signature. Block Island has the most Victorian hotels that are still being used as hotels of any location on the eastern seaboard, Willi notes. "They look old on the outside, but they're modern on the inside," she says. Many don't have TVs, although Wi-Fi and comfy mattresses are now a given. Of the iconic hotels, the Spring House Hotel ([www.springhousehotel.com](http://www.springhousehotel.com)), set on a hillside, boasts stellar ocean views and a guest list that includes Mark Twain and Billy Joel. Steps from Crescent Beach but walk-able to the shops and restaurants of Old Harbor, the Blue Dory Inn ([www.blockislandinns.com](http://www.blockislandinns.com)) is an old-school cozy Victorian with romantic touches, plus a daily wine hour and hot breakfast in the morning. Innkeeper Ann Law also operates the beachside Avonlea, once a private home, with enchanting views from its broad porch overlooking the water. The old, c.1876 Surf Hotel is now owned by Lark Hotels and is being renovated for the summer season.





Victorian style hotels and people on bicycles are common sights on Block Island, known for its laid-back style. (DIANE BAIR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

What Block Island doesn't have: A lot of shopping ("You can pretty much hit all of our shops in about 20 minutes," Willi quips) or serious nightlife, outside of a few bars that have been around forever. "We're not flashy. And we like that," Willi says. "We fly under the radar a bit."

And for some travelers, therein lies its appeal. "For me, Martha's Vineyard felt like stepping into a movie set," says Elaine Weber of Wethersfield, Conn., who has visited Block Island more times than she can count. "Block Island is rougher and more rustic, and it feels more comfortable — like being in someone's home. You can put your feet up on Block Island."

You can also put your feet on the beach — any beach. They're all public here, and all free, with 30 different access points. "You can literally go on any foot path and get to the beach and not be in someone's backyard," Willi notes. And they are lovely, with firm, tawny sand that draws Rhode Islanders to day-trip to Block Island just to go to the beach. You can walk to the beach from the ferry, provided you don't pack a lot of gear.





On Block Island, you don't search for pirate's booty, but for glass floats, hidden along beaches and on hiking trails. (BLOCK ISLAND TOURISM COUNCIL)

While you won't find the near-endless array of restaurants available on other New England islands, you won't find dress codes, either, or eye-popping prices. The adult beverage of choice is the mudslide, and after a couple of these, an order of chowder fries is required. Yep, chowder fries. At the Mohegan Café & Brewery ([www.moheganbi.com](http://www.moheganbi.com)), they top fries with chowder, bacon, and Gouda cheese, and bake them in the oven. Topped with scallions, they arrive at the table a gooey, glorious mess. Another favorite spot is Poor People's Pub, especially their weekly pig roast. Eli's ([www.elisblockisland.com](http://www.elisblockisland.com)) is a popular bistro known for tuna nachos; it's tiny, and they don't take reservations, so plan to arrive early. For fine dining, most islanders will direct you to Winfield's ([www.winfieldsbi.com](http://www.winfieldsbi.com)), where they specialize in French cooking with a southern flair.



French fries plus chowder plus bacon plus Gouda cheese = a Block Island classic. (DIANE BAIR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

And you won't leave the island without a bag of chocolate-caramel-sea salt fudge from Blocks of Fudge, or a doughnut from Payne's, sold from a silver food truck.

If you're lucky, though, you'll encounter an event that brings the locals and visitors together for some food, music, and a toast to New England's too-short summer season. We finagled an invite to the Inaugural Wine & Song Weekend at Avonlea. We ate lobster, danced to live music — and we made plans to come back and find a float, once the 2019 batch is hidden.

### **Getting there**

The Block Island Ferry ([www.blockislandferry.com](http://www.blockislandferry.com)) operates a traditional ferry year-round, including car-carrying vessels (extra charge) from Galilee, R.I. (Point Judith). The 55-minute ride arrives in Old Harbor. Adult round-trip fare is \$23.75. [www.blockislandinfo.com](http://www.blockislandinfo.com). The Block Island Hi-Speed Ferry ([www.blockislandferry.com](http://www.blockislandferry.com)) runs seasonally (also from Galilee), three to six times per day, reaching the island in about 30 minutes. Space is limited and reservations are recommended. Round-trip adult fare is \$37.85. They also offer ferry service from Fall River, a 2-hour, 15-minute ride carrying passengers only (no cars.) Round-trip adult fare is \$30 ([www.blockislandinfo.com](http://www.blockislandinfo.com)).