

EXPLORE: Grand Manan, NB: More Maine than Maine - Coastal Journal, 2016-07-28

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Raye Shelley Leonard – Coastal Journal

View of the White Head Island ferry terminal from our cottage on Ingalls Head Road.

It's peak vacation season in the Midcoast, and good luck finding a square of sand for your beach towel and picnic. People come here from everywhere for what is regarded as scenic solitude and a less hectic pace. But the Midcoast seems ... well ... hopping nuts after I just spent a mini vacation on Grand Manan Island off New Brunswick, Canada (and really, only 9 miles from the Maine coast).

Grand Manan is what people from away come to Maine to experience: Rugged coastline, lots of water and boats, friendly hard-working people, lobster and other seafood delights, and camera-ready sunrises and sunsets. Except Grand Manan – with its five lighthouses and 9-by-21 miles surrounded by the moody and unpredictable Bay of Fundy - is even more Maine than that.

For one thing, it's quite remote and you can only get there on a 90-minute car ferry from Black's Harbour, New Brunswick. That's almost as inconvenient as Coastal Route 1 in Wiscasset.

Traveling from North Head where the ferry makes port to the other end at Southwest Head Lighthouse takes about a half hour to drive. In between are a handful of villages with distinct personalities. North Head with its artists' cottages, cedar-shingled homes, and busy wharf reminded me of Monhegan; Castalia felt like Phippsburg (the Kwik Way with the attached New Brunswick Liquor Store – the only one on the island – made me think of Bisson's Center Store on a summer Saturday night). Woodwards Cove, where my husband's grandmother lives, seemed like Cundy's Harbor with the working waterfront pretty much in the dooryard. They have dooryards on Grand Manan, like we do in Maine. Did you know "dooryard" is a uniquely New England thing? People in Indiana don't have them.

Grand Harbour was a mid-island hub with the school, churches, and the Canadian Dollar Store (where my son bought Roman candles for 50 cents apiece). It was most like Boothbay Harbor with less than a sixteenth of the tourist shops ... and a llama farm.

Ingall's Head, where we stayed in a cottage near the Whitehead Island ferry terminal, was a swath of road that seemed an awful lot like that stretch of Route 24 in Harp-swell before you get to the cribstone bridge. Seal Cove could've been New Harbor with its tight cluster of homes and boats. And that long, long, mostly undeveloped journey out to the southern head

was like a drive down Route 136 along the Pemaquid Peninsula. Like tourists everywhere for all time, I applied what I know to Grand Manan. Seafaring traditions truly dominate every aspect of the landscape. That was familiar to me, too.

But bright tangled Nylon fishing lines, gnawed buoys in various stages of usefulness, stacks of lobster traps, and boats and boat parts are not just displays arranged outside restaurants.

Not that all that stuff is merely décor in the Midcoast. But around here, you find more of it in a marketing plan than you do in someone's dooryard.

Grand Manan is the Mid-coast Maine I come from in my mind. Except I know better than to believe such sentimental nostalgia.

Midcoast Maine – much of Maine – is deeply tied to the tourist industry. It has been for quite some time - longer, most likely, than my 45 years here. It is indelibly shaped by the expectations of people who come to visit, who want to see and do certain things.

Sure, there are whale-watching tours on Grand Manan. Everywhere you go, someone wants to sell you a bag of dulse. There are gift shops, takeout seafood stands, a farmers market where my son bought red currants, and even a healthy arts and crafts scene.

But Grand Manan is still shaped mostly by the sea, by people who apply themselves to its fishing industry, tide by colossal tide.

I hope it stays that way. rleonard@coastaljournal.com

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