

VILLAGE

on the Rocks

The Cape Ann town of Rockport, Massachusetts, is still primarily a lobstering port, with several small harbors and a friendly waterfront community ready to welcome visitors.

Standing at the end of Tuna Wharf on a crystal-clear summer day in Rockport, Massachusetts, I was feeling both excited and anxious. Excited because my husband, Emil, and I were about to take our 20-month-old daughter, Lilian, out on a sailboat for the first time—anxious for exactly the same reason. Predicting the moods of an almost-two-year-old is an impossible task, and I was nervous about what might happen once we were away from land. Not being overly ambitious, and not being familiar with the waters, we weren't actually taking her sailing ourselves. Rather, we were preparing to

by Maia R. Merrill

photographs
by Scott Goodwin

Two Rockport icons, Motif No. 1 and the schooner Appledore III, adorn the northeastern end of the harbor.

for the angler

The perfect jumping-off spot for fast action with big stripers, bluefish and bluefin tuna.

by Tom Schlichter

The Rockport area offers excellent access to striped bass, bluefish and bluefin tuna. Better still, it lends itself well to light-tackle and fly gear, as the first two species can be found in protected coves and rivers from May through September.

April brings shad to the nearby Merrimack River. "This is a major run," notes Skip Montello of North Coast Angler charters (508-395-5871, www.northcoastangler.com). "More than 100,000 shad return each spring, providing super light-tackle action. Most shad weigh between 3 and 6 pounds, but a few tip the scales at 10 to 12. Red-and-white shad darts with gold hooks work best for spin fishermen, while fly-casters can score with small sparkly streamer patterns."

School stripers arrive in May, making their way along Cape Ann's north shore and filtering into the myriad coves and the Anasquam River. These fish run 18 to 24 inches and will eagerly attack small Storm Shads, Fin-S-Fish and white curl-tailed grubs fished around rocky structure. As the waters begin to warm toward the end of May, poppers can produce thrilling surface strikes.

Early June sees bigger bass prevail, with the action spreading to Cape Ann's north beaches, rips and island edges. Look for 15- to 30-pound stripers, plus an occasional monster weighing 40 to 50 pounds. These bass will smack live-lined mackerel, 4- to 9-inch soft-plastic swim shads and big poppers fished tight to the rocks on a rising tide early and late in the day.

Throughout the summer bluefish in the 7- to 14-pound class, sometimes larger (Montello drilled a 21-pounder last year), mix in. The biggest fish tend to hold offshore, but you may find them near points or humps bordered by deep water. Diamond jigs, large swimming plugs and surface poppers all take their share of fish.

"The bass and blues are fun," says Montello, "but the one thing you don't want to miss is the bluefin tuna run. We get explosive action with footballs up to 100-pound-plus fish during late summer and early fall." The tuna often feed over humps and ledges quite close to shore. The area three miles southeast of Thacher Island has been a hot spot in the last few years.

According to Montello, hooking these tuna on spinning gear is a blast. Yo-Zuri Hydro Poppers bring ferocious surface strikes at times, as do a variety of metal jigs ripped across the surface. For deeper fish, try an Ocean Saltwater Wounded Peanut Bunker jig, a Crippled Herring or a diamond jig. "But if you really want your heart to pound, hook one of these bad boys with a mackerel or peanut bunker fly," says Montello. "You might not land many fish this way, but you'll get the fishing thrill of a lifetime!"



Some years bluefin tuna can be taken just southeast of Thacher Island.

Tom Richardson



Pigeon Cove, just north of Rockport, is used mainly by commercial fishermen, but it's worth cruising through on your way in or out.



A sailboat waits for the afternoon sea breeze to fill on a beach in Rockport's Old Harbor.

head out on *Appledore III*, a 61-foot two-masted schooner that does harbor cruises, for an afternoon sail.

The crew of *Appledore III* consisted of Capt. Ron, a grizzled, affable man, and Dave and Dan, two young men who are life-long sailors. As we were strapping Lilian into her bright-orange lifejacket and slathering on sunblock, she looked out at the water and hopefully asked, "Pinchies?" She had recently become fascinated with lobsters—watching, not eating them—and was constantly on the lookout for "pinchies" whenever water was in sight. "They're probably hiding today," my husband told her. "But you never know."

Motoring out of Rockport Harbor into Sandy Bay, we passed countless buoys, as well as moored lobsterboats and yachts. The harbor is a working one, lobstering being the primary industry. A gentle breeze picked up and the crew raised the sails. Soon after that they were walking around taking drink orders. Looking off to the right, I could see a small island with a lighthouse on it. This is Straitsmouth, an uninhabited island owned by the Massachusetts Audubon Society as a bird and wildlife sanctuary. The lighthouse was erected in 1835 to mark the entrance to the harbor. The island itself is closed to the public.

Less crowded and more scenic than neighboring Gloucester, Rockport's craggy coast is dotted with beaches and coves—Long Beach, Cape Hedge Beach and Pebble Beach, as well as Loblolly and Whale Coves—are worth a visit by boat. In addition to Rockport Harbor, boaters can cruise through Pigeon



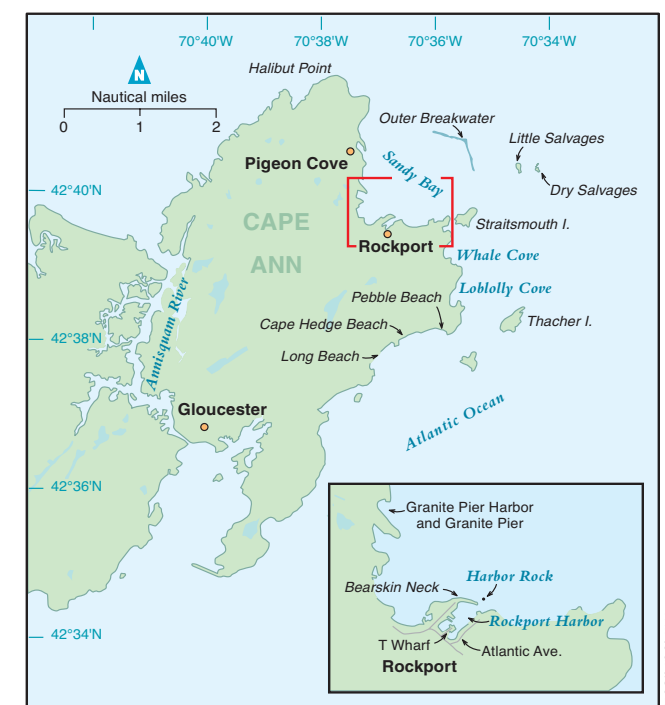
The spire of Old Sloop Church presides over Front Beach and a few late-season walkers and swimmers.

Cove Harbor, which is used mainly by commercial fishermen. While you're there, check out the Lego-stacked pink-granite fortifications that protect the harbor when nor'easters roll through. Granite Pier Harbor is the mooring field for the local recreational boats. It has a town dock where you can tie up small boats and dinghies and a great view of Sandy Bay and Rockport.

Although early settlers came to the area in the 1600s to fish these waters, it was in the 1800s that granite quarrying became a thriving industry, particularly in Pigeon Cove. Until this time, the settlements in Sandy Bay and Pigeon Cove and nearby neighborhoods were part of Gloucester. As the granite industry grew, so did the settlements. A movement was begun by the residents to separate themselves from Gloucester, and in 1840 the Town of Rockport came into being. It was also during the 1840s that Rockport became a popular summer destination and an abundance of visitors, including artists, writers and the wealthy, began spending the warm-weather months in the area.

Sitting on the deck of *Appledore III*, soaking up some sun and watching small waves lap against the boat with the backdrop of Rockport in the distance, it was difficult to imagine that these same waters can be quite treacherous. To the south we could see Thacher Island, a 50-acre, windswept island about a mile from Rockport Harbor that houses two lighthouses. The island was named for the survivors of a terrible wreck in 1635. A boat was caught in a storm and was dashed upon the

island's rocks. With the exception of Anthony Thacher and his wife, everyone on board, including the Thacher children, drowned. The island was named for Thacher, and its two lighthouses were quickly erected. Standing 166 feet above sea level, they are the only twin lighthouses operating in the





Pigeon Cove is protected from the area's notorious nor'easters by a seawall made from local pink granite.



The concrete launch ramp into Rockport's inner harbor looks out on Motif No. 1 and the harbor entrance.



The famous Portside Chowder House is one of several restaurants and shops that line Tuna Wharf and Bearskin Neck.

country, and the Cape Ann Light Station on the island is a national historic landmark.

Perhaps less interesting but no less important to be aware of are the Salvages, or "savage rocks," that lie on the outer side of Straitsmouth Island. There are two groups: The first, known as Little Salvages, is about a mile offshore, and the second, called the Dry Salvages, is about a half-mile farther out. Notwithstanding the notorious rocky coast, one of the most hazardous areas off Rockport is actually manmade. As the crew and I were discussing the waters, Capt. Ron gestured across the bay. "You see those two markers out there?" he asked. Squinting, I could barely make out the shapes on either side of a very large, partially submerged object. This, Capt. Ron informed me, is called the Outer Breakwater. In the late 1800s, Congress authorized the building of a 9,000-foot breakwater in order to enlarge and protect Rockport's harbor, thus allowing the town to become a major port. In 1912, after about 6,000 feet of rock and part of the superstructure were laid, the funds were cut and the project canceled, mainly due to high construction costs. Local efforts continued for years to have the breakwater finished, but with the onset of World War II, the campaign was put to rest. Today the structure remains and is a hazard to navigation.

As we returned to the dock, we got a great view of what is probably the town's most famous landmark. Located at the end of Bradley Wharf and visible from almost anywhere in the harbor is a large dark-red shack covered in lobster buoys that is known simply as "Motif No. 1." Though it may appear unassuming, this is one of the most painted and photographed buildings in the world. It is a perennial favorite with artists,

continued on page 82

Rockport at a Glance

Getting There

When coming to Rockport it's paramount to have an up-to-date chart and to honor the aids to navigation. From the north it's a straight shot to the flashing green "1 AHP" north of Halibut Point. From there head for flashing green "3" at the northwest end of the submerged breakwater. Be sure to leave it to port. From gong "3" head south-southeast to nun "4" at the harbor entrance and stay east of Harbor Rock. The flashing red "6", topped with red dayboards, marks the breakwater at the entrance. Coming from the east, avoid Flat Ground and Little and Dry Salvages. Pass well north of both green "1" at Flat Ground and flashing green "3", marking the submerged breakwater. Coming from Gloucester and the southwest, head northeast from flashing red "2", south of Eastern Point, to just east of Thacher Island (marked by a 166-foot flashing red horn). Avoid Londoner Shoal to the east-southeast. It's only marked with a black cylindrical cage on a spindle—no light. Swing north-northwest after clearing Thacher Island and Londoner Shoal and head for flashing red "2" at Avery Ledge. Give Straitsmouth Island, marked by 46-foot flashing green horn, a wide berth. At bell "2" bear west-southwest for the harbor entrance. Pass can "3" marking a 9-foot rock, on either side, and mark flashing red "6", topped with dayboards, at the harbor entrance. Use NOAA chart 13279.

Dining

Lobster is certainly a menu mainstay in Rockport but there are plenty of restaurants in town featuring everything from casual fried food to upscale cuisine. Open year-round, the **Greenery Restaurant** (978-546-9593) in Dock Square has both a takeout counter as well as full-service dining. Another mainstay of Dock Square is the **Fish Shack** (978-546-6667). Decorated in an eclectic nautical motif, the spacious restaurant overlooks Old Harbor and Front Beach. For lobster in the rough, try the **Roy Moore Lobster Co.** (978-546-6696) on Bearskin Neck. **The Portside Chowder House** (978-546-7045) on Tuna Wharf has a nautical pub-like atmosphere. **My Place by the Sea** (978-546-9667, www.myplacebythesea.com) at the top of Bearskin Neck offers a more elegant dining experience with front-row ocean views. Locals frequent **Ellen's Harborside** (978-546-2512, www.ellensharborside.com) on T Wharf overlooking the harbor. It's best known for its seafood, hickory-smoked pit barbecue and homemade desserts.

Tours and Charters

The schooner **Appledore III** (978-546-7540, www.schoonerappledore3.com) runs several cruises, including a sunset cruise, daily throughout the summer. For customized charters, Capt. Glenn Glesmann of **Sailor Dog Charters** (978-460-0780, www.sailordogcharters.com) runs day sailing trips on his Nonesuch 30 for groups of up to six. **North Shore Kayak/Outdoor Center** (978-546-5050, www.northshorekayak.com) offers tours ranging from two hours to overnights on Thacher Island.

Attractions

Located at the northeastern end of Rockport, **Halibut Point State Park** (www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/northeast/halb) has hiking trails as



The Bearskin Neck Country Store has an entire wall of jars filled with "penny" candy.

well as a massive water-filled granite quarry with plenty of tide pools. On a clear day you can see Mount Agamenticus in Maine and the Isles of Shoals off the New Hampshire coast. The **Rockport Art Association** (978-546-6604, www.rockportartassn.org) features year-round exhibits in its gallery as well as workshops and classes. Historic **Thacher Island** (617-599-2590, www.thacherisland.org) has plenty of trails to explore, with two guest moorings and a ramp available. Call ahead. Music aficionados come from near and far for the annual **Rockport Chamber Music Festival** (978-546-7391, www.rcmf.org) held over a three-week period in June. The 2007 season runs from June 7 through July 1.

Moorings

Rockport has no town dock or boatyard but the harbormasters will work to get you in. Call (978-546-9589) or e-mail harbormaster@town.rockport.ma.us. There is a \$1 per foot, per night fee. The maximum draft which can be accommodated is about 6½ feet. Vessels will be tied up in Rockport's main harbor, dockside in front of the Sandy Bay Yacht Club or along the wall next to Motif No. 1. There is also an anchorage in Sandy Bay. The **Sandy Bay Yacht Club** (978-546-9433) can provide basic amenities (shower, electrical hookup, launch service, ice and the like) from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. The harbormasters offer pump-out service. Call on channel 9 or 16.

Accommodations

From motor lodges to inns to stately hotels, Rockport offers an array of accommodations options. **The Halyard Guest House** (978-546-6421, www.halyardhouse.com) on Atlantic Avenue overlooks the harbor and is minutes from downtown. If you want to be in the heart of the activity, try the **Bearskin Neck Motor Lodge** (877-507-6272). Walk outside and you're on the Neck. About a mile and a half from downtown Rockport, **Eden Pines Inn** (978-546-2505) is set directly on the coast overlooking Thacher Island. It's a great place to watch a storm. The historic **Emerson Inn by the Sea** (800-964-5550, www.emersoninnbythesea.com) is a bit out of town but is very elegant and has amazing ocean views. For more lodging information, visit www.innsofrockport.com.

Additional Information

Contact the **Rockport Chamber of Commerce** at 978-546-6575 or 888-726-3922, www.rockportusa.com.

—M. R. M.

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both amateur and professional, and it's quite likely that you have seen a rendition of it at some point.

We bid the crew of *Appledore III* goodbye and set off for a bit of strolling and shopping. Coming to Rockport always gives me a sense of nostalgia. I first discovered the town as a teenager and would often take the train out to spend the day here during the summer, going to the beach and shopping. It's about a 15-minute walk from the waterfront to the commuter train station into Boston. Tuna Wharf, where we disembarked, connects to Bearskin Neck. Home to shops, galleries and restaurants, as well as private residences and a hotel, almost everything you'd want to see in Rockport is within a few blocks of downtown and the harbor. The main road is predominantly a pedestrian way, although cars do have access.

We took a right at the end of Tuna Wharf and made our way toward the top of Bearskin Neck. It wasn't long before we were at one of my favorite stores, the Bearskin Neck Country Store. This "general" store has an entire wall of jars filled with "penny" candy (they charge by weight these days), and I always stop in for some treats. We arrived at the top of the Neck and took in the stunning panoramic view, but by then it was getting late and was time to call it a day.

Until recently Rockport was a notoriously dry town. In 1856 a 75-year-old seamstress by the name of Hannah Jumper led the women of Rockport on the infamous Hatchet Gang Raid. Fed up with the men languishing away through the winters, drinking themselves into oblivion, the women went through the town smashing every bottle of liquor they could find. Rockport became dry and stayed that way until 2005, when the townspeople voted to repeal the old law. While there are no bars, restaurants can now serve alcohol with meals.

Past T Wharf—the town pier where the harbormasters' office, information booth, public restrooms and Sandy Bay Yacht Club can all be found—is Atlan-

tic Avenue. Mainly residential, this road is across the harbor from Bearskin Neck and has some amazing views. There are some beautiful cottages here, as well as the Halyard Guest House, owned by Christina and Jay Rourke. Christina grew up in Rockport and loves its small-town charm and natural beauty, particularly the ocean. "The wind is really something, and watching a nor'easter here is great," she says. Rockport is the easternmost town on Cape Ann, and Sandy Bay is wide open, with the Atlantic immediately beyond it. Winds pick up very quickly and the waves crashing on the exposed beaches can be spectacular.

Although Christina finds that it is predominantly artists and tourists who visit Rockport, she has been seeing more and more visiting boats moored off of Front and Back beaches. Just up from Atlantic are the Headlands, a large rock formation set on the corner of the harbor and Sandy Bay. People go there to picnic, fish and, of course, paint. Rockport is an extremely popular destination for artists. Attracted by the serene beauty of the harbor and coastline and the fury of the storms, countless artists have been coming here to paint since the 1800s. Today there are myriad galleries in town, in addition to the Rockport Art Association on Main Street.

Rockport Harbor may be small but it is quite busy. On any given summer day you'll likely see sailing classes, kayakers, yachts and powerboats coming in and out of the harbor. Overseeing the bulk of marine activity are the town's two busy harbormasters, Rosemary Lesch and Scott Story. The harbor wasn't always this active. The town's marine facilities are limited and, in the past, boaters would often bypass Rockport as they headed up or down the coast. This has changed over the last few years as Rockport has made a greater effort to welcome boaters.

Although there is no official town dock or boatyard, Story and Lesch will do what they can to get visitors a wharf tie-up or mooring. Lesch says, "We are a welcoming town; we really want to make the harbor as receptive as possi-

ble." Story adds, "People can also anchor in outer Sandy Bay and there is a dinghy dock and several skiff floats in the Old Harbor." Next to the harbormasters' office is the Sandy Bay Yacht Club. The center of the town's boating scene, the club is managed by Ron Petoff, who also happens to be the town's assistant harbormaster. Due to the size of the harbor and volume of activity, the Yacht Club and harbormasters often work together to welcome transients.

The waters off Rockport offer various underwater rock formations that, combined with the clear ocean water, make Rockport a renowned destination for fishermen and divers. Glenn Glesmann, who runs Sailor Dog Charters, says, "Divers come from all over to train here. The water is clear, there's interesting topography and a rocky coastline. There's a lot more to see than just lobsters." Avery Ledge, just beyond the Outer Breakwater is particularly popular with divers.

"It used to be that after Labor Day, Rockport pulled up its sidewalks, but the town is now trying to do more in the off-season. There is a Harvest Festival in October and Christmas events through December," says Christina Rourke. Emil, Lilian and I returned in December for the Christmas tree lighting and other festivities. The empty harbor was a stark contrast to the jam-packed one we had seen in the summer. The town was festively decorated, and we watched with hundreds of other families as Santa himself arrived in the harbor on a lobsterboat. Lilian was in awe and couldn't stop telling people: "I saw Santa on a boat!" Maybe next summer she'll get to see a lobster. ■

Freelance writer and editor Maia R. Merrill lives in Swampscott, Massachusetts, with her husband, Emil, and daughter, Lilian.

