

Embracing Cape Ann's Contrasts

By SUZANNE BERNE;
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MY first visit to Massachusetts' Cape Ann was on a cold, gray afternoon when surf detonated against the rocks, my scarf kept flying into my face and fishingboats pitched in such a forlorn way out in the harbors that it seemed impossible that anyone with a clear mind would want to live in this wind-struck, salt-struck place. Enormous granite boulders shouldered up against the beaches. The ocean was the color of rain, and the wind smelled fishy. Ducking in and out of my car that day, I wasn't surprised that witches had thrown hexes on this spot, or that sea monsters had been sighted here by reliable witnesses, or that pirates had divvied up blood money on the rocks. Or, especially when I glanced up at the widow's walks crowning a few old houses near the shore, that thousands of mariners had drowned off this coast. Cape Ann, as far as I could see, had that grim obduracy that fosters both legends and bad dreams.

Two days later the ocean was silky, the sky was blue and Cape Ann was neat as a postcard and as far removed from witches, monsters and pirates as most romance novels are from real romance. Families posed beside a monument for lost fishermen; beachcombers bought candy shells from souvenir shops; camera-hung visitors wandered through art galleries that sell the sort of seascapes that have become more familiar than the sea itself. Water glittered behind 18th-century clapboard houses, which seemed only sweetly weatherbeaten. Even the rocks looked benign.

Cape Ann forms a stony soupcon of land off Massachusetts' North Shore, divided in half by the Annisquam River and surrounded on three sides by the Atlantic Ocean. Local historians claim that Thorwald the Norseman (a seafaring gentleman of otherwise indistinct identity) sighted the Cape in 1004, and reportedly cried out, "It is beautiful; and here I would like to fix my dwelling." But it wasn't until the 17th century that Rockport and Gloucester, Cape Ann's easternmost towns, got their first dwellings, and the area was long known for its quarries and fishing fleets rather than its beauty. In the 1800's, blasting steam drills and exploding dynamite shook the air; the harbors were clogged with stone freighters, fishing schooners, packet boats and sloops -- not to mention an 80-foot sea serpent with a "head the size of a nail cask" and a tongue like a harpoon sighted in 1817 in Gloucester harbor by the town clerk.

It was a rough, misty, hazardous coast, frequented by privateers, rum-runners and smugglers as well as by fishermen and quarry workers. Self-proclaimed witches told fortunes and cursed sailors in nearby Dogtown, a weedy stone pile named for its resident pack of stray dogs: pirates buried gold in the headlands. Drinking seems to have been a major pastime. In fact, Rockport got so rough that in 1856 a local

seamstress named Hannah Jumper led a posse of hatchet-wielding women into the local saloons and taverns, where they smashed bottles, kegs and barrels until -- as the story goes -- the narrow streets ran with liquor and men flung themselves to the ground to lap it up. Nowadays the "Likker Raid" is the subject of tea towels, but one wonders at the desperation that led Hannah Jumper and her cohort to pick up those hatchets. Ms. Jumper's tidy cottage still stands in Dock Square, and Rockport, incidentally, is still dry.

The profile of this rugged snag of shoreline had softened by the Civil War. Painters and writers like Winslow Homer and Ralph Waldo Emerson began riding the train up from Boston for the ocean views and the salt breeze and Cape Ann's fame began to shift to the paintings it inspired and the artists it attracted. This is particularly true of Rockport, which clings to the Cape's scenic northeastern extremities, a town of sandy beaches, rocky coves, white-steepled churches and shingled cottages banked by lilacs. While Gloucester maintains a fishing industry and a palpable grittiness, Rockport has cleared its future to galleries and craft shops.

Like Provincetown, its Massachusetts rival both for coastal beauty and maritime kitsch, Rockport cheerfully peddles whale-shaped ashtrays, seagull paperweights and maple-sugar lobsters, but its main crop is paintings. Paintings of the sea at sunset and sunrise, stormy and quiet, empty or crowded with fishing boats, sailboats, rowboats; paintings of saltboxes, bearded sea captains, rose-covered stone walls. (One red fish shack in town has been painted so often it is nationally known as Motif No. 1.) These paintings are sometimes inexpensive -- a local gallery recently held a \$10 sale on most of its inventory -- and sometimes pricey. They are seldom very original, but few customers seem to mind.

Old Rockport surfaces here and there in spite of itself. Fishing shanties may have been transformed into ice cream parlors, but a witchy echo remains in the astrology establishments nestled among the souvenir emporiums. Piracy hasn't vanished either (one bakery sold me slightly stale "New York" bagels for 80 cents apiece). And granite, of course, is everywhere, from the beautiful town library to the old walled harbor to the fort at the end of shop-choked Bearskin Neck.

Most visitors overlook the town's mercenary zeal once they discover its beaches. Rockport includes eight miles of coastline, half of which is public. Bracketed by boulders the size of dinosaur eggs, the beaches are graciously sandy and, during the off-season, deserted. Perhaps the loveliest is Gap Cove Beach, with its wide, ringing vista of Straitsmouth Island and the sense it conveys of being as far out to sea as you can get without a boat. From Gap Cove, one can walk the Old Garden Road over the headlands - rife with raspberries and blackberries in August -- along the bluffs and right into town.

FRANKLY I like to drive when I am in a new place, and a perfectly good reason to visit Cape Ann is simply to drive along Route 127 and its offshoot, 127A, which coil the coast from downtown Gloucester, around Rockport and back to Gloucester again. En route you will find the expected rocky shoreline, leafy turns and handsome 18th- and 19th-

century houses; except that the expected, in real life, almost always delivers surprises, and nowhere is this landscape more surprising than at Halibut Point, a retired granite quarry that sits at the ocean's edge like Goliath's swimming pool. The water seems depthless and the high, rufous-steaked stone walls look eerily exposed, especially around sunset. It is an oddly peaceful place and makes one hope that in 100 years strip-mined hills might attain a similar weird beauty.

About two miles down the road, across the town line, is the minute and exquisite Gloucester village of Annisquam, where Ipswich Bay flows into the Annisquam River and fresh-painted colonials sit under old oak trees, surrounded by green lawns and rose gardens. Civic pride around here is known as "Squamism." This is Gloucester at its most venerable and least visibly affected by the vagaries of the fishing business. Once you arrive in downtown Gloucester, however, it is clear that this once-muscular industry has withered, although the Fish Pier and Seven Seas Wharf still seem busy enough in the summer with sightseers, whale-watching expeditions and waterfront restaurants. Main Street has gentrified toward the water, but a block away a Salvation Army thrift shop dominates the street, along with a large sign advertising "Cash for Guns." And apparently the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church has bought up a good bit of Gloucester in recent years, including part of the commercial fishing fleet. All of which lends the town an ambiance that is perhaps best described as uncertain. Downtown Gloucester is no Rockport, for better or worse.

But it does have its own cachet. Dr. John Hays Hammond Jr., otherwise known as "America's second-greatest inventor," built a castle just a few miles away, with a drawbridge, a Roman bath, a great hall and a laboratory where he worked on his inventions, which include the push-button radio, a magnetic bottle opener and a type of shaving cream. He also built himself an inner courtyard where he could manufacture moonlight, sunlight, thunder, lightning and rain ("from a gentle shower to a downpour"). The Roman bath is in the courtyard and can hold 30,000 gallons of either fresh or salt water, depending on what the doctor preferred for his swim. A dreamy, ingenious amalgam of Romanesque, medieval, Renaissance and very American elements, Hammond Castle looks like a place Sleeping Beauty might have napped in wearing a pair of headphones.

Of course there are also the beaches, and Gloucester has some first-class ones, particularly Good Harbor Beach, a sandy half-mile that overlooks tiny Salt Island. At the turn of the century, Gloucester was one of New England's toniest vacation spots with vast beachfront hotels that looked like wedding cakes, most of which have long since burned down. Enormous "cottages" still perch on the rocks overlooking the sea, including Beauport, the gargantuan dreamhouse of the interior decorator Henry Davis Sleeper. This 40-room "personal museum" of different architectural periods and furnishings out on Eastern Point is open to the public from May to October.

Just up the beach from Beauport is the Rocky Neck Art Colony, where famous artists once congregated and somewhat less-than-famous artists congregate now. It's a hustling little cove of galleries, restaurants, bright flower gardens and engaging old houses that

run from bungalow to Victorian mansion. Art is inescapable -- the smell of turpentine often mixes with the smell of cod from nearby wharfs; one restaurant even has palette-shaped tables. Every summer Rocky Neck is host to the Beaux Arts Ball, an exuberant outdoor costume party, to which anyone who happens along is invited. Gloucester also offers its annual New-Fish Festival in June, sponsored by area restaurateurs and featuring "a wide selection of underutilized species." Last year's favorite was skate.

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(Page 5 of 6)

Correction Appended

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But for me, the best time to visit Cape Ann is still on those fierce days when the wind blows from the northeast and the sea cannonades into the rocks. Out in the harbor looms a shape one can't quite identify; the air is full of shrieks and a faint scent of sulfur. And as the clouds darken, there's an unmistakable feeling that has been around since Norsemen first sailed this coast. Something wild is about to begin.