

LIVING IN

Island Heights, N.J.: A 'Magical Place' That's a Step Out of Time

Founded in the 19th century as a Methodist camp meeting site, this Ocean County borough retains an old-fashioned feeling, even as newcomers move in.

By Jill P. Capuzzo

July 8, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

Residents and visitors are back on the boardwalk for sunset strolls, the pickleball courts are open and white sails have been dotting the shoreline of Island Heights, N.J., for some time. But it wasn't until this week, when the Island Heights Yacht Club's junior sailing program started up again, that something of a sense of normalcy would return to this Ocean County borough on the banks of Toms River.

"I look forward to this every summer," said Brian Hull, 44, a high school social studies teacher who has taught sailing here for the last 28 years. "All over town, you see kids riding their bikes, wearing their helmets and life jackets, heading down the hill to the yacht club."

Despite the late start, Mr. Hull expects to squeeze most of the eight-week sailing lesson season in before Labor Day, although many of the boat races, along with other large public events, have been canceled. Still, for many of the borough's 1,673 residents, life has not been dramatically altered throughout the months of a state-mandated coronavirus shutdown.



By The New York Times

"When I'm in Island Heights, I feel like I'm in a different part of the country," said Michael DellaRocca, 67, a broker with Crossroads Realty who moved to Island Heights three years ago. "We're not being stupid, but people have been running and biking, families have been getting together. If you didn't leave town, you wouldn't know anything was going on."

With no commercial district, limited highway access and a public school system that serves just over 120 students, Island Heights has long seemed a step out of time, particularly in comparison with bustling areas like Seaside Heights, a short causeway ride away. Social activities center on the water in this 0.9-square-mile borough (a third of which is in the water). The yacht club and three other marinas are home to many boats from across Barnegat Bay, where numerous sailing regattas are normally held throughout the summer.



Island Heights has two small beaches, including this one near Cozy Cove Marina, where visitors can swim, fish or go crabbing, after buying a daily or seasonal beach badge. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

An abbreviated racing season will begin in early August, said Mayor Steve Doyle, commodore of the Island Heights Yacht Club. Other popular Island Heights events — including the fire department's Summerbrew fund-raiser in late June and the Rotary Club's Sailfest in September — were canceled because of a 250-person cap on public gatherings imposed by Gov. Philip D. Murphy of New Jersey.

"We're adapting to the new normal," said Mr. Doyle, 60, noting that borough council meetings are now being held outdoors. "Some families were hard hit by the Covid shutdown, dealing with job loss or financial issues. But everybody is supporting everybody else in town." (As of late June, Island Heights had 14 Covid-19 positive cases and one Covid-related death, the mayor said.)

Mr. Doyle, who has summered here each year since he was a boy, moved to his family's Victorian house full time upon retiring in 2016, a transition many of the borough's residents have made.

Founded in 1878 as a Methodist camp meeting site, Island Heights has long served as a summer retreat, especially for those from the Philadelphia area. And while full-timers now outnumber summer-only residents, occasional rifts arise among the various constituent groups, said Harry Bower, who bought an 1890s farmhouse here for \$175,000 in 1987.

"You have the townies, who want no change, and the yachties, who are just here for the summer, so they don't care," said Mr. Bower, 68, an art teacher and curator of the John F. Peto Studio Museum. "But in the last 10 years, we've seen new people, younger families moving here, who really appreciate the town's charm."

One of those appreciative newcomers is Therese Heimbold, 52, a commercial director at the US Pharmaceutical Corporation, who remembered her father talking about "this magical place" where he used to spend his summers. In 2017, she sold her house in Haddonfield, N.J., and bought one of Island Heights' original camp meeting houses, a two-bedroom cottage, for \$225,000.

Returning from her job in Philadelphia in the evening, Ms. Heimbold said, she finds her stress dissipates upon arrival: "I drive into town along River Road, and I see all the sailboats, and it's pure serenity."



138 CAMP MEETING AVENUE | A four-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bathroom house, built in 1985 on 0.53 acres overlooking Toms River, listed for \$1.275 million. 732-267-3688 Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

What You'll Find

Surrounded by water on three sides, Island Heights offers many homes with water views, nearly all a short walk from Toms River or Dillon's Creek. While it technically sits on a peninsula rather than an island, the borough does have one of the highest shore points along the Eastern Seaboard, with a bluff that rises 60 feet above sea level. Atop this bluff is a mix of newer waterfront homes with long staircases down to private river docks and smaller houses, including a handful of turn-of-the-last-century cottages surrounding the camp meeting site grounds on West Camp Walk. About a dozen newer homes have been built throughout the town.

At the lower altitude, River Avenue hugs the curve of the river, where some of the borough's grand Victorian and Queen Anne homes sit facing the water, complete with bright colors, ornate trim and the occasional widow's walk. (Island Heights was once home to a number of ship captains.) About a third of the borough's houses are within the Island Heights Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, although the designation doesn't restrict renovations.

"It was enacted without teeth," Mr. Doyle said. "But most people follow the rules in keeping up with the style. You're buying into that culture."

There are two small riverfront beaches in town, but many opt to cross the Route 37 causeway to the ocean beaches along Barnegat Peninsula, like Seaside Heights, Seaside Park and Island Beach State Park.



178 OCEAN AVENUE | A seven-bedroom, four-and-a-half-bathroom house, built around the turn of the last century and updated in 2003, on 0.23 acres, listed for \$650,000.
732-513-1302 Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

What You'll Pay

As of early July, there were 23 properties on the market in Island Heights, Mr. DellaRocca said, including nine vacant developer lots along Dillon's Creek. The most expensive house was a 1985 four-bedroom waterfront home with a 200-foot dock, listed for \$1.275 million; the least expensive was a 1990 two-bedroom, two-bathroom house for \$262,000. The development lots range from \$650,000 to \$1.1 million. Rental properties are almost nonexistent.

The average price of the 13 houses sold in the first six months of this year was \$480,000; during the same time period in 2019, 28 homes sold at an average price of \$411,000, according to the Monmouth Ocean Regional Multiple Listing Service. Elizabeth Hull, an agent with Re/Max and the wife of Mr. Hull, the sailing instructor, said the waterfront Victorians rarely come on the market, but when they do, they are priced at \$600,000 or more, depending on the shape they are in.



128 EAST CAMP WALK | A two-bedroom, two-bathroom riverfront cottage, built in 1900 on 0.14 acres, listed for \$599,000. 732-278-9070 Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Vibe

The Hulls live in a rented house on “the bluff,” where Ms. Hull said she makes sure to keep cheese, wine and beer in her refrigerator, because “people are always dropping by to hang out.” More organized gatherings take place at the yacht club, which holds regular Friday night B.Y.O.B. catered dinners that are open to members and nonmembers. (Island Heights is a dry borough.)

Beyond the boating scene, Island Heights supports an active arts community, housing three art institutions (currently closed) within its borders: a cultural heritage museum, the Ocean County Artists’ Guild and the John F. Peto Studio Museum, in a building where Mr. Peto, a world-renowned trompe l’oeil artist, lived and painted in his final years.

While many events have been canceled, the Island Heights fire department is hoping to hold its Labor Day Races, a more than century-old tradition that concludes with squad members shoveling a dump truck full of peanuts onto the field for everyone to scramble and collect.



Cozy Cove Marina is one of three private marinas in Island Heights. Along with the yacht club, it provides docking space for hundreds of boats from throughout the region. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Schools

The Island Heights School District, one of the smallest in the state, serves around 120 students from kindergarten through sixth grade. The elementary school provides Chromebooks to all its students and offers extracurricular clubs for chess, robotics, art, music and broadcasting.

Beyond sixth grade, students attend Central Regional Middle School and Central Regional High School, along with students from Berkeley Township, Ocean Gate, Seaside Heights and Seaside Park. The regional high school has about 1,400 students. In 2018-19, average SAT scores were 529 in English and 535 in math, compared with state averages of 539 and 541.

Among the private school choices are St. Joseph Grade School for prekindergarten through eighth grade and Donovan Catholic High School, both in neighboring Toms River.

The Commute

Island Heights is about 75 miles south of New York City and is served by buses only, out of Toms River. New Jersey Transit Bus No. 137 travels from the Toms River park-and-ride station (about a seven-minute drive from Island Heights) to Port Authority in Manhattan, in a little over an hour and a half. Tickets are \$21.25 one way or \$496 for a monthly pass. Academy Bus Lines runs a Parkway Express bus from the Toms River park-and-ride station to the Wall Street area; the trip takes about an hour and 45 minutes and costs \$21 one way or \$490 a month.



One of the 30 original cabins still stands on the east side of the former Methodist camp meeting grounds. The borough was founded in 1878 as a camp revival meeting destination and summer resort for Methodists. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The History

In the early 1900s, the department store magnate John Wanamaker established Camp Wanamaker, a quasi-military encampment in the northeastern part of Island Heights, where young employees were sent for two weeks during the summer to take part in drills, drum and bugle corps training, field competition and swimming. The site was taken over by the U.S. Army during World War II and is where the borough's municipal buildings and post office are now.

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