

Rising tide of visitors laps at South County's door

BY CATHAREN KANN

It's that time of year again. The temperature is soaring, and people are flocking to South County.

Suddenly, the urban block or suburban neighborhood where you live has become stifling and claustrophobic. Your vision is met with fenced-off yards, simmering sidewalk, and too many buildings. You begin to notice the cigarette butts and soda caps littering the edge of the sidewalk. The smell of hot concrete and exhaust fumes seem to propel you toward the ocean: to South County beaches, fishing piers, boat yards, yacht clubs. The fresh salt air and the open expanse of water beckon to you.

Perhaps you can get away for the day, the weekend, the week, the month, or if you are really lucky, the whole summer in your own beach house — you are at least a visitor and perhaps a part-time South County resident.

I too have felt that desperate anticipation as I pack my bag to escape to the coast, so near and yet so far.

On long sandy beaches in South County, the restful horizon of blue and the soft sand await you. The earlier you arrive, the fewer people there are. Small rocky beaches, fishing piers, and docks are equally inviting. Whether you decide to sunbathe, or walk along the shore, or clam, or head off in a motor boat, the blue sparkling waves and fresh air invigorate and renew you.

For lunch or dinner maybe you decide to have lobster, chowder and clamcakes, ice cream or home-made fruit pie. Around you, the people in South County seem more laid-back, with longer, wilder hair, no makeup, a good tan, and that lean, down-to-earth look.

THEN ALL TOO SOON your time is up. You must hop in the car again, with baggage, kids, shells, rocks — and more sand than you bargained for in your clothing, the car, your camera lens cap. Your summer is characterized by alternating oceanic bliss with long car rides in traffic, near cars with people's feet sticking out the window and boogie boards tied to the roof.

As you think over your lovely day, you experience the typical Sunday afternoon thunderstorm on 95 north, — the negative part of escaping to the coast.

It isn't this way for everyone, of course. I know, because I was once on the opposite side of the fence. I grew up in South County.

So when I am back on Route 95 on a Sunday afternoon heading north away from the coast, part of me stays behind. Because I have lived there, I am under no illusions. I know while I am stuck on 95 north in traffic, the full-time residents of South County are off having picnics on their boats or enjoying the sunset. Yes, part-time visitors, the beauty and fun do continue after you leave. The place does not just disappear, but you may want to pretend it does so you don't think about what you are missing.

So how else does the full-time residents' summer experience differ from that of the part-timers?

IMAGINE DRIVING ON AN ERRAND to pick up a gallon of milk. You casually glance to the right and see the blue sparkle of Narragansett Bay and the majesty of the Newport Bridge gracing the horizon. Your eyes drink them in and you feel invigorated, relaxed.

Around many a corner in South County is a scenic vista even on the most mundane errand. The natural beauty is uplifting and inspiring. You relish the calmness of no traffic, especially beach traffic: hot, sticky, seemingly endless. You feel sorry for city folks in all that concrete on a 90-degree day. Thank goodness you live in South County!

At night, if you do not close the shade, a bright light flashes on your closet door. It is from Beaver Tail lighthouse. The sound of waves gently lulls you to sleep.

In the morning, on your walk, you watch the sun rise over Narragansett Bay. If it

is cloudy or stormy, the blue-gray waves seem powerful, and noble. Full-timers appreciate a good storm, provided their houses and boats are secure. On stormy days my brother in Providence used to call up our mother in South County for a wave report. He would then head on down, or lament that he could not be there to enjoy the stormy weather. The power of nature is fascinating.

As a full-time resident, you know that after work you can always go down to the water, only a short distance away. Maybe you will watch a boat sail by, or even get in a boat yourself. The minute you step on any dock or beach, you can tell if it is high or low tide or in-between.

You can sit cross-legged on a floating dock and unwind, listening to the lazy waves lap the edge of the dock. You spot a school of fish swimming down the Bay, and you can tell by the color and wave pattern if they are blues or bass. If you have a cut on your finger you make sure to soak your hand in the salt water for a minute. It is well-known that salt water makes cuts, scrapes and poison ivy heal faster. The sight of a decaying crab or squishy seaweed causes no concern, as it might for a part-timer. Natural processes do not disgust full-time residents who are intimately in touch with nature.

Outdoor activities and sports are an important aspect of the full-time South County resident's lifestyle, whether it is gardening, swimming or boating. Your 4-year-old loves to swim underwater. Like most full-time residents, because you have a wealth of boating experience, you always, always wear your life jacket on small boats such as sunfish. You may even wear it on land. You have a profound respect for the ocean.



JOURNAL PHOTO / JOHN FREIDAH

The quiet of Narragansett Town Beach — to sit, to savor.

AS FOR THOSE PART-TIME VISITORS who flow into South County every July, you have mixed emotions. You appreciate the variety of people. After a long winter in a lightly populated area, you are ready to see others for a change.

It is true you feel a bit more deserving of the summer weather than the part-timers. Winters in a rural area can seem longer because it can be harder to get out in icy or snowy weather. Life is more affected by the weather, both good and bad, so if anyone deserves the perfect July day, it is you. Nevertheless, the part-timers add some spice to life and, of course, benefit the economy.

There is just one thing. One big thing. You do not want to find empty sandwich wrappings, cigarette butts and soda cans littering the local beach and sidewalks.

Full-timers worry that the part-timers may not have enough respect for the environment. Full-timers worry that part-timers do not understand how harmful even small litter such as straws and bottle caps can be for fish and sea birds. They hope everyone will treat the environment with the utmost respect. In the back of their minds, if they seem to hesitate when they meet you, it is because they want to be sure a part-timer will treat their surroundings as well as they do.

Part-timers simply want to be greeted with friendliness. Everyone appreciates a gorgeous summer day along the coast. So whether you are a full-time resident or a part-time resident or a visitor to the area, have a fun-filled, peaceful, safe, environmentally clean and happy summer.

If I do not see you on a beach, a dock, a sailboat, or eating ice cream, I know for sure I will see some of you on a Sunday afternoon on 95 north heading toward Providence.

And if you get stuck in a downpour, bumper to bumper, watching the lightning flash through your squeaky windshield wipers, at least be consoled that it's not the best day for a full-timer's evening picnic anyway.

Catharen Kann now lives in Newton, Mass. Send your point of view to LIFEstyles, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902. We pay \$50 for each essay published. We reserve the right to use, re-use and permit third-party use of any material submitted to us. Essays without a self-addressed stamped envelope will not be returned.