

City Island

David Freedenberg • Web Contributor • New York City

There is a magical place in a borough called The Bronx. No, it is nowhere near the House That Ruth Built, nor is it hidden deep within the sprawling Botanical Gardens. And it certainly cannot be found on your pastry run along Arthur Avenue. The Bronx is the only borough that is attached to mainland North America, yet this magical place is an island.



photo: Manhattan's distant skyline from a dead-end City Island street
David Freedenberg

Just west of a lonesome traffic circle on the edge of **Pelham Park**, a heavily wooded area of nearly three thousand acres and few cars, you will find a three-lane steel bridge. As you crest the span, you will catch a glimpse of another world. Not that the bridge is so high; it's not. But the island you see before you, just a mile and a half long and half-mile wide, you will soon learn, is almost an eddy of civilization.

The first thing you'll notice is that seafood restaurants are a more common sight than ATMs. Then, as you head down the main drag, you'll notice that you are breathing freer, the sky seems bigger, and humanity isn't closing in on you. With just over four thousand residents, it is the least-densely populated part of the Bronx. You'll find it to be a place where everything you think you know about New York and New Yorkers is wrong. Maybe time hasn't quite stood still here, but it is not so unusual to see people stand still. This magical place, this tiny outcropping of rock amongst the seagulls and whitecaps of Long Island Sound, is called City Island.

"Hey, I call it The Hamptons of The Bronx, ya know," one mustached man told me while bobbing his head and sipping his whiskey at two in the afternoon. I can easily see why. Life is so much slower here than in the rest of New York City. It is not a rare sight to see someone just relaxing, turning closed eyes skyward to feel the warmth of the sun. The smell of salt water is pervasive. Clams, mussels, bass, and sole are not delicacies, they are staples.

But City Island is most certainly not The Hamptons. The most striking difference I see is that The Hamptons are inhabited by Manhattanites, while every person I met on City Island was either born and raised there (also called "clamdiggers") or had lived there for decades. It is true that just like The Hamptons, City Island is invaded in the summer months and the traffic snarls and the locals evacuate. City Islanders call these invaders "mussel-suckers." But City Island has no public beaches (many dead-end streets hide small beaches behind locked gates), so that golden tanned horde heads for Orchard Beach in Pelham Park. Only a fraction of the beachgoers cross the bridge to City Island for a fix of seafood or a pint of Guinness.

So on City Island you'll find mostly "clamdiggers." And unlike most New Yorkers, most City Islanders are happy to take a few minutes to tell us "mussel-suckers" about themselves, their neighborhood, and, most proudly, their history. Don't get me wrong—it's not like your average City Islander will walk up to you as a stranger on the street and strike up a conversation as though it were the Midwest in the '50s. But generally, I found people to be genuinely friendly once you showed an interest in their unique little neighborhood.



photo: Victorian homes help create the time warp effect
David Freedenberg

How did City Island get its name? I just asked the old man selling vegetables out of wooden crates on the sidewalk. “The guy who owned this island just before the American Revolution, Benjamin Palmer, he thought it could rival New York City as a seaport, so he changed the name to City Island to push that idea.” I was satisfied with that answer, but the vegetable vendor wanted me to know, “Before that, it was owned by the Pells, like the Pell Grant for students. Back then it was named after the Indians who lived here, the Siwanoy Minneford Tribe, so they called it Greater Minneford Island.” Okay, very



*photo: The 3-Lane steel bridge that brings the mussel-suckers ashore
David Freedenberg*

interesting. “Actually the British plundered City Island in 1776. The Minutemen held them off over there at **Glovers Rock** in Pelham Park while Washington retreated after the Battle of Brooklyn.” Now, I try not to repeat historical facts I hear from strangers on the sidewalk, but I looked it up when I got home, and he was right on.

So were most City Islanders who offered up their oral history. Chatting with a ruddy-faced fisherman at a marina near the bridge, I barely had to prod at all to get a tale out him. “In the days before the telegraph, City Island was full of runners—you know what a runner is?” I did. “Because all the ships that were coming into New York harbor from Long Island Sound had to stop here at

the City Island seaport and pick up a pilot to navigate down the East River. So, the folks up here would see what was on its way into the port—lumber, cotton, whatever. They’d send a runner down to the stock exchange faster than the ship got there so their broker would have a jump on the game because he knew if the supply of lumber or cotton or, you know, whatever, was about to rise.”

The shy, bespectacled woman working at an antique store on City Island Avenue perked up when I began asking about her family’s history on the island. She told me of how she had come from a family of Irish shipbuilders who came straight to City Island after clearing immigration. She told me, “They built ships, and then, after a while, they used those very ships to sail back to Ireland once the Potato Famine was over.” Those who stayed, her branch of the family, toiled in some of City Island’s seventeen shipyards, building the sub-chasers, landing craft, and PT boats that helped America win the Second World War. But she was most proud of her relatives who worked at the Minneford Boat Yard and built the 12-meter class yachts that took the America’s Cup as recently as the 60s.

Some of City Island’s history is a bit rawer, however. There is a palpable anger amongst the City Islanders over a trend they are seeing with shipyards being torn down to make way for luxury condominiums. Also, many City Islanders want to preserve the City Island Marsh and the remains of the City Island Freshwater Creek on Ditmars Street, but a judge is allowing the marsh owner to backfill them to build condominiums. And I saw a true sadness in the eyes of a scruffy old pleasure boater who told me that just last month, the historic **Morris Yacht Club**, a beautiful Victorian era structure that Randolph Hearst once owned, burnt to the ground.

City Island, however, is very much alive and kicking. Its glory days of shipbuilding are over, but the sea is still a major part of the rhythm of life on the island. Along with the seafood restaurants that are jammed in along City Island Avenue, boat supply stores and bait and tackle shops pepper the streets, and marinas dot the shoreline.

Four yacht clubs remain, and they are always looking for people to crew their boats. If you are a particularly competent deck hand you might even get hired to crew a boat during the races held every Wednesday by the **Eastchester Bay Yacht Racing Association**. But if you are just looking to captain your own vessel for a lazy afternoon of fishing, both **Jack’s Bait and Tackle** and **The Boat Livery** rent out skiffs. And should you get a taste for the big catch, City Island’s commercial fishing fleet, **The Island Current**, **The Northstar II**, and **The Riptide III**, head out in the early mornings on fishing trips that sometimes drift as far away as The Rockaways or Montauk. The crew will provide you the pole, bait your hook, and gut your fish at the end of the day. They even psych you up with such mottos as “If they swim, we can catch ‘em!” If that doesn’t get you excited, but you still want to feel the waters of

Long Island sound rolling beneath your feet, they also offer you “mussel-suckers” moonlight cruises with music and dancing sans fish guts.

Since the decline of the shipbuilding industry after World War II, the real business of City Island has been its seafood restaurants. Sadly, the New York State Department of Health has declared that the eating of all shellfish from the waters of City Island is forbidden due to pollution (including PCBs and dioxin) and diseases. Thus all seafood sold at City Island restaurants must by law come from elsewhere. Nevertheless, the atmosphere on the island makes this seafood just taste better.



photo: A flock of aggressive seagulls at Johnny's Reef Restaurant
David Freedenberg

At the end of City Island Avenue, both **Johnny's Reef** and **Tony's Pier Restaurant** offer plenty of fried and steamed seafood in fast-food style setups, with picnic table seating on the water. The food is delicious and inexpensive, but watch out for the flock of seagulls circling overhead as they can be aggressive. Another place with outdoor seating is **The Black Whale**, which serves City Island's most popular brunch.

Most restaurants are geared up for enormous seafood feast dinners. I ate at **Sammy's Fish Box**, and I have never been so stuffed from seafood in my life. The bread and salad and antipasti had me reeling before I even dug into the ridiculously large family-style plate of shellfish over spaghetti. Feasts like these are expensive and gluttonous, but they are a unique City Island eating experience. Sammy's Fish Box, The Original Shrimp Box, The Original Crab Shanty, Seafood City, The Lobster House by Land or Sea, Captain Mike's Dining, and many others all compete for your “mussel-sucker” tourist dollar.

City Islanders seem to prefer **Artie's Italian Seafood**. The prices are reasonable and so are the portions. I stopped in for a plate of Littleneck clams posillipo, and I'm glad I did. The clams were fresh as could be, the white wine sauce was light and perfect for sopping up with bread, and the garlic was like candy. The waitress proudly informed me that not only are the customers at Artie's mostly “clamdiggers,” the employees are as well (although the owner is from Connecticut).



photo: Joe serves up a pint of Guinness at the Cross
David Freedenberg

The new kid on the block is **Sixmilecross**, a wood floored, tin ceilinged bar that is shooting for the local crowd, while going quirky at the same time. Joe is the bartender and art director. Not many bars have art directors, but not many bartenders can also claim to be fire jugglers either. At the Cross, Guinness is listed as an appetizer along with smoked clam bruchetta. The mussel menu features some bold options such as Thai mussels with sweet chili, coconut cream, bell peppers, cilantro, garlic, and scallions and mussels au Sauvignon sauteed with garlic, shallots, white wine and parsley. Although, the City Islanders I spoke with preferred the good old baked ravioli.

It is a magical place. In a borough full of people, and a city full of people in a hurry, City Island is truly an island getaway. Aside from the massive suspension bridges looming across the water and a distant Manhattan skyline, City Island feels more like sleepy New England than bustling New York—except for when an MTA bus comes rumbling down City Island Avenue. Even the unique City Island accent is a mix of New England and the outer boroughs. This tiny corner of the city has a flavor, history, and people all its own.

Places Mentioned:

Pelham Park

www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/vt_pelham_bay_park/vt_pelham_bay_park.html

Glover's Rock

www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs/hs_historical_sign.php?id=11599

The Morris Yacht Club

www.morrisybc.com
25 City Island Ave
718-885-1596

The Eastchester Bay Yacht Racing Association

www.ebyra.org

Jack's Bait and Tackle

www.jacksbaitandtackle.com
551 City Island Ave
718-885-2042

The Boat Livery

663 City Island Ave
718-885-1843

The Island Current

C&C Fishing Charters, Inc
917-417-7557

The Northstar II

553 City Island Ave
718-885-9182

The Riptide III

701 Minneford Ave
718-885-0236

Johnny's Reef

2 City Island Ave
718-885-2090

Tony's Pier Restaurant

1 City Island Ave
718-885-1424

The Black Whale

279 City Island Ave
718-885-3657

Sammy's Fish Box

41 City Island Ave
718-885-0920

Artie's Steak and Seafood

394 City Island Ave
718-885-9885

Sixmilecross, The City Island Saloon

288 City Island Ave
718-885-1664

David Freedenberg is a freelance food writer in New York City. He moonlights as a yellow cab driver and offers Famous Fat Dave's Five Borough Eating tour out of his taxi. Visit his website at www.famousfatdave.com.