

PREFACE

Our first year, we went to the wrong place. It was so good that we kept going back.

This was September 1982, after Labor Day, when we labored our way down North Carolina Highway 12 past the crowded islandopolis of Kitty Hawk, Kill Devil Hills, and Nags Head, which was where most sensible people from Richmond stopped on North Carolina's Outer Banks. Back then, going even that far was a four-hour drive. But I had seen Nags Head a decade earlier and liked it better the way it had been, so we kept going onto Hatteras Island. Vicki and I and our infant daughter, Lindsay, accompanied by a collapsible playpen, were headed to an Outer Banks unencumbered by fast-food restaurants, shopping centers, and motel chains.

What lay ahead, we weren't quite sure. We drove down the narrow highway in the dark for another hour and a half, usually between lines of sand dunes that made it seem a slalom course, looking for an inexpensive motel near the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. The lighthouse was the only spot we knew of. We drove almost to the end of the island, finally

reaching little Hatteras Village. We stopped at the Sea Gull Motel and checked in for the night.

In the morning, we discovered the lighthouse was in the village of Buxton, 15 miles behind us. Three towns, in fact, were closer to it than was Hatteras Village.

We stayed nonetheless, willing to forgive the island that small deceit. The island reciprocated generously. September on Hatteras Island is a glorious time. The weather and the water retain summer's warmth. Prices have dropped from the peak season, and crowds have dwindled now that school has started—not that the island is ever really crowded.

We went back the next year and the next and the next. September on Hatteras is absolutely glorious—unless a hurricane or a nor'easter is coming, of course, in which case it is absolute hell.

One year, we did get caught at the Sea Gull in a tropical storm. The electricity went out. The world crashed down around us. A Hatteras storm in the middle of the night is sheer terror. The next morning, the little-used island road was filled with people leaving.

But that was the exception. Cares wash away on Hatteras. Wristwatches lose their function. Each September morning for four years, we would walk across the main road—scarcely having to look, so infrequently were cars coming—to a breakfast spot called The Lightship Restaurant. We might find two other couples there. We might find no one. Likewise, we had the beach and the few shops almost to ourselves. Hatteras visitors were more apt to be fishermen than tourists that time of year.

We always stayed at the Sea Gull. By then, our son, Ryan, had been born. If we were going to arrive late, the motel people would tape the room key to the office door. The allure of Hatteras was always the same. The allure was . . . nothing. Adventures on the island were few—a trip

to the lighthouse, buying T-shirts, a cookout on the beach, afternoon storms. Oh, and I once had to yank Lindsay from the surf so forcefully her arm was in a sling for several days. The Hatteras undertow is not to be trifled with.

We left the island before our younger daughter, Jamie, was born. Lindsay had started school, and Septembers on Hatteras were no longer an option. The realization brought sadness.

But the island remained on our minds. In 1990, I wrote a column about Hatteras for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. A dredge, buffeted during a heavy storm, had knocked out the bridge to the island. I called down to the Sea Gull to talk to one of the owners, Katie Oden, who said Outer Banks people were used to that sort of thing. "The people down here, I don't want to say it's not an inconvenience, because it is, but it's not something you're not at all ready for," Katie said, using up her share of negatives.

Thirteen years later, I called the Sea Gull for another column and reached Katie again. This time, Hurricane Isabel had devastated Hatteras. The Sea Gull itself was national news. Part of the motel had been deposited across the street, part was sitting in the middle of the main highway, and Rooms 5 through 10 had simply been demolished.

But Marci, the daughter of Katie and Jeff Oden, was the main concern. She had been trapped inside the motel as chest-high water blocked the doors. Finally, the ocean smashed through a window and carried her into a motel garage. She got into the attic. Her parents prayed. "We were absolutely positive that she didn't make it. She was trapped," Katie said over the phone. "Our prayers were answered." Jeff and a neighbor waded to the motel with a surfboard to steady themselves. Jeff carried his exhausted daughter to safety.

Katie Oden said the damage was estimated at \$3 million

and the motel would not reopen. That was no easy decision for the two. Katie had been on the island for 30 years at that point, and Jeff was a seventh-generation Hatterasman.

But there is something in the Hatteras spirit. More than two decades after we had last seen the island, Vicki and I returned. We were looking to do a follow-up book to earlier ones on Topsail Island and Wrightsville Beach, and we had no doubt where we would go. We took that long drive down Hatteras—and came upon the Sea Gull again. Some of the destroyed portion had been rebuilt. The motel was open. On the wall was a framed front page of the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* featuring Isabel's wrath upon the Sea Gull.

To say Hatteras is unchanged would be lying. It has changed. But it has changed little—far less than most other resorts—and it has kept its soul. That may be more nature's doing than man's. Man wins many contests elsewhere, but here, on Hatteras Island, put your money on nature.

The book that has emerged here is neither a travel guide nor a history nor a paean to a disappearing lifestyle, though it contains elements of each. It is certainly not the definitive book on Hatteras Island. That book has never been written and never will be. Indeed, anyone who trifles with the history of Hatteras runs the risk of getting it so intertwined with legend, hearsay, and errors of fact as to be unrecognizable. One islander, referring to non-locals who would write Hatteras history, says bluntly, "They hear these stories and they think they know who the people are and they put it together, and it's the greatest mess you ever heard when it comes out."

This book is, instead, a conversation with an island.

It is shared memories with a warm beach, recollections of a storm, tales from a violent ocean. It is hot July days and dreary February days and the promising days of early May. It is wind and rain and sunrises and sunsets and blowing

sand and churning surf and you'd-better-be-ready-when-the-storm-hits-because-it-ain't-waitin'-for-you. Count on that, my friend. It is long-dead fishermen and lifesavers peering out from old photographs, and tourists and kite boarders smiling from new ones, and natives and transplants brought together every summer, the latter sometimes charmed by the former and the former simply putting up with the latter until finally, by God, they leave. All share and celebrate this ever-changing—ever-*challenging*—spit of land that nobody should be able to live on. But don't you dare try to tell them they shouldn't be here. They would be no place else.

Pull up a chair. Have a listen.



Hatteras
Island

KEEPER
of the
OUTER
BANKS

