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Last Exit to Riverhead By Nicole Cotroneo

Though few of its travelers believe it, the Long Island Expressway does end. Spanning the length of the fish-shape island like a spine, it stretches 81 miles east from Queens and smacks into a hamlet called Riverhead at the mouth of the Peconic River, the island's longest ribbon of water.

Most drivers abandon the LIE's clogged lanes to cut south toward Hampton beaches, bistros and boutiques, or north to sun-drenched vineyards. But those curious enough -- and patient enough -- to make it to the end find a place not yet dependent on tourism, where tractors slow up traffic on their way from potato field to cabbage patch, and sod farms color the earth Crayola green.

Retro isn't trendy here, it's a way of life, and those born and raised in Riverhead, N.Y., seem generally oblivious to the attractiveness of their time-warped town. "People from Washington are going to come to Riverhead?" 73-year-old Tony Meras asks doubtfully, leaning on the corner of Star Confectionary's 1949 soda fountain in a cotton apron, looking a lot like his father in the black-and-white photograph behind him.

At the other end of the counter, the luncheonette's young cook, Peter Edwards, is working the griddle. "You want potatoes with your eggs?" he shouts over the sizzle of butter. Tucked somewhere in a wooden booth, a man answers, "You bet."

No one seems to think this conversing between cook and customer is charmingly anachronistic. And that's quite refreshing.

Life Along the Peconic Riverhead's downtown area is classic Americana - white clapboard churches, brick buildings with large plate-glass windows, neoclassic courthouses. In recent years, several long-neglected historical spots have been salvaged along East Main Street, like Tweed's Restaurant in the J.J. Sullivan Hotel, which was restored to Victorian grandeur and named in tribute to original owner and Tammany Hall member John J. Sullivan. Nearby, there's the Vail-Leavitt Music Hall, with its pressed tin roof and bright cranberry and sea-green moldings, where local jazz bands and regional theater groups perform.

Somewhere in the middle of the Main Street stretch, a man cradles a guitar in Flower Alley. This little piece of serenity is a flowered passageway that runs alongside Eastenders Coffee House and the Blue Door Gallery, a tiny space that showcases work by East End artists and serves as a studio

for gallery owner Sandi Woessner. Across the street, the East End Arts Council has managed to fit a gallery, gift shop and community art school into two small historic homes. The surrounding grounds are not gated and are worth a stroll to see sculptures and mosaics.

Flowing behind the arts council and parallel with Main Street is the Peconic, a slow, dark river teeming with frantic, silvery bluefish. Layered in flannel, father-and-son anglers gather on the dock to wave their baited wands while fearless ducks skim by below, defying the onset of winter. The 15-mile river meanders by Atlantis Marine World's amphitheater before yawning into Flanders Bay, a wedge of water that pries the island in half.

Atlantis is a Disneyesque aquarium with colossal crumbling pillars and sea creatures that lurk in the dark corners of children's imaginations -- piranhas, sharks, electric eels. Beyond the aquatic, Riverhead is home to other misfit creatures. Traveling out of the hamlet and through the northern part of town (that's one thing a visitor must get straight: Riverhead Town encompasses many small villages, including the hamlet of Riverhead), a herd of brown-black, kinky-haired beasts seem oddly out of place. Those humpbacked bulls hunkered down in the autumn sun are Ed Tuccio's pet bison, and the inspiration for the menu at his restaurant, Tweed's.

Tuccio, whose Riverhead roots go back to the 1600s, doesn't slaughter his buffalo, though -- they're kept for breeding. The tender hanger steaks served in a pool of cognac cream come from Dakota herds, and the head that stares out over the bar belonged to the last bison hunted by Teddy Roosevelt in the South Dakota Badlands. To feed the buffalo, Tuccio grows corn at his North Quarter Farm, which is shared with wife Dee Muma, an Olympic medalist and horse trainer. It's harvest time and he picks up beaded cobs that have fallen from the tractor's cart abandoned at the edge of a shivering field. He talks of neighboring farmers, many who are Polish and have been slow to convert their potato fields into furrowed beds for "entertainment crops" -- things that can be picked by urbanites eager to finger something organic and gritty.

Heart of Polish Town If there's any people who deserve to be set in their ways, it's Riverhead's Polish residents, who began taming this land around the turn of the 20th century. Their influence has never waned, and is stronger nowhere than in Polish Town, a small, tightly knit neighborhood in Riverhead hamlet, where it's not uncommon to hear polka music blasting from a minivan.

To find the heart of Polish Town, look for Pulaski Street, or better yet, look

up and head toward the copper-domed towers of St. Isidore's Roman Catholic Church, which have earned their lovely bluish-green hue over 96 years. The church is the realized dream of the earliest Polish settlers, who adopted the Spanish patron saint of farmers and built the graceful white cathedral to hear Mass again in their native tongue.

Polish Mass is still celebrated each Sunday at 10:30 a.m. More than 300 parishioners attend regularly, including a new generation pushing strollers and towing teenagers. Crossing guard Kelly Daniels ushers them safely across Pulaski, singing, "Good morning, dzien dobry, dzien dobry." A young blond woman with Irish features, Daniels is a self-described "Heinz 57," and though there's no Polish in her recipe, she jokes, "I will be Polish soon."

Zeon Najdzion often keeps her company on the sidewalk. A 50-year parishioner, he married inside the soaring Romanesque nave of St. Isidore's, saw his daughter wed there too, and now sings in the choir. In 1929, at the age of 20, he emigrated from Poland and settled on New York's South Shore, where he briefly attended church. "But then the Irish came," he says with an insinuating nod and hurries into St. Isidore's, following a striking white-suited blonde in stilettos.

After Mass, parishioners scurry down the street to Euro Deli to purchase provisions for their Sunday meals. For six years, Polish immigrants Roman and Grace Rusiecki and their daughters have served smoked sausage, stuffed cabbage, babka and Polish chitchat to all comers.

Art and Wine What's a Sunday meal without a bit of wine, though? No problem in Riverhead. Its northeastern territory reaches a few miles past the "Wine Country" welcome sign, providing plenty of space for Martha Clara Vineyards, home of the pink "Big E" mansion where Robert Entenmann lives. That's right -- as in the you-must-eat-me white pastry boxes with the clear plastic windows. The bakery heir originally bred thoroughbreds on the property, but his children, Jackie and Bobby, suggested they go with the North Fork flow and plant grapes. The 106 acres were named after Entenmann's mother, Martha Clara, and it is her wedding photo that graces many of the vineyard's bottles.

"Every Friday she would hand out the checks to the bakery workers and see how everyone's families were," says vineyard manager Bob Kern, who has heard the story several times from people who spent their whole lives working in Entenmann's bakeries. "She was the sweetest, most gracious person. Everyone loved her."

Martha Clara Vineyards first released a viognier in 1998 and has earned several awards since, particularly for its white and dessert wines. But

Martha Clara is more than a tasting room -- it's an unpretentious vineyard that rolls in the beer kegs for Oktoberfest and gives people a reason to come in December by offering doughnut-making demonstrations and mulled wine tastings. And if the ground is clear of snow and guests are willing to part with their wine, Bill and Charlie, two friendly Percherons, are happy to bring guests on a jouncing carriage tour of the grounds.

"We want to make it a total experience for everyone," Bobby Entenmann insists, sitting sideways on his golf cart with a beer in his hand.

"The idea is we want people to have a place to go," Kern adds. "If we wanted to just sell wine we'd get a distributor."

There are two large barns on the property that Bill and Charlie have never set foot in. They house ever-changing art exhibits, including African folk art and furniture from the Hemingway African Gallery, which is currently in residence. Gallery co-founder Brian Gaisford (the other was Gregory Hemingway) is a strong, weathered man from South Africa with crystal eyes and a conservationist's soul. He insists the smooth, wooden birthing chairs were made for comfort, but they appear as inviting as a plywood board. He's right, though. A person could fall deep into sleep right there in the gallery. Luckily, he wouldn't mind.

The opening of a second gallery barn was a definitive success, thanks to the talent of Max Moran, an up-and-coming artist who is more up than coming and lives right down the street from the vineyard. Though he had previously established himself as a master street artist, rendering North Fork and Manhattan scenes with stunning detail, it was his gray "Rain" series -- many of which depict umbrella-topped figures obscured and anonymous in the rain -- that sold out at its Martha Clara debut.

Disillusioned by the Manhattan gallery scene, Moran came to the East End, where the light and the cloud formations are "really special," he says, nibbling on pear slices and cubes of cheese in his sunny kitchen. It's the reflections, he continues. "You have the Sound two minutes that way. The bay is two minutes that way. You can't get it any better."

Stars of Riverhead While the light drew the artist, it was the darkness that seduced amateur astronomer Jim Slezak, who used to drive 60 miles east from the Long Island town of Glen Cove to gaze at a canvas untainted by the light of anything but stars. In 1998, he and wife Linda moved permanently to Jamesport, a village within Riverhead, and purchased an 1877 farmhouse surrounded by vineyards and a nursery. After ripping up carpeting to expose caramel-colored fir wood floors and managing to get four enormous beds up the narrow staircase, they opened their home

as the Red Barn B&B.

Mornings are sweet here, glazed golden with sunlight and filled with the scent of warm apple cake. Afternoon adventures are best ended in the living room, curled up on the sofa watching the flames in the wrought-iron stove sway to the sound of the radio. But it's the nights that are truly magical, when Slezak pulls open the big, white doors on the red barn and carts out his Dobsonian telescope. Fat and red like a circus cannon, it looks as if it could blow a person to the moon. Instead, it throws a lasso around the white sphere, bringing it close enough to shove a thumb into one of its craters.

Slezak peers through binoculars looking for "open clusters," compact groups of hundreds of stars he says are "one of the most beautiful things to see in the winter sky." But the moon is full and as bright as the sun, washing out the sky to a charcoal color, overwhelming everything but the strongest stars. He gives up.

It's hard to feel cheated, though. Those elusive clusters can't be any more spectacular than a night bathed in moon glow.

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(Max Moran's gallery (4250 Sound Ave., Mattituck, 631-298-8606, www.maxmoran.com), housed in his farmhouse, displays vivid paintings of local and Manhattan street scenes and works from Moran's "Rain" collection. It is open Sundays at varying times (call ahead).)