

The Outer Lands

Returning to a place and a friendship, and wondering why you didn't return sooner.

BLOCK ISLAND. THE NATURE Conservancy calls it one of the last great places in the Western Hemisphere. It rides in the mist 13 miles off the Rhode Island coast and is part of the Outer Lands, a broken archipelago stretching from Montauk to Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and Cape Cod. Each piece was born in the dying days of a glacier that once gripped the continent. With enormous force, it reshaped everything in its path, only to end its epic journey here along the Atlantic. And ever since, the Outer Lands have remained in the tide, at the ragged edge of an ice age.

I first fly fished Block back in the 1980s and, up to a point, returned many times. For more reasons than I care to explain, however, I hadn't been back in a God's age, but then one evening not long ago, I received a phone call from Capt. Pete Farrell.

"Man, I'm on Block for the summer. Got a gig towing tourists on the banana boat. Working all week, but I have time to

fish early and late. And the fishing is good, dude. The stripers bite cranked last week, and the catching continues. Get over here. I'll get you hooked up." Pete insisted.

"Hey, Pete, good to hear from you, man. You're on the Block? Wow, lucky you. I'd love to come over. It's been a while. Let me look at the weather and make plans. I'll be back in touch soon. Thanks for the call," I answered.

Pete is a hard-core fly fishing fanatic, a never-say-die and passionate fly angler who is so dedicated to the sport that it steers his life in both seen and unseen ways. Fly fishing lives in his blood and his brain.

He and I had fished together many times. Several years ago, I lived in Rhode Island, and one fall Pete and I worked every grain of sand between Watch Hill and Matunuck. It was a hit-and-miss adventure, as shore fishing is apt to be. Still, we had some terrific hours with bass and blues ripping through the surf. We wore ourselves out, fighting tides, fighting

fish. I don't know why I hadn't been back in so long. I have missed those days.

In terms of angling, I trusted Pete wholly, and if he said there are bass on Block, I had to get there. So, the day after he called, I checked the long-range forecast, picked a two-day window, and called my friend Joan, and asked if she wanted to join me for a couple days on the island. She agreed. We made a reservation, and the following week we pointed ourselves at Point Judith to catch the Block Island ferry out of the fishing village of Galilee.

At the ferry, we climbed the stairs and parked ourselves on the upper deck. Clear and calm, it was a perfect day to head to sea. Eventually, the cliffs of Clay Head rose to greet us. Located on the Block's northeastern shore, they were majestic in the morning light, a glowing 100-foot-high palisade. Walking to starboard, we

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NANTUCKET STRIPER, BY CHERI RENESON



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watched them glide by and memories of great times came flooding in on high tide.

After checking into the hotel, we enjoyed a summer day on the town beach. Pete called around 4 p.m., and he asked us to meet him at the charter docks around 5:30. Joan and I got there a touch early and saw the banana boat unload. As people shuffled past, I spied Pete down the dock tying off the towboat. Seconds later, he moved toward us but had yet to see us. Built like a halfback, he moved with an economy of motion, slow and steady, a man confident of his way. Glancing up, he spotted me, beamed a big smile, and then flipped me the bird.

"Hey, man! Good you see you!" Pete yelled, with a now outstretched palm.

"Great to see you, Captain! This is my friend Joan," I answered while shaking his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Joan. Turns out, I got a few loose ends to finish here. How about I meet you guys on Water Street for a cold beer, say in fifteen minutes?" Pete suggested.

"Sure. Sounds like a plan," I said.

As Joan and I headed up the hill toward Water Street, she glanced up at me with wide-eyed astonishment.

"I can't believe he flipped you the bird!" Joan exclaimed.

"That's his standard hello. Don't take it the wrong way. He does it to get a rise out of people." I grinned.

"Wow. Really? Pete's a character!" Joan laughed.

As we walked, I told her more about Pete. Born in New York of Irish descent, Pete has always been irreverent, opinionated, never controlled by anything other than his own passions and whims. Yet as tough as Pete comes across, he hides a heart of gold. And as much as he pokes fun at the world, Pete can take it. At home, I have his business card from years ago when he guided full-time on Block. On the front is a self-portrait of sorts, a cartoon of a red-bearded, demonic-looking angler in waders, boasting huge buckteeth. Topping it off, Pete wryly named his guide service Blockhead Charters.

Later the three of us sat at the bar in the Mohegan Cafe. Joan sipped wine; Pete

and I worked on IPAs. A talker by nature, Pete delivered his typical blue streak. Having once lived on Block and guided here often, he has deep and extensive knowledge of the island. Joan and I leaned, listening with interest as Pete rattled on. You could tell he loved it here. You can stay on Block Island for only so long before going native.

"See many fly rodgers on Block these days?" I asked Pete.

"Nah . . . Not like years ago. The single-malt dudes show up now and then. You know . . . the guys who can cast ten feet. There are a few fly rodgers living here, too. But most of them don't have game," Pete offered.

"Booking charters?" I inquired.

"Hell yeah. Got charters booked next week. And things will pick up once the bonito show." Pete smiled. "There are a few around the island. My friend saw one in the wake behind the banana boat yesterday."

"What about the bass bite?" I inquired.

"Man, some big bass on the reefs around the island. Last week, on spinning gear we put four in the boat in one day. All of them over twenty pounds. Got shots of me releasing them," Pete said, reaching for his cell. He found the pictures, then held out his phone and scrolled through the images. "They're in twenty-plus feet of water, but we might get a fly down to them."

"Those are beasts," I said, staring. "Got bass on the beach, too?"

"Sure. It's a night bite. I had one of almost fifteen pounds not long ago."

"Let's do some beach fishing, like old times . . . or is there any chance we can sight-fish in the Great Salt Pond instead? Would love to do that!" I exclaimed.

"Hey . . . I have access to a flats boat, and we got a decent tide for the pond tomorrow morning. Why not? I'll pick you up around eight a.m. in front of the hotel," Pete said.

In the morning, I was sitting outside when Pete pulled up in his ancient Jeep. I greeted him, lifted the tailgate, and stowed my stuff, which blended in with Pete's jumble of fly gear: stripping baskets, tackle bags, waders, foul-weather jackets, reels, and fly boxes stacked to the ceiling. On the hood, a team of fly rods

rode a magnetic post, the rod tips angling rearward over the windshield. While in the front seat, a large patch of flies jutted from the dash. His truck served as rolling storage for his fly tackle.

Soon, we were in a flats boat racing over Great Salt Pond. If there were fish to be found—no question—Pete would put me on them. He is an excellent guide. Upon entering a cove, Pete killed the engine, gave me a thumbs-up, and leaped to the poling platform. I picked up my fly rod and stripped out line.

In the early light, the sandy bottom through the prism of the water shone yellow gold before giving way to the greens of deeper water. It was a familiar scene and a reminder of other special places among the Outer Lands that easily compare to the beauty of Menemsha, Monomoy, or Nauset.

We saw a couple of bass in the first cove, and I got one shot but didn't connect. So, we moved and started the search over. And within a minute or two, Pete broke the good news.

"Eleven o'clock. Swimming at us."

"Can't see him yet." I replied.

"Moving left now. Point your rod," Pete instructed. "More to the left."

I pointed the rod left, but still had not seen the fish.

"He just went over the dark bottom at the shore's edge," Pete announced. "Wait a second, let's see what he does. Okay, okay . . . He is turning back toward us now."

A stripers slid into sight—the water so clear, I could count its stripes. Flexing the rod, I placed the fly a few feet ahead of the fish and allowed it to sink before beginning a retrieve. On the first strip, the fish shot forward and clamped down. Surging off to the south, it stole line as the reel handle spun. The lime green backing began to show, and Pete popped off the poling platform to shake my hand.

"It's been a long time coming. Too long."

Back on the Outer Lands. Back on Block. Back fishing with Pete.



Ed Mitchell has 50 years of fly-fishing experience. He is the author of 4 books on the subject and has written for numerous magazines. See more of his work at edmitchelloutdoors.com.