

## Final Crossing

The Boston Globe

**The *Islander* braved hurricanes, ice, and rocks to put Martha's Vineyard in our reach. Now, after half a century, a million miles, and one onboard failed political assassination, the legendary ferryboat is being retired. This is her story.**

By Chris Burrell | August 6, 2006

SHE COASTS TOWARD THE PIER AND LETS LOOSE A WHISTLE, "BOOOOO-WHUMP." From the docks, you can hear the clang of metal as crewmen prepare to bind the steel car ramp to the bow. As the ship eases between pilings, her engines thrust into reverse. For the ferry arriving in port, this nautical noise may as well be a requiem.

The boxy old ferryboat called the *Islander* has chugged along the same choppy 7-mile route between Martha's Vineyard and the mainland port of Woods Hole for 56 years. It's been quite a run. Christened by the daughter of a movie star, it survived groundings and hurricanes, and its sturdy rail once foiled an assassination. The *Islander* has set endurance records, with more miles logged (over 1 million) and more years served than any other ferry in the fleet of the Steamship Authority, the public agency that provides transportation between Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, Hyannis, and Falmouth. How many passengers, do you think, are the children, grandchildren, or even great-grandchildren of the *Islander's* first riders? But the future is looming. A bigger, faster, flashier \$31 million replacement will arrive in the fall to carry three times the passengers and half again as many cars. By next summer, the *Islander*, built out of high-grade military steel in 1950 for \$687,510 (that's about \$5.8 million, adjusted for inflation), could be in a salvage yard, awaiting blowtorches to cannibalize its engine and hull. "It's ugly, but it's very strong," chief engineer Steve Broderick says of the ferry he has tended for almost 30 years. "This thing is a fighter. It's got tenacity, but nobody in their right mind runs a 56-year-old boat."

And so, when this summer ends, the *Islander* will join some other Vineyard traditions eroded by time, like horse races, the demolition derby, and the middle class.

AS I BOARD THE *Islander* ONE MORNING IN MAY, IT'S EASY TO SEE THAT IT IS A throwback, a 1,100-ton Velveteen rabbit, worn around the edges but beloved. The bench seats, upholstered in a thick forest green, are the first tip-off. A guy is stretched out napping on one. You can't lie down anywhere on the newer boats, whose seats are high-backed and covered in cloth, with cold steel armrests. The *Islander* sports tacky blue-and-yellow plastic tables with hard plastic benches - like a 1970s school cafeteria. Other seats have sagging Naugahyde bottoms. The crowning decor is children's art tacked up on the walls: birthday cards for a boat.

Regulars warm to the funkiness. The *Islander* "is the best boat they have," Margot Becker, a 19-year-old Vineyarder, tells me while sitting on one of the blue plastic chairs fixed to the deck. "The new boats are so airportlike and sterile." Sitting nearby, her mother, Claire Thacher, a 59-year-old resident of Chappaquiddick who grew up riding the boat as a summer visitor, adds, "The *Islander* everyone thinks of as being friendly."

Even in its twilight, the ferry has proved stalwart. In the first five years of this century, it carried 4.6 million people back and forth between the mainland and the Vineyard and nearly 800,000 cars and trucks. Summer, of course, is the busiest season: 128,806 people rode the *Islander* last August, compared with 43,346 in January.

Inside the wheelhouse, the *Islander's* history and power are palpable. "There are people who were transported to the island as infants aboard this ferry," says Captain David Dandridge, 53, of Vineyard Haven. As the church spires of his hometown grow smaller and the West Chop lighthouse rises into view to port, Dandridge pushes the nickel-plated throttle forward. "To full shake and rattle," he says, grinning beneath his mustache. The floor trembles, and you can hear the sound of sheet metal vibrating. Levers and dials of polished brass and steel are set against golden, varnished wood. Absent are computer screens. Fixed to the wall is a telephone with a steel case, a chunky Bakelite handset, and small crank. "When everything else craps out," Dandridge says, "that still works."

The *Islander* is an antique, but it's hardly frail. Crew members say that when northeasters and high winds forced other ferries to lash down in port, the *Islander* braved the chop and got people home. "She runs in conditions the others

can't," says Bob Douglas, founder of the Black Dog Tavern in Vineyard Haven and the owner of Shenandoah, a 108-foot wooden schooner. "Why would you have a problem with a boat that can do that? The *Islander* is a class act. People grudgingly have to admit that, even if the boat line likes new stuff ."

Legend has it that the *Islander* was built from war-surplus steel forged for a submarine, heavier and tempered. "They got a boat and a half for the price of one," says Broderick.

"I always kid the guys that if there was a collision between this and the *Martha's Vineyard* [another Steamship Authority ferry, launched in 1993], we'd go right through it and not even slow down," says Michael Mazza, 49, of West Tisbury, who skippered the *Islander* in the 1980s.

Sturdy as a Hummer, the *Islander* performs more like a Prius, burning one-third the fuel the other ferries use. Credit the designer, Eads Johnson, an eminent naval architect. "It's lowest to the water, no windage," says Mazza. "The boat is smooth as hell. I don't know how they got this hull, but it's like a canoe."

A really big canoe. The ferry is a double-ender with two bows and propellers at both ends, spared the delay of 180-degree spins at port. A frugal boat is a moneymaker, the crewmen point out, but top brass at the boat line see profit in speed and size. Newer boats, after all, can plow across Vineyard Sound in 35 minutes, not the 45 minutes it takes *Islander* at its crossing speed of 11 knots. The replacement ferry will carry 76 cars, with interior seating for 650 people, compared with the *Islander's* capacity of 50 cars and fewer than 200 seats in the cabins.

It's those limitations, and the *Islander's* Spartan comforts, that have regular passengers lining up to say bon voyage. "It's the one boat you took when others wouldn't go, but you can tell it's worn out," says Ralph Friedman, who has ridden the *Islander* for 30 years to commute to his job in the Taunton schools. "It consistently runs late. The lighting is terrible, the seats are old. It's time to go." As the *Islander* edges toward extinction, passengers, workers, and historians recall its colorful past. Built in Baltimore, the *Islander* was christened on a May day in 1950 by little blond Cathleen Cagney, the 8-year-old daughter of the actor James Cagney, who owned a summer home on Martha's Vineyard.

One of the most bizarre events in the *Islander's* history transpired on a September night in 1972. A passenger spotted former defense secretary Robert McNamara in the lunchroom and told him there was a call for him in the wheelhouse. Near the stern, the man grabbed McNamara by the belt and shirt collar and tried to heave him over the railing. McNamara laced his fingers into the grillwork on the rail and held on until other passengers came to his aid, while the would-be assassin vanished. Had the assailant succeeded, McNamara would have surely perished, either swept into the propeller blades or drowned in the darkness. Years later, a Vineyard artist admitted - anonymously - to the assault in a 1995 book about the legacy of the Vietnam War.

There are tales of the 1954 hurricane, when the crew sailed to the safety of Lambert's Cove, and the 1980 accident in Oak Bluffs, when the vessel hit an uncharted rock and nearly sank.

Broderick relishes retelling one of his own stories, of the July morning in 1988 when the *Islander* veered to avoid a sailboat and ran aground in Woods Hole, cutting a gash in the hull. Water gushed into the engine room. "You know there's a problem when you see starfish and seaweed going by," he says. He stuffed a life jacket into the hole, grabbed a piece of plywood, and ordered a 240-pound crewman to stand on the contraption and act as a human plug to keep the boat afloat.

I follow Broderick down steep steps into the roar of the engine room, where he enters his soundproof booth and removes his ear protectors. "We're all deaf as haddocks down here," he says as a smile creases his weatherworn face.

Then there's Bernie Holzer, 72, the *Islander's* purser for nearly 30 years. His voice over the loudspeaker is worthy of a 1940's radio comedy. He has his own favorite tale: "The old Italian lady who comes to me and says, 'My daughter-in-law and husband, I don't think they're on the boat.' Then I'm stuck with someone's mother-in-law. Who's gonna claim a mother-in-law?" But about the *Islander*, Holzer is wistful. "It's one of the best running boats we've got. But maybe we gotta spring ahead."

Chris Burrell is a freelance writer living in Vineyard Haven. E-mail comments to [magazine@globe.com](mailto:magazine@globe.com). ■

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