

## Clubbing on the shores

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### Bands and DJs, bars and dance clubs, energy and talent, North and South have them all - so where is best?

By Steve Morse, Globe Correspondent | August 10, 2008

The sun is setting as I head northward over the Tobin Bridge on part of a marathon, multiweekend assignment: to compare night life on the North Shore vs. the South Shore. Is one better?

In the end, I came away with new respect for both, though I believe the North Shore has the summer edge because it boasts so many outdoor clubs and restaurants.

What emerged from jaunts up to Gloucester and down to Plymouth was not just a discovery of great places in both areas, but also a regional pride that would not quit.

"It's an ongoing feud. I live on the North Shore, but I work with people who live on the South Shore, so we talk about it," said Kerrie Beaulieu, an administrative assistant hanging out at the sparkling Mandrake in Beverly, a bar-restaurant on Cabot Street.

"When I think of the South Shore, I just think of traffic," sniffed her friend Samantha Racki, who lives in Marblehead and works in public relations in Newburyport.

Now, do I hear it for the South Shore?

"I think there are more places to play on the South Shore," said singer Brian Burrill, who had just finished a solo set at Marina Bay Beach Club (formerly WaterWorks) in Quincy. Nearby is the fabled, nearly 50-year-old Beachcomber on Wollaston Beach, with a new sign out front that reads, "The Cape is here this year." Owner Jimmy McGettrick said, "With the economy being what it is, we want people to save money by coming here rather than the Cape." It seems to be working, because he had a big crowd for the excellent Age Against the Machine (a Rage Against the Machine tribute act).

OK, everybody has a point. Both shores offer many options - and both lure older crowds that might not fight the young, twenty- and thirtysomething stranglehold at most intown Boston/Cambridge clubs. Also, drinks often cost less, and many places outside the city don't have cover charges. And you can't beat the water views at such spots as the Ocean Club on Nantasket Beach, the bohemian Madfish Grille in Gloucester, and the elegant Red Rock Bistro in Swampscott.

Overall, live music has ebbed, especially original music (artists are often asked to play radio hits instead). Gone are great North Shore live clubs such as Grover's and Sandy's Jazz Revival in Beverly. Gone from the South Shore are the Yardrock in Quincy, the Sea Note in Hull (closed this summer, but hoping to reopen), and Meaghan's Place in Scituate.

"We're running out of rooms to play," said Kevin Morris of the South Shore reggae band Noddacul, noting that in some places DJs are becoming more prevalent and in others the focus is turning more toward food. "When one club falls off the map, you've got to find another," said Erinn Brown, a Salem-based singer.

Still, the beat goes on, and I'm determined to find it.

My first stop is Revere Beach, which remains a colossal disappointment for night life (the same with Nantasket Beach down south). It's the home of the generic, seedily unexciting beach bar, places like Sammy's, Bill Ash's, and the Shipwreck Lounge. The most interesting place is not on the beach but near it: Club Lido (formerly the Wonderland Ballroom) on North Shore Road. It often features reggae on Fridays (Jamaica's Morgan Heritage

played a sizzling set before a spirited multicultural audience) and separate floors of Brazilian and Latin music on Saturdays, when the club is at its high-energy peak.

Heading farther north yields the better-kept secrets. The streets can be labyrinthine (compared with the easily traversed roads on the South Shore), but that's part of the adventure. I really enjoyed the casual ambience in Marblehead; first stop was the Three God Tavern, a modest, nautical-themed bar-restaurant where doorman Ben Martin cited the local wisdom that Marblehead is "a sailing town with a drinking problem." He said last call at town bars is only 11:30, so that many customers flock to Salem for a nightcap. (Salem's last call, like most towns on the North and South shores, is 12:30-ish.)

Wending through the quaint lanes of Marblehead I check out Caffé Italia, a posh, fine-dining trattoria and bar with a spiffy Aston Martin parked out front. How fancy. But then I hit the famously unpretentious Maddy's Sail Loft, a small, jumping place with an antique map of the seacoast. A line formed at 10:30, so after a brief visit I went up the street to the Landing, a classy restaurant on the water with a bar for live music. I bumped into Gary Swain, a local resident who laughed when I told him I was comparing the two shores. "The South Shore seems like a Third World country to us because it's so far away," he said, though he also bemoaned the decrease in live music clubs everywhere.

Testing out the nightcap exodus, I drove to nearby Salem, which was hopping on this weekend. The downtown Dodge Street Bar & Grill, the most dedicated music club in the region, books rock, blues, and jazz in an earthy roadhouse style (owner Frank Presutti likes it that way). Tonight was the competent Van Halen tribute band Fair Warning (tribute acts are ubiquitous) and they drew a devoted, sweaty crowd.

After drying off from the heat, I repaired to the nearby flood of bars such as Rockafellas (which had the band D3 playing rowdy dance hits), the Edgewater Café, and the Lobster Shanty. All were crowded and had outdoor patios, but Rockafellas was the most swinging with a large, high-ceilinged indoor room filled with testosterone-fueled males chasing women. Salem won my vote as the hottest night life center on the North Shore - and we haven't even mentioned the cool bar-restaurants on Pickering Wharf such as Finz, where I ran into "TV Diner" host Billy Costa, whose boat was docked alongside.

The South Shore is just as spread out. I started in Quincy, which doesn't have much of a beat downtown, and where Marina Bay is the main attraction. It showcases the lively, outdoor Marina Bay Beach Club, complete with imported palm trees and Sunday DJ nights when the door charge rises to \$20 (highest of any place I encountered). Other Marina Bay places, accessible by a scenic boardwalk, include the mellow Skyline (where singer Jimmy Peters played a fine set), the more revved-up Blue (where a Bon Jovi tune blasted over the loudspeaker), Captain Fishbone's (with a great, umbrella-tabled bar), and Waterclub, which has DJs and dancing inside. All have nice patios with generally young crowds eager to party.

A trip along the coast on Route 3A to Weymouth didn't yield much; the town's club scene leaves a lot to be desired, though Next Page has some good blues bands. And then comes the more upscale Hingham with the hip Stars (a modernized diner-bar), the fantastic Italian restaurant Tosca (Aerosmith's Steven Tyler has been spotted there), and the way-cool tavern, the Snug, where the likable Ryan Fitzsimmons performed and state Senator Bob Hedlund quaffed a round at the bar. "I'm a nocturnal creature. I like to go out," he said with a laugh.

Five minutes later is Nantasket Beach, though it's nearly as barren as Revere Beach. Places worth checking are the Ocean Club (with a huge romantic patio on the edge of a cliff), the relatively new Barefoot Bob's (a no-frills beach joint), the tiny but playfully named Hull's Kitchen, and the larger Red Parrot, where such local heroes as country-rock singer Dave Foley and Noddaclu perform. But don't expect much more.

My next forays north were to Gloucester, Newburyport, Beverly, and Swampscott. The most exciting of these is Gloucester, ripe with variety. The town has the very mainstream Capt. Carlo's, where a long line of about 60 people waited to hear a cover band play on a raucous outdoor deck. I bailed out to the more peaceful, downtown Dog Bar, a garden-patioed sanctuary featuring North Shore fave Bradley Royds playing well-received covers and occasional originals. The Rhumb Line is also a must (with top local talent and some open-mic nights), but the most interesting destination is Madfish Grille on the water in East Gloucester's Rocky Neck art colony. It attracts an artsy crowd dancing side by side with Gloucester fishermen, with no one putting on airs. And great acts play there from the Boston Horns to Christian McNeill.

A trip to Newburyport was fun but a bit numbing. The big lure is Michael's Harborside (two floors on the water), but it has dropped live music and appears to be moving in a more upscale direction, to the chagrin of one local woman who said too much is being done to turn Newburyport into "Nantucket North." An alternate to that is the longstanding Grog, a rough-and-tumble club where the group the Herland Brothers slammed out Southern rock. But the stage is in a dark, subterranean basement and if you happen to be claustrophobic, forget it.

I enjoyed Beverly, where a string of places on Cabot Street has forged a night life resurgence. Besides Mandrake, where local R&B star Barrence Whitfield performs, there's the next-door Soma, a restaurant serving upscale Mediterranean dishes with a side bar with local acts such as Quill, Elephant House, and Hope Road, a Bob Marley cover band that plays on Tuesdays. And a new wine bar called Tryst is up the street - all part of the "hidden gems" of the North Shore, as Costa put it.

A definite gem is the Red Rock Bistro & Bar on the ocean in Swampscott, whose name means "land of the red rock," according to co-owner Louise Petersie. It has an immaculate, white-tableclothed restaurant and a chic bar with an ivy-decked patio. Bookings vary from singer Brian Maes to Elvis impersonator Dana Z, who had an adoring female crowd nearly tearing off his sequins.

Deeper into the South Shore is where things heat up - namely Plymouth and Marshfield, both of which surprised me. Plymouth is filled with tourists but also two popping clubs on the town's wharf: the tropical Cabby Shack, with its own palm trees for scenery, and the singles bar East Bay Grille, a site that Jerry Seinfeld and his cohorts might enjoy.

The Cabby Shack has a young, tanned audience with a yen for sweet cocktails. "We're trying to make it feel like you're getting away on an island," said manager Nate McMinn. The walls are oceanic blue, the mood is blissful hedonism, and there's live music every night in the summer. Across the parking lot is the East Bay Grille, which has a frenzied singles bar inside and another outside in a landscaped area where an over-30 crowd eyes each other like an old-school meat market. "This is where you want to be," said one clichéd Romeo. "If you see any good-looking 30-year-old girls, send them our way."

Begging off, I ducked over to Marshfield's Brant Rock neighborhood, where I was struck by the kinetic scene at Venus II, where youths danced to a DJ on the first floor and oldsters to the rock band Entrain on the second floor. If you needed any evidence that an older crowd prefers a live band, this is it.

I ended the night up the street at the free-wheeling Courtneys, an unfancy watering hole that was beyond wild at closing time. A mixed-age crowd wriggled around to disco and classic rock hits. A local woman told me her theory that the North Shore is more "progressive and refined," while the South Shore is more "conservative." I sure didn't see any conservatism at Courtneys. It was like the Wild West after midnight.

And so the debate will rage between the two shores, but the bottom line: You're sure to have fun in either direction.

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