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Waterfront Taxis

BY NANCY SOLOMON

In recent years, more cities and towns are providing waterfront taxis, so that instead of walking, driving, or taking a bus, residents and visitors can now travel using a water taxi. Water taxis have a long history on Long Island, and I suspect elsewhere. Beginning in the 1920s, there were water taxis taking people to High Hill Beach, the predecessor to Jones Beach, from various communities on Fire Island, and more recently, from Rockaway Beach to Manhattan. Although some may be familiar with the New York Water Taxi, few may not know of the Port Washington Water Taxi, which docks across the street from Long Island Traditions' office at the Town Dock. Over the years, I have noticed the modest launch, classically designed, ferrying people from the boats docked in the harbor to the mainland. Recently, I was able to interview Matt Meyran, the founder of the company, and Bill Rooney, one of the captains.

Matt began boating at an early age, growing up in Port Washington:

We were water rats. We were on the water all the time. I was bass fishing. At the time, the rules were that it had to be 16-inch bass. I was selling striped bass to Louie's (a local seafood restaurant) at 10 or 11 years old. I paid off my gas, my boat, I was working on the water since that age for pay. I went to North Shore Yacht Club, as I got a little bit older and stopped selling fish. I was young but tall, so I looked older. Charlie Kalen—Tom Kalen's son—had a lobster boat that needed to be scraped and caulked. My grandfather on my mother's side was a boat builder from Scotland. He came over here and worked on City Island, and my dad had all his caulking hammers and his caulking tools, so I scraped, caulked, and painted Charlie Kalen's boat for probably \$4 an hour. He said, "You did such a good job, can you drive a boat?" I was on a boat from the time I was 4, driving the boat.

When I asked Matt why he started the water taxi, he shared with me his thoughts:



Port Washington harbor. Photo by Nancy Solomon.

People at yacht clubs could afford to buy a boat and go out on the water. The ones I'm taking out don't usually have their own boats. They come to the water, loving to go on the bay. For \$10, you get to go on the boat—it's not going to break the bank. You can have an ice cream, and for \$10, go out on the harbor. All different people come out with us. We give people access to the water at not a high price. There are free moorings and transient moorings.

Port Washington attracts a variety of boaters and walkers who enjoy the Town Dock and its shorefront walking path. Matt shared with us some of his memories of the people who come here:

I've had people come out here and live on their boat for 28 years, raise their children on the boat, been around the world three times with all their kids. When I take a person who hasn't been on a boat for 40 years, and we meet a person who hasn't been off a boat in 40 years, where land meets sea, this is where I'm the happiest.

Youngest boy to ever circumnavigate the world was here—he was Australian. He did it at 16.

One of the people who runs the water taxi is Bill Rooney, a seasoned captain who is from Great Neck. Like Matt, Bill also grew up on the water, in Great Neck. As Bill reflects:

I've been up every nook and cranny you can imagine, in every kind of boat you can imagine. And now I find myself in Manhasset Bay, which is a completely new experience, because the things that go on in Manhasset Bay do not occur on the other side of the peninsula in Great Neck. It's a unique community.

The navigation skills that captains require has changed greatly over the years. Matt Meyran explained some of the changes that have occurred:

We learn by experience. You had charts back when. We didn't have GPS. We didn't have this navigation stuff. So [we] don't rely on GPS. We are in a small harbor. I know it like the back of

my hand, where the rocks are. But to learn, you look at charts, etc. When you take the captain's test, you have to know these things. You have to have 720 days experience to take the captain's test. That's two years. What [the] Coast Guard is hoping is that you had another captain teaching you at least some of the skills during that two years before you take the test. You have to know the rules of the road and respect it before you get out there.

Bill Rooney enjoys the experiences of ferrying people as well as giving tours on the water taxi:

The job of the water taxi is very interesting. Because it's not just a taxi, we do tours. The taxi service, you don't spend much time with the person, we're just bringing them from a restaurant to the dock or from a restaurant to another restaurant, or from the dock to their boat, or from their boat to a restaurant. And you don't get a lot of time with the people. But on the tours, you get a minimum of a half an hour, sometimes an hour, sometimes longer. And the conversations flow. There's also what we refer to as the tran-

sient community, which are visitors from other parts of the world. And I say world because, literally, they come from all over the world. To Manhasset Bay. Manhasset Bay isn't necessarily their destination. It's become like a rest stop on an interstate highway. Where when you need food and rest, and restrooms, and you just want to take a break. But you're going from, let's say, Colombia, the country, Colombia to Maine, and you found out on the Internet that if you come to Manhasset Bay, everything you could possibly need for your journey can be found here. They come here because they can get parts from West Marine. They come here because the amount of restaurants is numerous. They come here to go shopping. They come here to do their laundry. They come here for the shipyard repairs—you will need something. Well, did you need something that you just can't walk into a store [for], they'll fix it up for you at the shipyard. They come here to visit relatives; these cruisers that are cruising all around the world. Some of them have relatives in the metropolitan New York area. We have a railroad train that takes you to

the City, to Brooklyn, anywhere. So, if you want to visit your relatives in Queens, or Manhattan, you can get there. From here, effortlessly. The rates that are charged for the day to be safely moored in our harbor are the most competitive rates anywhere on the east coast of America. There's nobody that charges less. So, this encourages people to come in and stay, and they spend a lot of money in the local economy at the stores and restaurants.

Aside from enjoying the experiences of working on the water, Bill and Matt also enjoy the people they meet. Perhaps, this is why they continue the operation, which has been a source of joy and excitement, especially during the first wave of COVID-19. As Bill explains it:

You have to be a really interesting person, on some level, to embrace sailing the way these people embrace sailing. You don't find dummies; they are kind of dynamic people. Because when you realize the expense and the work and labor that's involved, and time to produce that experience, to be on that mooring and have that boat. It's formidable, given that most of these people own houses. And this is a side thing. Oh, here's an interesting story. This lady is, I guess maybe she's 50. She decides she wants to learn sailing. So, she buys a boat, a real estate agent, local. And she's had the boat in there now for two years, maybe going on three. And just the fact that the single lady would get this boat, buy it, pay the bills, put it in there, and try to learn how to sail. I mean, how many people do that? You know, these are interesting people that are doing something that's quite adventurous. There's nothing like sailing, I'm telling you. There's nothing like it.

So, next time you're near a water taxi, take advantage of it and talk to the captains and crew mates. ▼



Photo courtesy of Port Washington Water Taxi.

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