



Fire Island

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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Western Fire Island viewed from the lighthouse. Photograph appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

Fire Island is a barrier island, a narrow strip of sand and shrubbery that has accumulated along the southern coast of Long Island. For a long time, it was considered the home of pirates and smugglers. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, nine communities have grown up along the sandbar. Two of these communities, Cherry Grove and Fire Island Pines, are now famous as resort towns for gay men and lesbians, who flock to the island for hedonistic vacation experiences in the summer.

Cherry Grove was the first community to emerge, when in 1869 Archie Perkinson, a local Long Island businessman, bought the cabin and land of the notorious pirate Jeremiah Smith. Perkinson soon lured visitors out to the Island and served them seafood dinners. He eventually opened a hotel. Small summer cottages were built around Perkinson's Hotel. In 1882, Oscar Wilde visited the Island and stayed at Perkinson's. He declared Cherry Grove to be "one of most beautiful resorts" he had ever visited.

By the 1920s, Cherry Grove had become a bohemian hangout. Painters, actors, and writers made the Grove their summer home. Despite the ban on alcoholic beverages during Prohibition, Fire Island offered some protection from the local police on Long Island, if not altogether against the Coast Guard. Liquor flowed a little more easily on Fire Island. With the opening of Duffy's Hotel in 1930, Cherry Grove began to attract gay and lesbian vacationers. At that time, Duffy's was the only place on the Island with electricity and a phone. The hotel drew many visitors and soon became the center of social life, where visitors danced and partied to music played on the nickelodeon.

During the 1940s, Cherry Grove attracted an increasing number of prominent gay men and lesbians. The poet W. H. Auden and his partner Chester Kallman regularly came out to the Grove throughout the first half of the decade. They were joined by Carson McCullers, Janet Flanner, Benjamin Britten and his partner Peter Pears, Christopher Isherwood, Lincoln Kirstein, Patricia Highsmith, Jane Bowles, Tennessee Williams, and Truman Capote, among many others.

Cherry Grove's sense of community was reinforced by the founding of the Arts Project of Cherry Grove toward the end of World War II. The Arts Project offered the opportunity to use the artistic and creative talents of the summer's visitors by mounting theatrical productions. Drawing not only on the talents and skills of well-known writers, designers, and theatrical people, the Arts Project also gave every Cherry Grove resident a chance to contribute to the cultural life of the community.

Drag, cross-dressing, and other forms of dressing up were a frequent feature of Grove social events. One of the community's rituals that featured drag was the annual "Invasion of the Pines" on the fourth of July, when flamboyant and noisy drag queens led a fleet of small boats from the Grove and invaded the swanky and tony gay community to the east, Fire Island Pines.

By the 1960s, Cherry Grove had become a predominantly gay resort community, thus making it "America's first gay and lesbian town."

Other communities developed to the east of Cherry Grove. Just across the sand dune to the east--known as the Meat Rack, for obvious reasons--is the Pines, the most recently established community on Fire Island. It was settled mostly in the 1950s as a "family community," but its geographical advantages--a natural harbor and an elevated central ridge--led to vigorous real estate speculation and attracted those who wanted to build houses with spectacular views that were also safe from high tides and floods. Successful actors, fashion designers, and wealthy businessmen moved to the Pines, which was from the beginning much more upscale than the more middle- and working-class Grove.

By the end of the 1960s, the Pines was rapidly becoming a gay community. After Stonewall, a new generation of homosexuals explored Fire Island. Renting shares, large groups of young gay men experienced the pleasure of living in a predominantly gay community. Outdoor cruising and al fresco sex were endemic.

If Duffy's in the Grove had been the site of prodigious drinking since the 1930s, the Pines and its premier social hot spot, the Sandpiper Restaurant, were the site of an endless supply of recreational drugs such as marijuana, LSD, and cocaine. The music was rock and disco. Andrew Holleran's novel *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) offers a haunting and poignant portrait of Fire Island's deserted parks and lavish orgies, as his young hero looks high and low for meaningful companionship.

The Grove and the Pines offer strong contrasts in their architecture and in their social life. By the 1980s, the Grove was made up primarily of older men and women, and lesbians were a significant, though minority, part of the Grove's community. In contrast, the Pines was the preferred Fire Island resort for the gay men of the Stonewall generation and those younger. Drag was an important theme of Cherry Grove social and community life, while gay politics was a preoccupation of many men who visited the Pines.

Since the AIDS epidemic, the two communities have grown closer socially. Both communities were devastated by the AIDS epidemic. Both responded with fundraisers for AIDS service organizations and with support services for HIV-positive residents and visitors. The successes of the glbtq movement have also helped unify the communities.

Despite the increased acceptance of homosexuality throughout the country, and especially in the Northeast, Cherry Grove and the Pines remain communities with a large preponderance of gay men and lesbians. Today most glbtq New Yorkers flock to Fire Island not, as earlier generations did, to experience a safe haven from homophobia. Instead, they come to enjoy a social environment that reflects the history of past struggles and that continues to offer the pleasure of living in towns where homosexuality is the norm.

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About the Author

Jeffrey Escoffier writes on glbtq history, politics, culture, sexuality, music, and dance. One of the founders of *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, he has published widely. Among his books are *American Homo: Community and Perversity* and a biography of John Maynard Keynes in the Chelsea House series on the Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. He co-edited (with Matthew Lore) Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il*

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