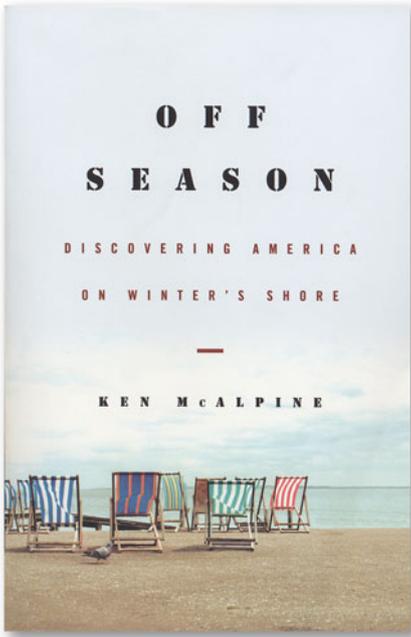


Loosening society's tethers



OFF-SEASON: Discovering America on Winter's Shore

by Ken McAlpine

Three Rivers Press, New York. 2004.
290 pp. \$13.95 (soft cover)

WHEN SUMMER PEOPLE have closed up their homes, when the last postcard has been mailed on the way to the bridge, and when local folks have returned to waterfront eateries, real life has resumed in coastal communities. Ken McAlpine knows enough of that life to want more. He has breathed salt air since birth, worked as a lifeguard in Florida and New Jersey until he was 30, and wants his sons to scatter his ashes over the waves. But he doesn't live on the Atlantic shore. Now a travel writer for national publications, and perhaps nudged by approaching middle age, he set out to learn what it takes to stay behind when September rolls around and to meet those whose seafaring roots run generations deep. He converted his Windstar van into a one-man RV outfitted with sleeping bag, down jacket, laptop, and kayak, kissed his family good-bye in California, drove across the country, and, in mid October, began a solo five-month-long journey from Key West, Florida, to Lubec, Maine. Northward into winter.

"By traveling in the off-season ... I hoped—no, I fervently believed—that I'd find a salty, small-town America, a place of substance with a unique stamp beyond the faceless suburbs and strip malls that are consuming this country, a place where people have time for themselves and their neighbors and possibly even a stranger."

McAlpine looked up old friends, made new ones, listened to family histories told in sometimes obscure dialects, and joined a potluck supper on Ocracoke Island in the Outer Banks. He spent days with men who followed their fathers into dangerous maritime trades even as they mourned brothers and grandfathers lost at sea. No rose-colored glasses tainted his view as all along the coast he looked for common threads.

Days began in places like the Coffee Club, a trailer in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, where six mornings a week commercial fishermen drop by for instant coffee before heading out. Georgia shrimpers, South Carolina fish packers, a couple who tend feral cats in Montauk, New York: all invited him to hang out. At Tangier Island, Virginia, population 600, he looked beyond the "Mayberry RFD" summer facade into the world of crabbers working Chesapeake Bay. There he encountered Tim Marshall, a maritime cop who metes out justice equally to blood relatives and neighbors alike. Like others, Marshall opened up to this stranger who wanted to hear about his fears as well as what he loves about a place where, in a good week in winter, a waterman, to earn \$600, risks slipping from his icy deck.

McAlpine immersed himself in local history and culture, often passing hours in small libraries reading back issues of the local paper. Skeptical locals at first took him for another real estate developer come to buy their homes, which was as far from McAlpine's sensibilities as could possibly be. Others plum didn't want him to write about their town. Some were too eager to promote their own agenda (he slipped away from them, fast). He looked for places where bigger and faster aren't considered better, communities that have held back America's spreading homogeneity or have slipped beneath its radar. He spent time with folks who could no more sit through an office meeting than run for president.

Take Craig and DeeVon Quirolo, in the Florida Keys, who have made it their mission to protect the coral reef from man's indifference and abuse. It's head-butting work. "You have to be on people's asses all the time," said Craig. "There's no gold watch at the end of my road. But it's a toss up. I spent yesterday diving the reef. People retire to do what I do."

BOOK REVIEW

Or Erik Jersted, a lifeguard for 30 years, who maintains boats to make ends meet and won't fit into any mold. One night, McAlpine climbed into the water beside him to scrape barnacles from a yacht. "Do you ever wish you were on the yacht and not under it?" McAlpine asked. "Never," came the reply. "I get to go down to the ocean before work, surfing a few waves, grabbing a few lobsters, paddling a kayak. That's all the yacht I need. Just be thankful. That's the secret. Fifty-four years old, and I can still do this. I know plenty of people my age with heart bypasses and diabetes." On Sundays Jersted ministers at a nursing home, then lends his fine bass voice to the church choir.

Shrimp farming is a hot topic along Georgia's backwaters. McAlpine didn't have to ask how what they are doing in Thailand, Vietnam, Ecuador, India, and Brazil affects Hunter Forsyth. The man has driven shrimp boats since he was 18, except when he served in Vietnam, where his familiarity with tidal waters

proved useful. Forsyth isn't about to change careers, but his son will carve out another path.

Despite McAlpine's best efforts to get inside South Carolina's Gullah culture, he was no match for its secretive ways. Gullah language, nearly incomprehensible to strangers, fascinated the writer, but its voodoo past (or present) remained hidden behind locked doors.

McAlpine's kayak proved its worth, taking him into remote coves and contemplation. But as winter turned bitter, he reveled in different forms of freedom, cross-country skiing on a Connecticut beach and surfing off Rhode Island with a maniac named Peter Pan. The two men crunched through snow to the mist-shrouded beach. There he found heaven. "Every surfer knows the feeling," writes McAlpine. "Everyone else will have to imagine what it's like to win the lottery while simultaneously achieving orgasm."

When McAlpine hit the Maine coast, kayaking proved irresistible one last time. He barely paddled half a mile

before racing back to shore as wind "beyond cold" swept across the water. "It ...burned me like a brand. Had it actually been a brand, it would have read 'Idiot.'" In Stonington, the roads were glazed with ice. Idiocy struck again when, ignoring meteorological signs, he ended up freezing through a February night before AAA sent a tow truck to pull his van from a ditch. Back at the B&B, he was welcomed with blueberry muffins; they'd been wondering if their guest had died, it was so quiet upstairs.

Backdrops for the author's journey evoke Discovery Channel travelogues in wide-screen HDTV, but there's more here than armchair travel:

"It's a rare thing when society's tethers are loosed," McAlpine writes, "and, even if you don't act on it, it is still fine medicine for the heart. It's good for us, too, to go along on the ride.

"Most Americans don't know winter's beaches. I now know this is both a blessing and a loss."

— Janet Mendelsohn 