

Tides of change at

■ Once a secret summer respite for gays who wanted freedom for their lifestyle, LI's seaside cottages now host mix of straight families, too

BY INDRANI SEN
STAFF WRITER

Bernie Murphy was in his early 20s when he first discovered the gay vacation enclave of Cherry Grove on Fire Island. Now 66, Murphy reminisces about a paradise by the ocean that in many ways no longer exists.

"In the early '60s, it was truly an escape," he said. "In those days, we were still in the closet. You got on the train or a car and you snuck out there. You didn't let anybody know."

Nearly a half-century after Murphy discovered this haven of gay summer life — a "bacchanal" he recalls with a nostalgic smile — the world has changed and so has Cherry Grove.

No more secrets

Once one of the few places for gay men to frolic publicly, the Grove has become a cliché to many gays. And these days, with "Will and Grace" and "Queer Eye" on prime time, gay people have less need for a se-

cret getaway than they did in Murphy's youth.

"Now the gay world is so diverse," said Richard LaFrance, 68, a longtime resident and editor of the online newsletter "As the Grove Turns." "People don't have to go there to be gay anymore."

Some longtime Grovers worry that with baby strollers in the yearly pride parade and a growing influx of straight vacationers, Cherry Grove and its adjacent gay community, Fire Island Pines, have evolved into just another Long Island summer resort — for everyone.

"When I go out to a bar, I can't tell who's gay or straight any more," said James Duus, 47, a Pilates instructor from the West Village who summers in Cherry Grove. "It seems like young kids from Long Island and straight people. I'm like, where are all the gay people?"

The answer for many gays and lesbians is: somewhere other than Cherry Grove. "It's not necessarily something for me," said Robert Vitelli, 30.

For people like Vitelli, of Centerreach, out and in a long-term relationship, Fire Island's gay party scene doesn't have much allure.

"At some point, it becomes a novelty," explained Vitelli, the assistant director of Long

Island Gay and Lesbian Youth, who summers with his partner and several straight couples in a timeshare on the Caribbean island of St. Martin.

Across this barrier beach community, a new Cherry Grove is emerging. And those who still value its place in gay history hope it can hold on to some kind of gay identity. "We're in the process of becoming something else," said Barbara Ann Levy, a gallery owner and president of the Cherry Grove Chamber of Commerce. "None of us know, frankly, what it is. It's a redefining moment."

With its pristine white sand beaches, elegant cottages and quaint wooden walkways, Cherry Grove's real estate has attracted straight buyers and renters.

"The homophobia has been diminished because of Ellen DeGeneres, 'Will and Grace,' 'Queer as Folk,'" said Bill Ottignon, a broker at A Summer Place, a realty firm specializing in sales and rentals in Cherry Grove. "Gay people can go anywhere. And that means straight people are comfortable coming into our communities."

And the straights are coming. "Put it this way: Four straight couples bought houses on Cherry Grove last year," Ottignon said. "That's unprecedented. I can't think of years past that we've sold a house to a straight couple. Not in recent memory."

Most cottages sell for \$400,000 to \$600,000, Ottignon said, though two beachfront properties are on the market for just under \$1 million each.



The scene at the Cherry Grove ferry, which is bringing a growing influx of straight vacationers to the gay enclave.

A 2002 survey by a local community group found about 90 percent of respondents in the Grove's peak summer season identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and 8 percent said they were straight. Of prospective buyers, Ottignon said, about 10 percent are straight. Of those looking to rent seasonally, 20 percent are straight.

And then there are the day trippers. On a recent evening at the Ice Palace, a nightclub once known for its raucous gay disco scene, gaggles of tanned college girls in low-cut tops and skintight jeans flirted with young men, their white baseball hats shining under the black light.

The straight customers mingled easily with young gay couples, taking turns belting out '80s hits on the karaoke stage before heading to the dock to catch the last ferry back to the mainland.

The interactions between straights and gays can be awkward. Public nudity and open sexual expression are an integral part of the gay Cherry Grove culture. The forest between the Grove and the Pines — called "the Meat Rack" by most — is still known as a place for clandestine encounters.

"They call it Judy Garland Park," LaFrance said, referring to its official name. "But it's not for kids."

Some concern

The presence of children in the Grove — 33 by the 2002 survey's count and many more



Cherry Grove

who visit regularly — is another catalyst for change and a cause of concern for some. “When I first came out here, nobody with baby carriages came,” said Murphy, a Manhattan resident who has a Cherry Grove summer house. “Now you see them out on the beach. They see a naked man and they’re like” — he feigned horror. “I say, well, you’re here. You could go to Rockaway or wherever.”

Duus, whose niece visited recently, recalled her seeing a nude man on the beach, which is legal in Cherry Grove. “I was like, should she really be seeing that at the age of 10?” he said. “I don’t have a problem with nudity, but a kid shouldn’t be exposed to anything sexual. . . . So maybe it’s not the greatest thing.”

But Alicia Soto, 24, on a week-long stay in the Grove with

sons José Quinoñes, 10, and Jonathan Kwok, 8, said she hasn’t had any problems. The self-described lesbian keeps them away from the forest, but of the nudity, Soto said, “They’re fine with it. They want to walk nude down the beach themselves.”

Duus worries that the Grove will some day lose its gay identity or become diluted by the influx of straights. “It’s a bad thing, because we’re never going to have our own place anymore,” he said. “But on the other hand, it’s good that we’re melding with society.”

LaFrance agreed. “We wanted to go to everybody’s other places,” he pointed out. “But when they come to ours, we’re like ‘Oh my God!’”

Change is natural, LaFrance said. “In some ways, this place is out of fashion,” he said. “It’s expensive. The accommoda-



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / JUNE LEE

Clockwise from back left, Alicia Soto, Cynthia Soto, José Quinoñes, 10, and Jonathan Kwok, 8, of Jersey City

tions need to be updated. . . . They keep promoting the drag shows and the bars and the partying. I’m like, ‘No, promote the natural beauty.’”

But still, LaFrance said, he un-

derstands. “All old people hate change,” he said. “The older crowd had a lot different experience than young people today. A lot of the old guilt, a lot of the old shame — they don’t die, those things.”

And for those veterans of the gay rights struggles, the insouciance of younger gays can be galling. “They walk into it,” Murphy said. “They didn’t have to work for it. We did.”

There’s even a kind of nostalgia for the worst aspects of the old days, some said, when anti-gay hoodlums in Sayville

chucked stones at buses carrying gays from the train station to the ferry. “A lot of people say that was the best era,” LaFrance said. “I tend to agree. There was a lot of laughter. . . . We had a lot of fun in the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s because we were outlaws and had no responsibility. Now they’re doctors, lawyers, politicians. . . . They have a lot to be serious about.”

Still, ride the ferry on a Friday evening, and the feeling of anticipation is for more than just a weekend at the beach. The doctors, lawyers and politicians are there, swapping suits and ties for shorts and flip-flops.

As the ferry approaches the dock, a thumping bass line from a dockside bar drifts across the water. A sculpted young man in briefs hands out fliers for an “underwear party.” Two men turn to each other and kiss in the last of the evening sun.

Gays flocked to community after 1938 storm

Gay men and women have had a presence on the sandspit of Fire Island since as early as the mid-1930s, wrote anthropologist Esther Newton, but it was the Hurricane of 1938 that established Cherry Grove as a predominantly gay community.

A few members of New York City’s theater, literary and society crowd, including some gays, had settled at Ocean Beach, a few miles west of Cherry Grove, and were eyeing the more secluded

Grove.

The hurricane came on Sept. 21, 1938, and Cherry Grove’s houses, owned mostly by the working middle class, were largely flattened, according to Newton. In the aftermath, many locals sold, and those who stayed took out loans to rebuild and offered seasonal rentals to repay them.

“It was the New Yorkers who could afford to rent for the whole season,” Newton wrote in her 1993 book, “Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years

in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town.” Some of the newcomers picked up swaths of land cheap and the gay population grew through the 1940s.

Efforts by some locals to oust gays proved successful in Ocean Beach, where a 39-year-old man was convicted of “attempting to commit a crime against nature” with a 22-year-old law student, but not so in the Grove, Newton said.

Landlords were making good money as the resort gained popularity among gays who, by

1950, were the majority. Over the next half-century, the Grove became a premier destination. The poet W.H. Auden described the Grove in his poem “Pleasure Island” as “this outpost where nothing is wicked / but to be sorry or sick.”

But sickness came. During the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, the gay male population took a devastating hit. Lesbians increased their numbers over that period and by 1990 owned about 15 percent of the Grove’s

275 homes.

Fire Island has lived in the imaginations of generations of gay people all over the world as a “delicate paradise,” wrote gay activist Jack Nichols in his 1976 book “Welcome to Fire Island.”

“Where else but Cherry Grove,” he asked, “can an overweight blond [man] in a royal plum caftan, cocktail glass in one hand and gold feather in the other, do a seven-o’clock-in-the-morning hula on Bayview Walk and have no fear of hooligans?”

— INDRANI SEN



From left, Hector Longoria, David Pepe, Tarik Daniels and Brett Andrew relax in the sun on the Cherry Grove beach