

New trail shows watery heart of R.I.

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By Ray Henry/Associated Press Boston Globe

PORTSMOUTH, R.I. - With a few strokes of a kayak paddle, Rhode Island's developing Blue Trail offers a new perspective on Narragansett Bay, the watery heart of the Ocean State.

The first markers on the 10-mile trail, which hugs the shoreline of Aquidneck Island, will be installed next month. Even a short trip offers a glimpse into life on the bay, a place many Rhode Islanders see only when heading to the beach or zipping over the Claiborne Pell Bridge to Newport.

On a quiet summer afternoon, a lobsterman anchored his boat off Coggeshall Point and patiently mended his trap. Seagulls squawked and swooped off the shoreline of nearby Dyer Island. Massive pleasure yachts were docked on shore. Military sites ranging from Revolutionary War battlegrounds to mothballed aircraft carriers dotted the shore.

Organizers hope the Blue Trail will be the start of a larger mapped trail system allowing people to paddle down Rhode Island's rivers and across its coastline.

"Our goal from the very start is to get people using these resources so they appreciate them and are interested in conserving them," said Meg Kerr, treasurer of the Blueways Alliance, which promotes the trail.

While the Blue Trail is OK for novices, beginners should take precautions since Narragansett Bay can get rough, said Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, which helped create the trail.

Dolen, a kayaker, recommends that daytrippers wear a lifejacket and bring or rent a closed-top kayak or a canoe with a spray cover to avoid getting swamped by waves. She suggests that paddlers listen to weather reports before planning a trip. The bay is normally calmest in the early morning or late afternoon, when the winds are typically light.

"In some conditions, it would be for experienced paddlers only," she said.

When the route is launched next month, a Blue Trail sign will greet paddlers at its start, a boat ramp near the lush grounds of a Benedictine abbey and school in Portsmouth. Portsmouth Abbey has installed the only major wind turbine in Rhode Island, and its slowly spinning blade is a major landmark from the water.

The northernmost launching site is near where the Continental Army and militia forces fought the British Army and its Prussian mercenaries during the so-called Battle of Rhode Island in August 1778.

From there, paddlers head south along the shoreline and past a yacht club and marina. Small islands dot the East Passage of Narragansett Bay, once a major shipping channel, and several are open to the public. Island hopping helps break up the kayaking and allows paddlers to experience their own private Robinson Crusoe moment.

"I like going out to the islands," Dolen said. "It's just more fun to go to a destination."

An early option is the park on the southern tip of Prudence Island, the large landmass opposite the start of the trail. Dyer Island sits farther south between Prudence Island and mainland Portsmouth.

Paddlers can stop there, but they should beware of least terns that will swoop at interlopers during mating season.

The Blue Trail continues south along the Middletown shoreline and passes Coddington Cove, part of Naval Base Newport. The cove is a secure zone, off-limits to paddlers, but passersby can see the former aircraft carriers USS Saratoga and the USS Forrestal parked there.

An obvious landmark is just ahead: the Claiborne Pell Bridge, which connects Conanicut Island to Newport.