

The Family Emerald

by Benjamin Preston & Family



1985. L-R: Grandpa Dino, Tim, Grandma Betty, Maureen & Ben (the author)

Our first family visit to Emerald Isle was in 1980, around the time of my second birthday. I don't remember much about that summer, but I do know that we stayed in an oceanfront house at the bottom of 13th Street then known as The Miller. How did we end up there? Find an old wooden rocking chair on a dune deck somewhere and sit down for a spell. I'll tell you.

My grandparents, Betty and Dino Agro, and their only child, my mother, Maureen, lived just north of New York City in the late '60s and early '70s. When they wanted to go to the beach, they headed south to the Jersey Shore for a few days at a time. It was an easy place to get to from there, but it was also crowded and expensive. By the time grandkids came along (me and my little brother, Tim) in 1978 and 1980, the Jersey Shore had lost its appeal. It had become even more crowded and expensive, and we were all living in the Washington, D.C. suburbs by then, so it wasn't all that close anymore. The beaches in Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia Beach were a little closer, but were also too busy to make for a relaxing beach vacation.

So my grandparents, on the lookout for a restful, reasonably-priced family getaway, embarked on a secret fact-finding mission. Their idea was to find a spot that was close enough to D.C. to make a day's driving relatively painless, yet far enough away from densely-populated metropolises to be less appealing to the vacation-seeking throngs from those places.

During one of these trips, they stumbled upon a forested barrier island with a smattering of cottages and duplexes nestled among the sand dunes. There weren't a lot of people on the beach. They loved it. The next year, they sprang their surprise and invited the rest of us to

join them. That week just after Labor Day in 1980 kicked off our family's long relationship with Emerald Isle.



1983. Tim, Maureen & Ben

Our first vacation rental, The Miller, was and still is one of those classic, squat duplex ramblers that constituted the majority of the housing stock on Ocean Drive at that time. This was long before the much larger houses equipped with pools and other luxurious amenities came into vogue. Back then, brightly-colored siding in the Florida style wasn't much of a thing, and the low-slung, earth-toned houses seemed to melt into the dunes at night.

Based on stories from my parents and the familiar photos of our first sojourn at The Miller, I can tell you that the house had wood-paneled walls, a ship's cabin-themed dining area, and a wide porch with plenty of weathered wooden rocking chairs for everyone. As with most beachfront houses in Emerald Isle, its porch looked out over an expanse of grassy dunes that lay on either side of a long boardwalk stretching out to the beach. There was no television, no phone, no sheets, no

towels, and cooling came from ceiling fans that did little more than stir the humid air. Despite its lack of modern conveniences (even for then), we remembered this house for years after as one of our favorites, mainly because the beach was nice, the house was charming, and it was only a short walk across Emerald Drive to Bogue Sound, where we kids could enjoy splashing around in the calm, shallow water.

As my mother recounts, "That first vacation in The Miller was pretty special. Tim was a squalling three months old, and you were running buck naked from the beach to the house. Grandma was 'melting' because there was no air-conditioning. But we all loved it."

Paradise found. We were hooked.

Every summer thereafter, we repeated the same ritual. My brother and I squirming with anticipation in our vinyl-upholstered seats, we would stop at Piggly Wiggly for groceries,

then drive to the little green house on 2nd Street where Emerald Isle Realty's office was located and pick up our keys.

Then there was the unhurried week that followed, which usually included daily sandcastle construction, riding shorebreak foam on our inflatable canvas hardware store rafts, and digging up clams in the sound. When we did leave the house, it was usually for brief jaunts to Salter Path, Swansboro, or Morehead City, and the yearly visit to the then-tiny aquarium in Pine Knoll Shores. Whichever house we rented any given year, we always ended up walking to the nearest pier, and sometimes the more distant one. Indian Beach Fishing Pier, Emerald Isle Fishing Pier, and of course Bogue Inlet Fishing Pier were all still standing then. (How long or short they were was a reliable gauge of how bad the previous storm season had been.) At night, we plucked speckled crabs off the beach as they scurried away from our flashlight beams, and ate them for dinner the next night. Tim, brokenhearted over their doom, usually erupted into mournful howls the minute they entered the pot.

There were a few memorable years, such as the time a red tide washed thousands of dead fish onto the beach, and the year we caught a load of blue fish when they were running by in big schools all week. One summer, Hurricane Bob forced us to flee the island for a couple of days. A real crowd-pleaser was the time we watched a sea turtle dig her nest and lay eggs on the beach a few houses down.

We returned to The Miller in 1981 and 1982, then had to move the week of our visit into August and change houses the next summer because I was starting my first year of school. I don't have much memory of the next house we stayed in—nor does anyone else—but we all remember Sea Bounty, the one we stayed in for several summers during the mid-'80s. A new house in Deerhorn Dunes, near the causeway, it was a fresh experience for all of us in a variety of ways. Staying on that end of town offered easier access to Bogue Inlet, a magical place of tide pools and vast, sandy meadows that seemed to my young mind like another planet. My brother and I would play for hours there, always finding interesting creatures in mini-lagoons far from the current of the actual inlet. Then there was the basic house stuff. Sea Bounty had central air conditioning and cable TV, the latter of which we didn't even have at home.



1985.
Tim &
Ben

But still no telephone. My grandfather, who was still working at the time, used to carp goodnaturedly about how, when we were in Emerald Isle, he practically had to climb a telephone pole to make a call back to his office in D.C. I accompanied him on a few hikes to

the gas station at the intersection of Coast Guard Road and Emerald Drive, where he went to use the pay phone from time to time.



Fishing for blues, c.1982. Maureen & Ben

In the late '80s, my grandparents bought a small A-frame house in the woods near Archer's Point, that thumb of land that juts into the sound on the north side of the island. Although they no longer stayed with us in the annual rental house, they were always around when it was time for our family's vacation. So my parents rented slightly smaller two-bedroom duplexes for the four of us—places

like Red Fish, Blue Fish, two doors down from The Miller (still there), and By the Sea, over near 6th Street (also still there). Being right on the beach was important to us.

When we headed for home from our too-short vacation each year, I would stare out the back window of my parents' car until the causeway bridge dipped behind the pines lining either side of that first curve on Highway 58. I knew we would be back the next year, but like the rest of my family, I was always sad to leave.

Nothing lasts forever. As my brother and I progressed deeper into our 20s, we got busy with our own things in far-flung places. Unlike in our parents' and grandparents' times, children and families were a distant speck on the horizon. As they aged, my grandparents ended up selling their house on the island and retreating to a less mobile life in the D.C. suburbs. Our annual beach vacation in Emerald Isle was put on pause for a while.



2013. Maureen & Luz
Elena

Then, one year, when everyone was living back on the East Coast, we all got an e-mail from my mom.

“Who wants to go to the beach this year?”

That was in 2011, and we haven't missed a summer since. Life has come full circle, too. My grandparents are no longer with us, but my parents, Maureen and George, have become grandparents themselves. My wife, Juliana, and I, have two sons—E. and L., aged 4 and (nearly) 2— who frolic on the same beach that gave my brother and I so much joy when we were their ages all those years ago. Watching them chase crabs, dig holes, and lob globs of wet sand at each other is a great way to experience anew all the fun we had when we each occupied different slots in the generational lineup.



2014. Tim & Ben

We're an international crew now, boasting American, Colombian, Italian, and Turkish pedigrees, and we enjoy homemade international cuisine and craft cocktails amid the music of summer cicadas during our week together every year. There are new games and beach toys and books and topics of conversation that didn't exist before that keep the familiar fun fresh. Like many, we also found refuge from the pandemic in our annual beach rental after not being able to spend time together over many months during 2020.

Our family has grown since those early years, so we have to stay in bigger houses these days. In addition to my parents and brother, and my wife and our sons, our group also includes my brother's wife, Nesrin, and my wife's mother, Luz Elena. Occasionally, other friends or relatives will join us. More recently, we've stayed in places like Drift Right Inn and Didjeridu, which, as you can imagine, all have air-conditioning, cable TV, and WiFi.

But for all the changes that have taken place since our family started coming to Emerald Isle more than 40 years ago, one thing has remained constant: it is still the same quiet, family-friendly beach town it always was. There are still spectacular sunrises to the left and glorious sunsets to the right. You can still often see the Milky Way on dark, moonless nights. And there are the same hilly, tree-covered dunes beckoning us to return year after year for a weeklong escape together from our busy lives in more crowded places. It is part of my grandparents'



2018. Juliana, Ben & Baby Numero Uno

legacy to us—the same gem of a place they found all those years ago when they were looking for a quiet place for us to retreat together. To our family, this green, sandy island is precious, like an emerald in a gold setting. With any luck, it's something we can pass down to future generations, too.



2018. L-R: Baby1, Ben, Maureen, George, Juliana, Luz Elena, Tim, Nesrin



2019. L-R: Ben, Baby1, George, Maureen, Tim, Juliana, Nesrin



2021. Maureen & her grandchildren



2021. The seeds of generations to come.