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LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

The boardwalk was built in the 1920s, after the subway line reached Coney Island.

Years later, what a day at the beach

► **COONEY ISLAND**
 Continued from Page M1

Nathan's Famous, at Surf and Stillwell avenues, began selling hot dogs for a nickel in 1916. By 1955, Nathan Handwerker, who counted Jimmy Durante and Eddie Cantor among his friends, had sold his one-millionth dog.

Now part of a corporate entity with outlets all over the country, this location retains the hustle and pizzazz of earlier times. In addition to two sizes of hot dogs — served plain or with sauerkraut, cheese, or chili — there are crinkly fries, burgers, pizzas, hot dog nuggets, and mini-con dogs.

Nathan's Famous is also where, on weekends year round, rain or shine, you'll find Captain Bob, tour guide and Coney Island char-

acter of the first degree. Over 6 feet tall, with gray-blue eyes and a captain's hat tilted jauntily atop shaggy white hair, Captain Bob has a mile-wide smile, a folder of vintage postcards under his arm, and an encyclopedia of tales to tell about Coney Island's golden age.

Captain Bob (he won't reveal his real name, which we later learn is Robert McCoy) has been offering tours for seven years.

"I came as a little kid in the 1940s and 1950s, when it was really crowded," he says.

It's busy on a hot Saturday afternoon. People buy hot dogs and Cokes, or carry their coolers, chairs, and umbrellas. They meander past a flea market, bumper cars, and shoot-em-up games before heading up the ramp to the boardwalk and the beach.

Captain Bob says he recently moved here to pursue his Coney Island passion year round. Much of what he has to say about Coney Island is of a time long past.

In 1865, Peter Tilyou moved here from the city and opened the Surf House, a hotel and restaurant. He rented bathing suits and built wooden bathhouses nearby.

"People didn't go to the beach then like we do now," Bob says. "They got all dressed up."

In 1884, the first US roller coaster opened at Coney Island, and in 1895, Paul Boyton opened Sea Lion Park amusement park.

Over the next nine years, three more parks opened: Steeplechase (1897), Luna Park (1903), and Dreamland Park (1904). People came to see the remarkable sights, one more fantastic than the next. Luna Park, for example, was a modern fairyland, with minarets, towers, and castles sprawled across 92 acres. People rode elephants and camels through the park. In Dreamland, which had a million electric lights, all the buildings were white, and the Beacon Tower stood 375 feet high. It burned in 1911 and is now the site of the New York Aquarium.

We stroll to the boardwalk, past rows of fast-food joints offering knishes, cotton candy, fried shrimp, sausages and burgers, corn dogs, funnel cakes, ice cream, and beer — sometimes all at one venue. Other places hawk beach balls, towels, T-shirts, suntan lotion, hats, and beach chair and umbrella rentals. A barker calls to come "shoot the freak," a paintball game with a "live human target."

At Surf Avenue and West 12th Street, Sideshow by the Seashore

keeps alive a Coney Island tradition with 10 live acts and attractions, including Eak the Geek (bed of nails sandwich), and Scott Baker (glass-eater, magician, human blockhead). Above the theater entrance, their brightly painted portraits hang on canvas banners.

Around the bend and up a flight of worn tile stairs, we find the Coney Island Museum. Coincidentally, the woman taking our 99-cent entry fee painted those portraits. Marie Roberts, a professor of drawing and painting at Fairleigh Dickinson University, has Coney Island in her blood.

"My Uncle Lester was a talker at the sideshow at Dreamland before he became a snake oil salesman in the 1920s," she says. "I grew up speaking carny."

Roberts says carny is a real language used among the carnival and sideshow community, not just slang or banter. When asked to demonstrate, she reels off sounds reminiscent of some Eastern European dialect mixed with Gaelic and pure gibberish.

Back outside, Captain Bob continues spinning tales of the past while the present jolts the senses with contrasting colors, smells, and activity. A five-piece band plays salsa music, competing with the clatter of the roller coaster and the shouts of children playing in the freshwater spray from an artificial palm tree on the beach.

"In 1934, there were 28 roller coasters in Coney Island," says Captain Bob. "The Cyclone is the only one left."

The Cyclone was built in 1927 and achieved National Historic Landmark status in 1991. It is part of Astroland Amusement Park, which sits next to Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park. Its old-fashioned Ferris wheel has 16 swinging cars and eight stationary cars, and rises 150 feet. (Over 30 million riders! Not a single accident in 85 years!)

Farther down the boardwalk, we see the bright red skeleton of the Parachute Jump, a 262-foot-high structure known as Brooklyn's Eiffel Tower. Built for the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, it was later moved to Steeplechase Park. Although no longer operating, the structure was declared a landmark in 1977. It stands beside a spiffy new baseball stadium, KeySpan Park, home to the New York Mets' Class A affiliate Brooklyn Cyclones.

Captain Bob pauses at a gap in the boardwalk.

If you go . . .

How to get there

By New York City Transit subway: Take the D, F, N, or Q train to Stillwell Avenue, the last stop.

By car: From Manhattan, take the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel (Interstate 478) to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (Interstate 278) to the Belt Parkway east to exit 6. Head south on Cropsey Avenue to West 17th Street. KeySpan Park and the Parachute Jump will be in front of you on Surf Avenue.

What to do

Captain Bob's Historic Coney Island Tour

718-372-8091
www.captainbob.8k.com
 Meet at Nathan's Famous hot dog stand, Stillwell and Surf avenues. Tours Saturday and Sunday, rain or shine, year round at noon and 2 p.m., \$12.

Astroland

1000 Surf Ave.
 718-372-0275
www.astroland.com
 Ride the world-famous Cyclone, Tilt-A-Whirl, Astrotower, and more. Weekends only through fall.

Coney Island USA

Coney Island Museum and Sideshows by the Seashore
 1208 Surf Ave. (near West 12th Street)
 718-372-5159
www.coneyisland.com
 Great source of information.

New York Aquarium

Surf Avenue at West 8th Street
 718-220-5100
www.nyaquarium.com
 The only aquarium in New York City, with more than 8,000 animals. Open daily year round, \$8-\$12.

KeySpan Park

1904 Surf Ave.
 718-449-8497
www.brooklynclones.com
 Home to the Brooklyn Cyclones, Class A affiliate of the New York Mets. Open June-September, \$5-\$12.

Where to eat

Nathan's Famous

1310 Surf Ave.
 718-946-2202
 Hot dogs in two sizes, plus burgers, wings, pizza, grilled chicken sandwiches, and more; \$2-\$6.
Coney Island Buffet
 1409 Mermaid Ave.
 718-333-1898
 Order off the menu, or try the buffet with more than 200 selections of American, Japanese, Italian, and Chinese cuisine; \$7-\$14. Clean, fresh, with comfortable booths.

"See the small dunes, and the low foliage?" he says. "Just erase all the garbage, and try to see this the way it was when Henry Hudson first arrived" in 1609. "There were lots of wild rabbits here. Coney is the Dutch word for rabbit. Hudson looked at these dunes and said, 'Look at all the conies here.'" Captain Bob turns and smiles, pleased with his tale.

We learn later that there are several conflicting versions of how the island got its name, none of which include Hudson uttering this line. But for a moment, as we look at the dunes with their scrubby growth — ignoring the rides and the corn dogs and the garbage — we see for a moment the rabbits and the pure wildness of the place. We see, and we believe it all.

Believing in things that may or may not be true, blurring fantasy and reality through illusion, and celebrating creativity and alternative visions — while making a buck — that's what Coney Island has been, and still is, all about.

Excitement! Thrills! Coney Island! Right this way!

Contact *Necce Regis*, a freelance writer in Boston, at necceregis@earthlink.net.

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