



# DOWNTOWN DIALOGUE

## HEAVEN IN THE HARBOR

BY LIZ BERGER



Photo by A. Frieden

I often think that Lower Manhattan has everything in one square mile, so it should come as no surprise that there is a little bit of heaven 800 yards off shore. An antidote to the craziness and action I love about New York City, Governors Island has all the elements of a perfect weekend escape—a place to relax, art, music, history, recreation, views, ice cream and mini-golf—and it's only a seven-minute ferry ride away. Sign me up!

For many years, Governors Island was the best-kept secret in New York Harbor. First Dutch, then British, it has hosted a cross-dressing colonial governor, Lord Cornbury, in the early 18th century, Army Lt. Ulysses S. Grant in 1852, and Confederate POWs during the Civil War. President Reagan met with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev there in 1988 to discuss nuclear arms reductions.

Originally called Nut Island, thanks to an abundance of walnut, hickory and chestnut trees, Governors Island was expanded in the early 20th century with landfill from the Lexington Avenue subway. For years it served as home base to generations of Army and Coast Guard families—with a school, church, synagogue, golf course, parade grounds, movie theater, bowling alley and the only Burger King in the United States ever to serve beer.

A chance helicopter ride in the 1990s changed all that, when President Clinton informally told Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan that he would help turn over the island to the City. In 2002, the federal government announced that it would sell the island to the people of New York for a nominal cost and that the island would be used for public benefit.

The happy result is that Governors Island is no longer a secret. Stabilization of the architecturally significant historic district and

simple-but-dramatic improvements to the public spaces have made Governors Island the city's go-to summer destination, for picnics, bike rides, theater and strolls. The Lincoln Center Festival presented two major theater events on Governors Island in July, Rosanne Cash played guitar there, and Prince Harry played polo.

The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council has established a year-round artists-in-residence program on the island, there's an urban farm run by the nonprofit Added Value, fantastic camps organized by the Children's Museum of the Arts, a circus workshop run by Big Apple Circus, and a couple of ball fields for league soccer and baseball. In early September, the New York City Harbor School—a public high school with a maritime focus—will open. And there's more to come, starting with a breathtaking plan for 87 acres of parkland and public space designed by the internationally renowned landscape architect firm West 8

Every weekend from June to October, there's something fun, different and memorable happening on Governors Island, but you don't have to do anything. Here's some end-of-summer advice: The Trust for Governors Island, the successor to the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation, led by Leslie Koch, has put nearly 20 red hammocks at Picnic Point on the island's southern end. Check the ferry schedule at [www.govisland.com](http://www.govisland.com), grab a book or just your thoughts and head down to the Battery Maritime Building. A breezy and liberating seven-minute ferry ride later, you'll be on your way to one of the most exciting and special places in New York City, just a stone's throw from Lower Manhattan.

*Liz Berger is President of the Alliance for Downtown New York and a Director of the Trust for Governors Island.*