

Island in the (Maine) Stream

BY DONNA STUART

If you live in Vacationland,
where do you go to vacation?

One wonders: With 3,478 miles of coastline and several thousand islands in their home state, do Mainers consider coastal living a necessity? Or is there a need for an alternate universe where the first language may be Spanish, but the second often has a Downeast accent? Why else would a former Portland mayor, a Speaker of the House, prominent Maine business owners, lawyers, philanthropists, artists, and school teachers alike be drawn to an island that has regularly been blown to smithereens by the U.S. Navy? (Well, maybe not to smithereens, but the Navy *did* use it for target practice for more than half a century, suspending bombardment in 2003—the gulls' ears are probably still ringing.)

"Ah, Vieques," say the cognoscenti, giving the name the proper Latin lilt. (You and I would probably say *vee-AY-kez*.)

Set eight miles off the east coast of Puerto Rico, 21-mile-long Vieques Isla has become a second—or first—home for an increasing number of Mainers. Some of its appeal may lie in what it lacks: crowds, commercialized beaches, high-rises, traffic, traffic lights—and the U.S. Navy, which left in

Another spectacular sunset eases
Vieques into an active nightlife.

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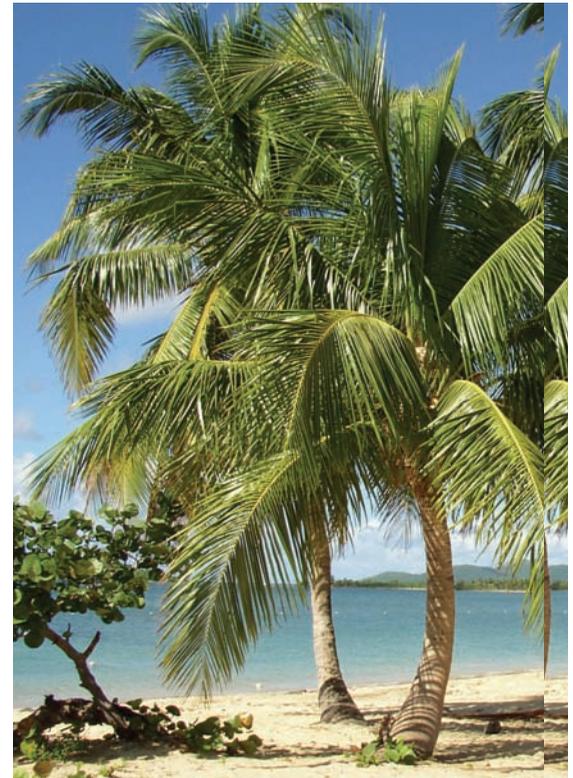
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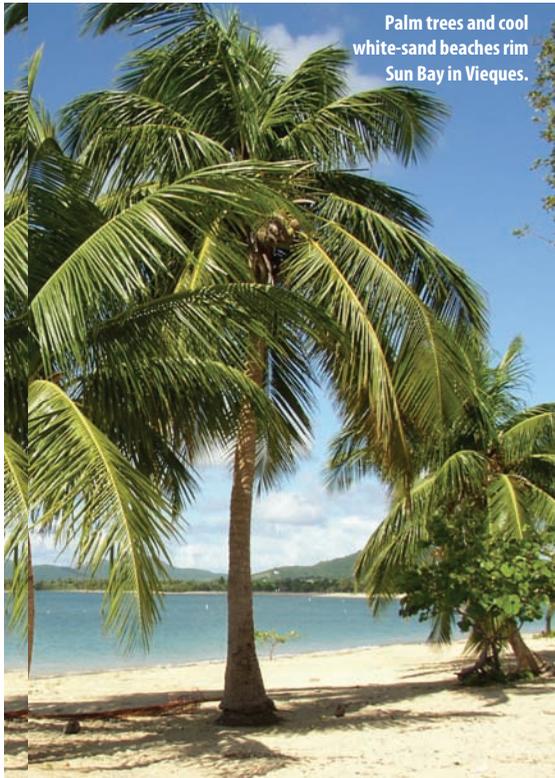
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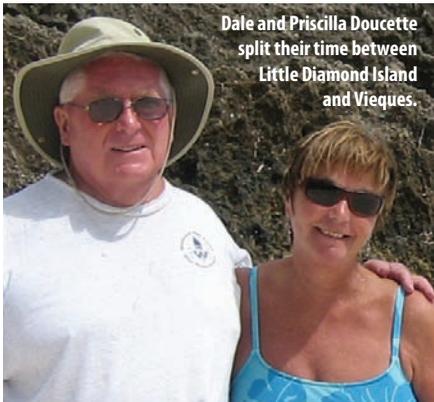
2003. The Navy's former bombing sites—the eastern and western thirds of the island—have been turned over to the U.S. Department of the Interior and are now the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge. Managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the 17,673-acre preserve is the largest in the Caribbean. The remainder of the island—with its two small, rural towns, Isabel Segunda and Esperanza—is home to fewer than 10,000 Viequeses, a burgeoning population of northerners, and a herd of wild horses, descendants of the *paso finos* brought to the New World by the Spanish.

So why is it a magnet for Mainer? Helen Davis, a licensed real estate agent on Vieques, explains. "There's a huge like-mindedness between here and Maine. It's a very laid-back, non-pretentious place with no glitz or glamour. I've had everyone from heads of major Maine corporations to Rangeley fishing guides as clients. You can buy anything from a small piece of land with no title for \$10,000 to a multi-million dollar mansion." Davis *does* know her Mainer; after all, she was one, having owned a wine-and-cheese business in Wiscasset prior to moving here to Vieques.

Connie Greaves Bates concurs with Davis's assessment. She and her first husband, the late Edward Greaves (for whom the Ed Greaves Education Center in Cherryfield is named), began annual pilgrimages to the



Palm trees and cool white-sand beaches rim Sun Bay in Vieques.



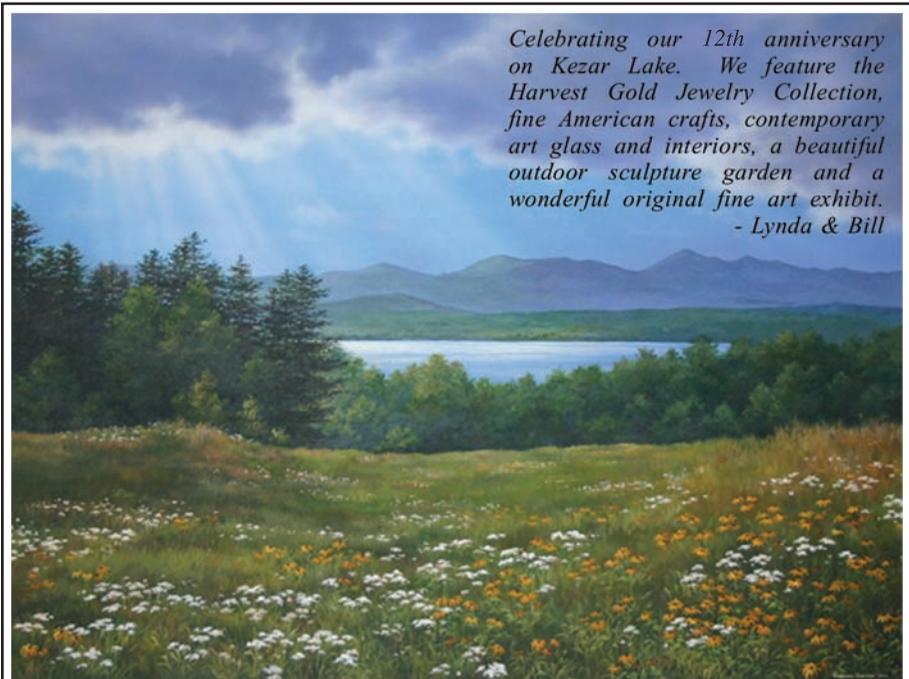
Dale and Priscilla Doucette split their time between Little Diamond Island and Vieques.

island in 1972. "Back then, we explored the island in an old Volkswagen. It was all cows, open land, and so beautiful." They purchased land in 1978 but didn't build until 1988—only to have Hurricane Hugo severely damage their new home the following year, when the eye of the category-four storm passed right over the island.

More than 80 percent of the wooden structures on Vieques and the neighboring island of Culebra were destroyed, and more than 30,000 Puerto Ricans were left homeless. The Greaveses rebuilt and continued to visit several times a year. "The island hasn't changed as much as one would have thought in all these years," Bates explains, "largely because the Navy was here."

"The second day after we flew in, we called a real estate agent," says Jim Stott. He and Jonathan King—owners of Stonewall

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DISCOVERY

Kitchens—had sailed throughout the Caribbean and visited many of its islands, but decided on a visit to Vieques after hearing of the island from friends in Cape Neddick. They've since built a house of concrete, mahogany, and steel, designed to take full advantage of the site's spectacular views while withstanding the hurricanes that brought the original Greaves house to grief. Stott and King visit often, sometimes for long weekends. "It's just a three-and-a-half-hour flight from Boston—with no customs or immigration—then an 18-minute ride on a puddle-jumper and we're here. We can leave Boston on the 6:25 a.m. flight and be putting the groceries away at 1:15. And you can enjoy the island pretty much year round—except late September and October, the hurricane season—because it stays in the 70s and 80s, thanks to the trade winds."

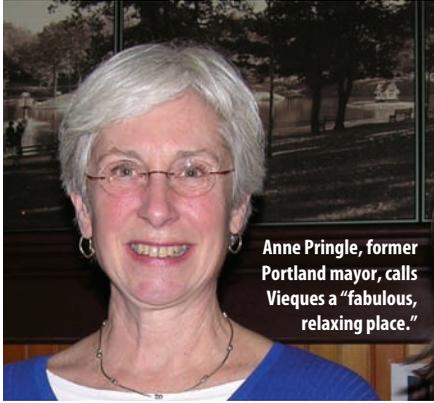
Accommodations on the island can be quite reasonable. "When we were building the house, I'd sometimes come down and stay in one of the B&Bs in town; it was about \$60 a night," Stott continues. "One morning, I got up, looked out, and saw Keith Richards's yacht about 70 feet offshore, sharing the same view. We've had a NOAA ship pull up in front of our house to view humpback whales playing 60 feet from the beach. And yet the Puerto Rican government wants to ensure that everyone can afford to spend time there, so there are places where you can camp on the beach for \$10 a night."

"It's the most fabulous, totally relaxing place," says former Portland Mayor Anne Pringle, her voice warming to the memory of the island that she and her husband have visited a number of times. "It's low-key with so many beautiful beaches, and it's virtually undiscovered." The beaches are long expanses of sand and water undisturbed by t-shirt shops, tiki bars, and other concessions; most, including Green Beach with its spectacular views of Puerto Rico, were once part of Navy land and will never be developed.

"Last Thanksgiving, Jonathan and I went to one of the beaches," Stott explains, "and we were the only ones there."

At night, the bioluminescent bay is a draw. Said to be one of the brightest such bays in the world, its mysterious blue-green light—caused by a microscopic one-celled organism—is best viewed by boat or kayak during the new-to-waxing-or-waning moon.

Then there's Bill and Becky Thomas—who own Seacoast Scaffold and Equipment



Anne Pringle, former Portland mayor, calls Vieques a "fabulous, relaxing place."

as well as a brick townhouse in Portland's West End. Far from being the doubting Thomases, "we fell in love with the island" at first sight of Vieques 18 years ago, says Becky Thomas. "We stayed up in the hills for a few years, then bought our place in Isabel Segunda."

What draws them back year after year? "It's not Maine in the winter," Thomas laughs. "I've tried every single winter sport—my favorite is walking on the beach." The Thomas hacienda is "a two-story cinder-block house. We bought the small house next door, which we turned into our master bedroom, bath, and office."

If you visit Vieques, you can stay at an inn (Hacienda Tamarindo), dine at a restaurant (Blue Macaw), buy art, have a massage, or even have your land cleared by a business with a Maine connection.

Or, to feel totally at home, live next door to another Mainer, as Dale and Priscilla Doucette and MaryAnn and Dennis Currier do. The two couples are neighbors on Portland's Little Diamond Island and on Vieques—where they spend the winter months—often welcoming friends and relatives including Priscilla's brother, Stan Bennett. (Apparently the CEO of Oakhurst Dairy appreciates the natural goodness of Vieques.) The Doucettes, who've retired from the Portland school system, and the Curriers have become active in island life, from volunteering at the local historical society and working with the school system to contributing to the humane society.

The humane society helps take care of the island's herd of wild horses—which, it turns out, aren't always that wild. "More than once, I've seen a local kid take a rope, grab one of the horses, and ride it into town," says Jim Stott.

It could be that the wildest thing about this island is its many connections to Maine. ■

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