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-AH-kays.)

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
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 Viequenses, 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 Mainers? 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 Mainers; 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
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 courtier Sy of www.ViequeS-ISland.com; courtier Sy of pr IScIlla doucette

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.

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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.

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