ESSAY

Everything Is Different on an Island

On a globe, every landmass is an island. But it's the littlest ones that hold the true riches.

By PORTER FOX

SARA FOX

Porter Fox sailing Whistler I, a 32-foot ketch built by his father, Crozer Fox, in Southwest Harbor, Maine, and designed by Chuck Paine. After his father died, Mr. Fox took a solo sailing trip on a different boat, the first his father ever built. Venturing from island to island, he thought about the isolation and serenity that come with being surrounded by water.

I grew up on an island in Maine. My father was a boat builder, and I spent much of my youth exploring rocky headlands, sounds and islets along the coast. From my bedroom window, I could see the metallic blue water of Southwest Harbor. A half-dozen wharves extended from the shoreline, and a fleet of lobster boats pointed into the wind, swinging from their moorings.

It was an exotic place to come of age. Fog bent the light in the morning and made the seawater appear green-black. Wisps of mist curled through the streets in the afternoon and strafed thick stands of pine and spruce. In the winter, nor'easters made the rain gutters sing and blew the front doors in. In the summer, the Atlantic was a wide, blue basin, in constant motion and brushed by the wind. Around the edge of the island were rows of dead pines — wind-whipped and bleached white, their branches reaching to the sea like bones.

My notion back then, and still today, is that there is no escape from an island. The borders are finite and the surrounding ocean deep. Waves, wind and flotsam drift in with the breeze and tide, somehow drawn to the island's singular existence. The thing is, a solitary entity in the middle of a void becomes the void. The sea is everything. The island is a vanishing point on a map. It is disconnected from the outside and, when you inhabit it, it becomes your world.

When I finally adventured onto the mainland in my late teens, I hit the highway with a vengeance. I headed for the mountains first, then the cities. I traveled across five continents for 20 years on trains, buses, boats and by foot. The sites and people I saw were fantastic, yet somehow it was the islands that I remembered best: the chalky streets of Naxos, Paros and Delos in the Greek Cyclades; half-acre atolls that drop 2,000 feet to the ocean floor in Fiji; razor-thin ridges bracing the Big Island's volcanic peaks in Hawaii; 300-foot-deep blue holes in the middle of the forest on the Bahamian island of Andros. When I finally came to a stop, it was, of course, on an island. Brooklyn, on the western tip of Long Island.

Everything is different on an island: language, weather, food, tradition. There are phrases in the Exuma Islands in the Bahamas that seem to exist only there: "day clean" (dawn), "sip-sip" (gossip), "first fowl crow" (rooster call). The molasses-colored rum in Barbados is special to that rocky gem, and the coffee in Cuba can be found only in the tiled corner bars where habaneros sip it morning and night. Bali's vibrant batik sarongs are art you can wear, and Maldivian dhon riha tastes like seafood curry concocted in the depths of the ocean.

On a globe, every landmass on the planet is an island. But it's the little atolls that are the most magical. The island of Stromboli, north of Sicily, is shaped like an anthill and blasts white smoke from its volcano all year. Anegada, in the British Virgin Islands, is flat as a dinner plate until you get within a few hundred yards — and palms and coral heads rise from the waves. Malta and Gozo are home to what are likely the oldest standing structures in the world, and on Ibiza, the endless thumping of techno sounds like warring tribes preparing for battle.

It is difficult to find hard borders these days. The wilderness has been penetrated from every angle. Airports have opened the corners of the world, and highways traverse every major landmass on the planet. In the old days, it was easy to get lost. You started walking and eventually the trappings of mankind vanished. Or you sailed away on a ship until you couldn't see land. These days, a traveler 5,000 miles from home has to turn off his phone, tablet and laptop to disappear.

Of all of the wild places you can still escape to, islands are foremost. Many are too small for airports or ferries. Others are too remote. In the South Pacific there are islands so overgrown with mangroves, you have to steer your boat a mile inland before you hit dry land. Others in the French West Indies began as sandbars until seeds and soil morphed into an oasis. You have to walk half a day to reach some of the remote beaches on Kauai. Others, off the coast of Africa, still hold treasure from the days of the Barbary Coast pirate nations.

The isolation and serenity that come with cutting a border around the land you occupy are unmatched. New York School poets in the 1950s and '60s migrated to Eleuthera in the Bahamas to reconnect with the sea and sun. Diane von Furstenberg was on Barry Diller's yacht, seeking shelter from a storm, when she discovered her future home on nearby Harbour Island, and Paul Gauguin famously repatriated to French Polynesia to escape European civilization and "everything that is artificial and conventional."

When I was young, I could never find the words to describe that isolation. Maybe I left before they came. A 19th-century poet named Celia Thaxter, who palled around with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Whittier on the Isles of Shoals on the Maine-New Hampshire border, left the Shoals only a few times and always came back. Her descriptions and recollections capture island life better than any I've ever read.

In her memoir, "Among the Isles of Shoals," she writes of the people, the water, the old fishermen, the ships " . . . of the sky and sea, the flitting of the coasters to and fro, the visits of the sea-fowl, sunrise and sunset, the changing moon, the northern lights, the constellations that wheel in splendor through the winter night." She writes about seeds from her garden that come up a different color on the mainland; of brown and swarthy fishermen; the keen glance of seafarers; how "all the pictures of which I dream are set in this framework of the sea."

I discovered Thaxter's writing on a solo sailing trip along the Maine coast a few years ago. My father had passed away and I was making a memorial journey, of sorts, in the first boat he had ever built. I hopped from island to island, finding shelter in tiny hurricane holes and exploring the granite-rimmed shoreline of my youth. Every night I'd hunker down in the cockpit and read Thaxter's book by flashlight. In one of my favorite passages, she recalls an elderly African woman who rowed 10 miles to the Shoals in the middle of the night to look for buried treasure, her divining rod reflecting the starlight, garments fluttering in the midnight wind.

Thaxter goes on to describe a 15-ton boulder that was thrown onto the shore of White Island by the waves; layers of fish bones three feet deep on Star Island's beaches; the "mosaic of stone and shell and seawrack" along the shoreline; scraps of boats and masts locals gathered for firewood; "drowned butterflies, beetles and birds; dead boughs of ragged fir trees completely draped with the long, shining ribbon grass that grows in the brackish water near the river mouths."

One night after reading, I put the book down and surveyed the harbor. The VHF radio crackled below. A storm was blowing in from the southwest. It would blow all night and into tomorrow, the forecaster said. I could see lightning flickering in a few clouds on the horizon. The wind got chilly and picked up a bit.

A motorboat circled the harbor and headed for the mainland. I recognized its low-slung lines, the open cockpit and the tan bimini top collapsed on the bow. The cherry console and teak decking were familiar — auburn and gold. The boat was a Somes Sound 26, a replica of a Newport launch, 26 feet long with a 240-horsepower Chrysler inboard engine. My father had built it years ago.

I crawled down below, mystified by the coincidence, the timing, the magic of maritime life. I eventually drifted off to sleep, embraced by the fiberglass hull, the ocean, the harbor and the low-slung island protecting everyone in the anchorage from the sea. It was disconcerting to be offshore during a big storm, but far less so tucked in behind the rocky barrier. I dreamed all night of maps and boats and the coast I'd grown up on. By morning, the storm had passed, and I spent a few hours scanning the chart, figuring which island I'd sail to next.

FORAGING | BETHESDA, MD.

Keeping It Local Outside the Capital City

Less than 10 miles from Washington, Bethesda, Md., is often perceived as only a well-heeled suburb of the capital. But with around 60,000 residents and a vibrant downtown that spans several blocks, it's a worthwhile destination in and of itself. Though many stores lining the streets are recognizable chains, the lesser-known retailers here make this mini-metropolis an unexpected shopping gem. These not-so-familiar boutiques sell a variety of goods from wines to clothes and are mostly owned by local entrepreneurs.

SHIVANI VORA

Secolari

➤ Extra-virgin olive oil from California is the draw of this boutique and tasting room owned by Mary and Barth deRosa, a husband-and-wife team from Clarksville, Md., about a half-hour from Bethesda. The highlight of a visit is trying the more than a dozen different oils, many of which are organic. Single varietals, made with one kind of olive, include the robust koroneiki, originally from Greece, and the more delicate mission from California itself. Unusual flavored oils are must-samples. Who would have thought tandoori, blood orange and jalapeño olive oils could be so tasty? Prices from $7. **7249 Woodmont Avenue, 301-652-7006, secolarievoo.com**

Luna

➤ This trendsetting boutique, part of a mini-chain with three other locations throughout the South, is the go-to shop for a well-edited collection of clothing from both popular brands like Citizens of Humanity and Joie as well as smaller labels like the contemporary Lavender Brown. Prices from $20. **7232 Woodmont Avenue, 301-656-1111, shopluna.com**

Lou Lou

➤ Started by Tara and Ben Wegdam of Middleburg, Va., who are married, this accessory chain of more than two dozen stores mostly in the D.C. area has a following for affordable and fashionable bags, jewelry, scarves and leather goods for men and women. **Prices from $2. 7126 Bethesda Lane, 301-652-0048**

NOT JUST A SUBURB BUT A DESTINATION, TOO.

Sabun Home

➤ High-quality Turkish cotton is the star at this narrow, gray-hued bed and bath store owned by an Istanbul native, Ferzan Jaeger. Though extra-soft sheets and duvets in earthy tones and simple patterns are part of the selection, the real finds are the traditional Turkish towels called peshtemals. Though these towels look and feel like lightweight throws or shawls, they are actually highly absorbent and fast-drying. Ms. Jaeger also carries peshtemal women's robes that can do double duty as chic bathing suit cover-ups. Prices from $8. **7123 Bethesda Lane, 301-656-2302, sabunhome.com**

Cork & Fork

➤ The proprietor Anna Landragin, below right, a former winemaker from Champagne, France, carries more than 500 labels from small producers around the world. She also has close relationships with the winemakers and regales customers with her deep knowledge of their craft. Her selections always change; there might be a riesling from Tasmania one week and Patagonian red wines the next. Prices from $12. **7110 Bethesda Lane, 301-841-7204, corkandfork.co**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DARREN S. HIGGINS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES