

January 10, 2013

Maine's Hard Sell: Island Life

Isolated Enclaves, Faced With Aging Populations, Try to Draw Mainlanders

By JENNIFER LEVITZ

ISLE AU HAUT, Maine - This island's year-round population could fit into an average-size Burger King, not that there is one here.

Out on this forested, rocky dot 6 miles off the Maine coast, there are no speed limits, movie theaters or other mainstays of mainland life. And if your car goes kaput, "God bless you trying to get that fixed because we don't have a mechanic," said local resident Bill Calvert, steering his self-described clunker down a winding road on the 6-mile-long by 2-mile-wide island.

Residents of Isle au Haut, (pronounced i-la-HO, pop. 73), concede proudly that existence here isn't for the wimpy. But, in need of a demographic boost, they also believe there are other people who crave a neighborly, self-sufficient lifestyle—albeit a 45-minute ride on the mail boat from the mainland. So Isle au Haut is one of nine unbridged Maine islands that, with the help of the state, are making an unexpected pitch: Move here.



Bill and Nancy Calvert, longtime seasonal residents of Isle au Haut, recently sold their home in Portland, Maine, and moved to the island full time.



The islands have recruitment committees and are sounding the call for new residents in publications like the American Home Business Association newsletter. Isle au Haut, for one, is offering discounts on town-owned land to families who want to put down roots. "Many people daydream about moving to a remote island village like ours," says the island's promotional website, aimed at telecommuters, small businesses, artists, fishermen, or others who would be able to make a living in a locale that is isolated in winter but draws vacationers in summer.

In 2010, the state gave a one-time award of \$2 million to year-round island communities to help build rental dwellings to attract newcomers. The money is from a \$30 million revenue bond authorized by Maine legislators for affordable housing statewide.

Legislators who led the effort for state funds represent the islands and see the year-round villages as part of Maine's heritage. They also see economic benefits: Year-round residents run libraries, inns, stores, landscaping services, and other businesses that keep summer colonies humming—as well as do off-season caretaking and construction.

All-season island living is a challenging, but crucial, sell, local officials say. Maine had the highest median age, at 42.7 years, among states in the 2010 census, and the slow growth plaguing the Northeast is doing little to replenish ranks of the young.



That dynamic is particularly extreme on Maine's islands, spruce-covered outcroppings that speckle the coast from Portland northward to Canada. Some 15 Maine islands have year-round communities, home to about 5,000 people. Isle au Haut, home to part of Acadia National Park, had a population of 73 in the 2010 census, down from 79 in 2000—though locals say there are usually only about 40 true year-rounders. The average age rose to 49.5, from 41.5 in 2000. There are four children—all fifth-graders—in the one-room school house.

"We're an endangered species," said Roger Berle, who is 69, lives on Cliff Island (pop. 50) and is the chairman of the Maine Islands Coalition, an advocacy group for island concerns. "We're on the edge of survival."

Critics say the state, which is facing a budget shortfall this year, could put its money to better use. "Should you be using that money to pay for a few housing projects on islands or should you be using it to fix roads, bridges, the education budget, those types of things," said Peter Steele, spokesman for the Maine Heritage Policy Center, a conservative think tank in Portland.

Isle au Haut's two affordable-housing dwellings, set to be finished in February, will rent for \$650 a month and up, for families who earn as much as \$70,000 annually. "We don't want to just bring out low- or very low-income people who are going to have a difficult time surviving," said Bill Glover, lending manager for the Maine State Housing Authority. Island leaders on Isle au Haut have also raised \$180,000 privately for the housing.

Those who choose to make the leap to full-time residence on Isle au Haut might be greeted by 73-year-old Bernadine Barter. Ms. Barter organizes parades, greets the mail boat at the dock, and leads winter's main social happenings (besides potlucks): regular volleyball games.

"If you have to be entertained and have Wal-Mart, this wouldn't be the place for you," said 58-year-old Brenda Clark, who is the island hairdresser, librarian and town-hall custodian. In spare time, she makes baskets out of used lobster rope and sells them in craft stores.



To attract newcomers to its unbridged islands, Maine allotted \$2 million for affordable-housing projects, like the one above on Isle au Haut.

The island also has a library, general store, church, gift shop, a tiny post office and a volunteer fire department, sort of. "Here is how it works: if you are on the island and there is a fire, you are a volunteer," explains the community website.

Living in southern Maine, Lee Williams, a financial planner who was nearing retirement, saw the pitch and thought, "Oh please, this is heaven!" she recalls. She got her husband to agree to a visit. But in their hotel room near Stonington, Maine, the morning of their scheduled journey to Isle au Haut on the mail boat, her husband "just rolled over and said...I know I can't do it. I know I cannot live out there," she said, adding that she came to concur.

Still, one man's remote outpost is another's paradise. "Some people get off at the dock and say, 'What do you do here?' " said Mr. Calvert, a financial planner who telecommutes. But he and his wife, Nancy, who moved here full time after years of being summer residents, can't imagine living anywhere else. "We go and do Portland and go to the theater and dinner, and I just can't wait to get back. It's like this yearning to get home," said Ms. Calvert, looking out the window of her kitchen over Penobscot Bay.

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A version of this article appeared January 11, 2013, on page A3 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Where Island Life Isn't Easy.