



LIVING THE DREAM, FOR REAL

Essay by Bob Friel

STANDING AT THE BOW OF A SMALL BOAT,

face in the sun on a sublime San Juans afternoon, I had a moment to reflect on what makes certain people a good fit for island living. It was only a moment, though, because the boat was about to crash into a dock.

"Okay, not bad," I lied, as the fledgling captain floundered for reverse. "Let's try that again, but with a little less cracking and splintering."

People are drawn to the idea of island living for obvious reasons. Islands float in the sea of our imaginations as escapist fantasies. Actually move to one, though, and the fantasy is prone to some cracking and splintering.

Orcas Island, in the way-out northwest on Washington State's watery border with British Columbia, counts as the eighth island I've lived on. But even after much psychological self-fracking, I have no easy answer for how a pale Irish Catholic from Philly winds up spending years in the Muslim Republic of Maldives, in the Florida and Caribbean skin-cancer breeding grounds, and, most recently, in a rustic cabin on an oceanfront cliff amid fir- and flannel-covered hills.

Maybe it is the romance: the romance of unplugging from the world when the Internet goes down for a week because a fish farted near the underwater cable. Or the escapism: as in those people you see wandering around islands who look like they've escaped from somewhere with soft music and measured meds. Or it could be the sense of community: the kind of community where wealthy second-home owners—Ohio's Carpet Remnant

King (retired), for instance, and Arizona's former number three Hyundai dealer—engage in a blowhard battle royal over a \$50 neighborhood road assessment for new gravel.

It's probably not the ease and low cost of living. When someone on an island says they lost a fortune in the market, they're not talking stock crash; it means they went food shopping. In World War II, South Pacific cargo cultists built ersatz airplanes out of bamboo, hoping to prompt the gods to send real C-47s filled with Army surplus. Nowadays, islanders bow to the power of Amazon Prime's two-day delivery.

So, with island living a sometimes inconvenient, often expensive existence, why have I spent most of the last 30 years surrounded by water? Often the best way to see what's right in front of your nose is through other people's eyes—which put me on the bow of that boat as docking tutor to Cap'n Crunch. I first met the captain and his mate over drinks, when they were deciding whether to move to a tiny island where they'd need to jump into a boat just to get to a bigger island to pick up mail and food, and to catch the mainland ferry.

"Are we crazy?" they asked, which prompted my recitation of island pros and cons. In short, if they could swing it, who wouldn't want to live in a place wholly immersed in natural beauty and surrounded by a 600-foot-deep moat that drowns out the mainland's noise, crime, and congestion—a down-home friendly place where islanders flourish, supported by the uniquely interdependent culture spawned when staunchly independent folks find themselves rafted together?

Of course, as I've counseled many people over the years, an island might seem the right place for you, but are you right for the island? Though near retirement age, this couple still worked. Yet they could do so remotely—a big plus, since jobs that can pay for nice island homes are especially scarce on islands. They'd already stress-tested their marriage by living and working in close quarters, and they seemed amiable enough to survive in an "everybody knows your business" fishbowl. It seemed they'd be a good fit. And it wasn't until the end of the night that they asked me about boats, saying they not only didn't own one, but also that neither of them had ever even driven one.

That's when I knew they'd make it. Yes, they were just the right kind of crazy. Only folks with the eccentric, adventurous souls of true islanders would leave a little detail like that for last.

*Now marking his eighth year in the San Juan Islands, Bob Friel is the author of *The Barefoot Bandit*, the story of teen fugitive (and former San Juans scourge) Colton Harris-Moore.*

STORIES FROM THE ISLANDERS

**"You can't
get in the car
and drive
somewhere.
But I can
look out my
window and
see eagles,
humpback
whales, sea
lions, and
bears."**

—SCOTT HURSEY,
40-year resident
of Petersburg,
Mitkof Island, AK
(208 square miles;
population 3,216)