

# Life

Folks looking to consolidate debt are using the Internet to ask for help from a friend or stranger

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Lower Birch Island, Maine  
Buyers have been snapping up isles like this one in Pleasant Bay

## LIVING

### Your Own Private Island. New technology makes living on one more feasible. How to find the ultimate waterfront property

BY KRISTINA DELL

WHEN A.J. LONGMAID SPENT HIS BOYHOOD summers on Spectacle Island, a private 4.5-acre (1.8 hectare) refuge off the coast of Bar Harbor, Maine, his family had no electricity or pressurized water. He read by kerosene lamp and showered by pouring a bucket of freezing water over his head. Today Longmaid, 30, not only has hot showers and electric power on the is-

land but also can make cell-phone calls, watch television and surf the Net via satellite. "People don't even realize they aren't connected to the mainland when they're here because everything is the same," says Longmaid, who lives on Spectacle Island with his girlfriend from May to October and rents a second house to guests. The couple spends the winter in Florida, where he works as a yacht captain.

Driven by the seemingly endless Amer-

ican fascination with real estate and the continual thirst for affordable, less developed seaside views, island dwelling has become practicable and increasingly popular. Many islands that were once considered uninhabitable wildernesses have become desirable properties. Over the past 10 years, a growing number of people have been snapping them up in the U.S., paying anywhere from \$200,000 to \$5 million, depending on size and lo-



**Diamond Lake Island, Wash.** Surrounded by lake and mainland views, this 1-acre island near Newport is equipped with modern utilities



**Middle Sedge Island, N.J.** Although it sits off the coast from a highly populated beach community, this spot offers its owners peaceful seclusion



**Melody Key, Fla.** This 5.5-acre private escape, outfitted with modern conveniences by a rock musician, is about 25 miles from Key West

cation. Typically, prices run about 20% cheaper per acre than traditional waterfront properties in the same locale—a discount reflecting the extra hassle it takes to get to one—but that gap is starting to narrow as demand rises.

Some buyers enjoy the status that comes with owning a unique parcel of land surrounded by 360° water views. Others are seeking a more intimate connection to nature, a slower pace of life or the increasingly elusive senses of privacy and security. Interest spiked after the 9/11

attacks, says Chris Krolow, CEO of Private Islands Inc., a company specializing in island sales. There are an estimated 700 habitable private islands in the U.S., most located off the coasts of New York, Maine, New Jersey and Connecticut; in the Great Lakes region; along the shores of Florida and the Carolinas; and in the Pacific Northwest. The fact that only 150 are for sale at any given time adds to the allure of owning one. State governments and environmental groups have been limiting construction on many islands off the coasts of

Maine and Florida, further reducing the supply. Islands in premium locations have high resale values.

Nick Hexum, lead singer of the reggae-rock band 311, bought a 5.5-acre mangrove-lined island near Key West, Fla., as a getaway from his hectic touring life. Fittingly, he changed its name from Money Key to Melody Key. His house rests on stilts and is built in the shape of two hexagons in order to better weather hurricanes. It has a pool, air-conditioning and Internet access. Hexum spends much of his time there snapper-fishing and scuba-diving. "Maybe it's too sleepy for some people, but that's what I go down there for," he says. He paid \$2.8 million for the property five years ago and, after many renovations, has put it on the market for \$7 million because he has less time to make the cross-country trip from his home in Los Angeles.

The purchase price is just the first of the expenses and challenges that come with owning land in the middle of a body of water. There's the cost of getting there and back, and of course, all supplies must be transported by boat or air from the mainland. Bob MacDonald, 62, owner of Lower Birch Island in Addison, Maine, recalls how he and his wife once had to transport their refrigerator by canoe. When they're on-site, modern conveniences like dishwashers and washing machines often require costly power-generation systems. Recently, however, some owners have begun turning to solar and wind power. "You have to go green," says Longmaid. "Without solar panels, there is no other way for me to turn on a light." Longmaid, who inherited his island from his parents, who paid about \$65,000 for it 30 years ago, has also installed his own generator-powered desalinization system, which makes 600 gallons of fresh water from ocean water every six hours—enough for up to 14 people. Solar power recharges a large bank of batteries when his generator shuts down. "A lot of man-hours go into keeping up an island," says Longmaid. But a hot shower and a good movie afterward make everything worth it.

## Do you have what it takes to own an island?

Sure, it sounds great. But here are some things to consider before signing the deed



A.J. Longmaid surveys his private domain in Maine

**Do you have a pioneering personality?** Most island owners are entrepreneurial spirits. "[We see] all types from all age groups and backgrounds except for one thing: all are very strong individualists," says island-real-estate agent Farhad Vladi.

**Can you afford it?** Homeowners' insurance is tough to get, and very few lenders will give financing

for island properties. In addition, construction costs can run 30% to 60% more than on the mainland since you're hauling everything from doorknobs to sewer systems.

**Are you handy?** You can't just call the plumber when the toilet backs up or the systems break and leave you without electricity or running water. Mechanical and carpentry skills help.

**Are you healthy and hardy?** You're a boat ride away from

a hospital or doctor. You should be in good enough shape to climb in and out of boats and haul things.

**Do you need people around?** If you get lonely easily, island living isn't for you—unless you surround yourself with family and friends. (Then you'd better really enjoy their company.) "A lot of things that bother other people about islands, I enjoy," says Chris Krolow of Private Islands Inc., who owns one in Canada. "I like being stranded."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PRIVATE ISLANDS INC.; T21; NICHOLAS HEXUM; JAMES ALISTER