



The **Commute**

Going to work on the island of Islesboro is a complex

game of hurry up and wait.

BY VIRGINIA M. WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHED BY LOTTIE HEDLEY



twenty-five miles to Freedom, where she gives riding lessons on the hot, dusty trails of a summer camp for kids.

Sounds like a stressful pace, but Patrick finds tranquility in the rigid routine. “I love the ferry ride,” she says. “I call it the poor man’s yacht. It’s the only boat ride I’m going to get during the summer. I go up top where I can sit outside, and I kind of meditate. It’s a time to relax, a time to chill out, a time when I don’t have to talk. How nice to be on that boat and look out at that view! I’m grateful.”

Non-reservations: Vehicle Line-up Is On A First Come First Serve Basis. Vacant Spaces Within the Line May Not Be Filled In. Those Not in Compliance Will Be Directed To The End Of The Line.

It’s 7:15 A.M., and the sun is shining brightly at Lincolnville Beach, where a queue of trucks and vans snakes through the Lincolnville Ferry Terminal parking lot. Workers wait in their trucks, heads back against the seats, eyes closed, radios on. Others, clad in jeans and billed caps, stand outside their vehicles in groups of two or three, sipping coffee from paper cups and shooting the breeze. Every few minutes another truck rumbles down McKay Road and takes a place at the end of the line.

The walk-ons, most of whom have a car or ride waiting on the island, assemble outside the ferry office. A woman sits on a bench reading the newspaper. A couple of men make small talk outside the door. Dale Hatch is among the folks who congregate near the ferry ramp, from which the *Margaret Chase Smith* can be seen across the bay leaving Grindle Point on the western side of Islesboro on her first voyage of

There are rules, and if you don’t know what they are, you will learn them soon enough.

Reservations: All Drivers Must Be In Their Vehicles With Tickets 15 Minutes Prior To Scheduled Departure Time. Reservation Will Be Forfeited. NO EXCEPTIONS.

BE ADVISED THAT there are rules, and if you don’t know what they are, you will learn them soon enough. Barton Lee Patrick found out the hard way when she pulled into her reserved space at the Lincolnville Beach ferry terminal just as the boat from Islesboro was easing into the dock. “The ferry workers eliminated me!” she says with humorous incredulity. “They saw that I was not in my spot exactly on time, and they sent me to the end of the line.”

That was ten years ago, and Patrick, who is the trainer and head instructor at a seasonal nonprofit equestrian school

on Islesboro, has not been late for a ferry since. “I behave myself,” she says. “I want them to like me. My life revolves around the ferry.”

Lobstermen are ruled by the tides. Farmers follow the seasons. The scores of carpenters, gardeners, boat builders, house cleaners, and others who tend to the needs of the well-heeled summer denizens of the island of Islesboro are on ferry time. Among the fifteen year-round island communities served by state and private passenger boats, Islesboro, a retreat for America’s elite since the first enormous cottages were erected at Dark Harbor in the 1890s, occupies a unique niche owing to its location and its culture. Unlike its Penobscot Bay sisters, North Haven and Vinalhaven, which are too far flung to attract many daily commuters, Islesboro is just three miles offshore, a twenty-minute jaunt. And unlike Peaks and Chebeague islands in Casco Bay, whose residents stream to

mainland jobs in Portland and the suburbs, Islesboro is where most of the bleary-eyed workers who ride the *Margaret Chase Smith* ferry each morning metaphorically punch the clock.

The commute may be short, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. “I’m very punctual,” Patrick says. “Otherwise, it would be a nightmare. The ferry leaves on time whether I’m there or not.” That means leaving Belfast, where she operates the Belfast Polo Club year-round, no later than 7:15 A.M. in order to catch the first ferry out of Lincolnville at 8. It means riding lessons start and end on schedule, and islanders pay for their tardiness in lost minutes. And it means leaving the barn – a multi-million-dollar waterfront facility built by an affluent summer resident for his wife and pressed into community service after they divorced – by 11:30 so she can catch the 12:30 boat back to the mainland and drive



Islesboro depends on 2,200 seasonal residents who outnumber year-rounders four to one.

the day. One of six vessels in the Maine State Ferry fleet, the *Margaret Chase Smith* makes nine round-trips daily between Islesboro and Lincolnville Beach from early April to mid-October (a reduced schedule is in place the rest of the year).

“When I was a kid growing up on Islesboro, this was not thought of,” says Hatch, of the importation of a couple hundred laborers to satisfy islanders’ desires. “We had a ferry, but it was never busy like this. This began in the nineties when we had an influx of people moving over – summer people and retirees.” Indeed, the town’s original industries have all but disappeared – only 3 percent of Islesboro’s working citizens fish or farm – and the island hosts only a few stores and one bed-and-breakfast. There are no inns and no banks, not even an ATM. The economy depends almost entirely on the 2,200 seasonal residents who outnumber year-rounders by more than four to one. Hatch, who moved off island in 1989 and now lives in Newcastle, commutes to Islesboro nearly every day to work with a landscaping crew.

As the ferry nears the shore, it growls to a crawl, roiling the water as it turns and backs snugly into its pen at the pier. The crew scrambles to secure the boat and lower the ramp, and a few pickups and dump trucks on supply runs roll off, followed by a

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handful of walkers who keep cars on the mainland. Hatch and fifty or so other workers collect their lunch coolers, tool belts, and totes and walk across the grated ramp, onto the cement deck, and up the staircases to twin cabins separated by the captain's bridge. Next come the vehicles, the crew waving the drivers right, left, or straight down the middle of the deck, coaxing them into place, tight as sardines in a can. About twenty trucks get on. At least that many remain in the queue as the *Margaret Chase Smith* pulls away from the dock.

Tickets That Have Been Held In Person's Mouth Will Not Be Accepted.

Islesboro commuters divide loosely into two groups – the regulars, who have season-long work on the island, and the transients, who are working on a specific construction project and will disappear when the job is done. Electra Greatorex counts herself among the former, which she describes as an unofficial clan united by their twenty shared minutes in a ferry cabin at the beginning and end of every workday. “We all have our customary place where we sit,” she says. “And if there’s someone new, we notice.”

Greatorex and an island resident, Robyn Congdon, tend the gardens at five estates owned by three families, all with deep generational roots on Islesboro. “It’s very satisfying,” says Greatorex, who lives in nearby Camden. “The birds are singing, and the surf is splashing, and I’m outside working.”

As for ferry time, that took some getting used to. “It’s an anxiety-provoking thing at first,” she concedes. “I set my pace so I’m here when the boat is pulling in.” She leaves her car on the mainland and

passes the time on board with the crossword puzzle or simply soaking up the view, which is routinely enlivened by porpoises and seals playing in the waves. “It’s a grand way to ease into work,” she says, “and it’s relaxing on the way back.” She’s even been known to lie down for a catnap on one of the cabins’ orange plastic benches. “By the time I get to Lincolnville,” she says. “I’m re-energized and ready to go again.”

Ferry commuting comes at a steep price. Passengers pay ten dollars for a round-trip ticket and ten dollars to park (the cost per day is less for those with monthly and seasonal parking passes). A car or truck adds \$27.50 or more to the daily fees, and one of the handful of reserved spots is yet another twelve dollars. Those costs, combined with the volume of traffic flowing to and from the island in summer, forces contractors to be highly organized.

“You have to handle things differently,” says Jeff Hodgdon, a carpenter who finds steady work on the island siding and roofing homes along with the occasional yearlong construction project. “There are no hardware stores or lumberyards over there, so you’ve got to order everything three or four days before you go. Generally we leave a truck over there because it’s hard to get on the boat. Well go over on the 6:10 A.M. *Quicksilver* so we can be on the jobsite early and then we come back on the 4:30 ferry.” (The *Quicksilver*, a commercial water shuttle, makes two early morning round-trips between Lincolnville and Islesboro five days a week.)

Drinking Of Alcoholic Beverages Or Smoking Anywhere On The Vessels Or In The Buildings Is Prohibited.

“There are two kinds of people on the island,” says Paula Mirk, who has lived on Islesboro for twenty-six years. “The ones who are hyper-concerned about the ferry, and the ones who are philosophical about it. I find it amusing how many people

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choose to live here and then spend a lot of energy making sure they are on the boat on time and complaining about it.”

That is one of the curiosities of Islesboro's ferry culture: The parking and queuing dance is more intense on the famously laidback island than it is on the mainland. An elaborate puzzle board of parking spaces with varying rules is painted on the road leading to the ferry ramp, and the uninitiated can – and frequently do – confuse these spots with those in the ferry queue. In July and August, people determined to get on the first ferry of the day park their cars in the queue the night before.

Mirk is among the few *Margaret Chase Smith* commuters who travel against the traffic. The education director for the Institute for Global Ethics, she rides to the mainland once a week, jumps in the car she keeps in Lincolnville, and drives eight miles to the institute's offices in Rockport. “Islesboro gets a bad rap – people say we're not a real island like Vinalhaven or North Haven because we're so close to the mainland, but we're not the mainland either,” she observes. “I guess that makes us kind of special.”

William Meade certainly thinks so. An orthopedic surgeon who lives at the north end of the island, he catches the 5:55 A.M. *Quicksilver* and drives to work at the Togus VA Medical Center in Augusta every day, stopping without fail for a copy of the *Kennebec Journal* at the Mic Mac Market on Route 17 in Union along the way. “I arrive around 7:08, 7:10,” he says with precision. “I manage to get in an eight-hour day. I try to leave about twenty minutes before 4 so I can be at the ferry terminal by four minutes to five and walk on the boat.” It's the last boat of the day, and it leaves at 5 P.M. sharp.

Once on board, he can relax. “It's a nice crew on the way back, and it's a pretty pleasant ride,” he says. “There are only five or six of us and occasionally we have parties with cheese and crackers, sometimes even some wine – but that's against the rules.” 