

The Boston Globe

TRAVEL

Exploring the Elizabeth Islands (and swimming with cows)

The scene is more verdant Scottish Highlands than New England coastline. But there they are: the beach-loving bovine.

By **Diane Bair and Pamela Wright** Globe Correspondent. Updated July 7, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



These privileged Scottish Highland cows can graze and swim as they like. PAMELA WRIGHT

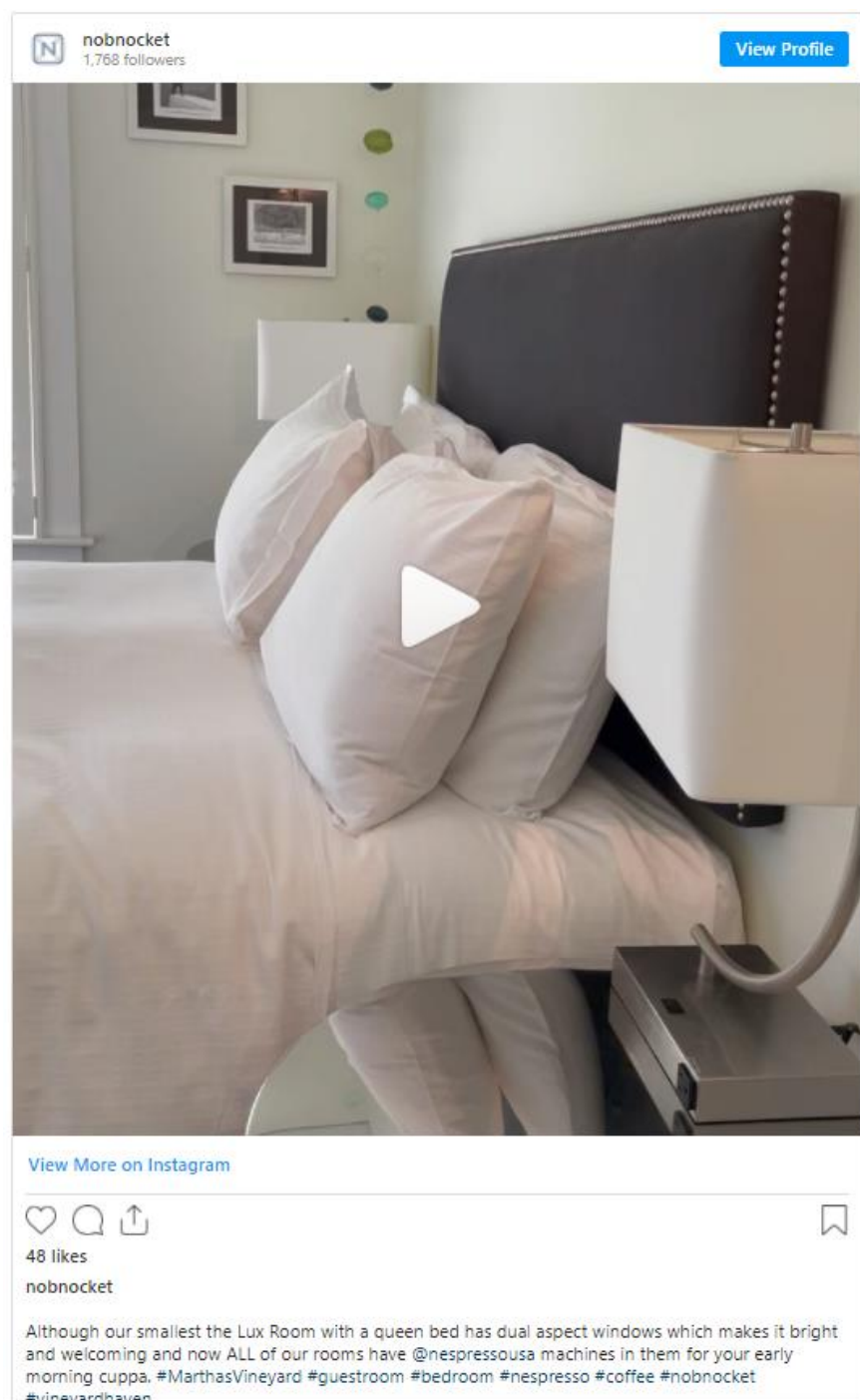
They had us at “beach-loving cows.” And “Explore the Elizabeth Islands by boat, stopping to swim with the highland cattle of Nashawena Island.” Sign us up.

The Beach Loving Cow package is offered at the [Nobnocket Boutique Inn](#) on Martha’s Vineyard. A stay at the inn is lovely, even without the boat tour and the cows. Owners Annabelle and Simon Hunton have created a peaceful, elegant sanctuary, just a short walk from the Vineyard Haven ferry docks. The seven-room,

contemporary inn sits on two acres of gardens and woodlands, with several private, outdoor sitting areas, seemingly far away from the bustling Main Street crowds. Inside, the Huntons show off their design acumen with a sleek, black-and-white palette, polished wood floors, and contemporary furnishings. A pair of tufted white leather sofas flank a brick fireplace in the living room, and French glass doors open to a light-filled sunroom.

The inn offers other nice touches, too: a bar area where guests can help themselves to complimentary drinks and snacks, bicycles to use to explore the island (bike trails are nearby), yoga on the lawn on Saturday mornings, and breakfast, prepared by Annabelle, and worthy of mention. All in all, it has a very upscale, unfussy, intimate vibe, the perfect balance between luxury resort and seaside inn.

After checking in on the first day, we explored the town, had dinner at Garde East overlooking the harbor, and slept like babies in our spacious rooms, under crisp Frette linens.



“It might be a little sporty out there,” Captain Eamonn Solway said the following morning as we boarded his 26-foot, six-passenger charter boat. “But this is one of my favorite trips. I never get tired of it.”

The trip is a long one, covering 50 miles around the Elizabeth Islands, a chain of 13 islands off the Cape Cod coastline, just north of Martha’s Vineyard. All but two of the islands are owned by the Forbes family, a wealthy Boston-based enclave, who made their money trading opium and tea in the 19th century. We motored around the West Chop Lighthouse, and into the choppy waters of Vineyard Sound. It was a gorgeous day, bright and sunny, with great visibility. We passed Nonamesset Island, circled around a couple of striped fishermen, and motored along the shoreline of Naushon Island, the largest privately owned island in the Northeast. Solway stopped the boat in pretty Tarpaulin Cove overlooking the Tarpaulin Cove Lighthouse and a historic Colonial home nestled on the sandy shoreline.

During the 18th century, the cove would have been filled with merchant ships with their tall masts and billowing sails. “There might have been 50 or more ships in the cove at one time,” Solway said. “It must have been quite a sight.” The cove is one of the few deep-water shelters in Vineyard Sound, once the second busiest shipping passage in the world, and one of the most dangerous. Boats would shelter in the cove, pick up supplies and mail at the shoreline home, and most likely tip a few pints. Today it’s a popular spot for pleasure boats, and the beach, which is open to the public (thank you Forbes family), is well-liked by people and cows.



Boats can land at Fish Dock on Cuttyhunk Island, which has a handful of take-out food vendors and small market. PAMELA WRIGHT

“Sometimes the cows take the trail up to the lighthouse, hang out for a while near the boulders, and then head down to the beach for a dip,” Solway said. “I’ve taken a lot of cow pictures here.”

The cows were nowhere in sight until we left the cove and turned the corner, and there they were. What a nice private island life they had, one-percenter cows! The water was 61 degrees; obviously warm enough for bovines but not for us. We snapped photos of the black and white, “Oreo” cows as they grazed in the grass, laid in the sunshine and cooled in the water. It was a scene that was more verdant Scottish Highlands than New England coastline. Later, we spotted a large herd of Scottish Highland cows, big, hardy animals with horns, grazing and swimming in the water.

The outermost island in the Elizabeth Island chain is Cuttyhunk, a pretty slice of land with a small community. It is exactly what we want a New England island to be: well-maintained cottages and homes hugging the shoreline and rambling up hills, blooming flower boxes, gravel backroads, a community message board, a tiny K-12 schoolhouse, and views galore. A small market and a couple of take-out shacks line Fish Dock where we landed, including the Harbor Raw Bar, serving Cuttyhunk Island oysters. “During the summer, they motor around the harbor offering fresh oysters on the half shell to boaters and visitors,” Solway said. We were disappointed the Raw Bar was closed on our visit; instead of slurping, we walked the main street up the hill to Naval Lookout Point, an old battery station, with spectacular views.

Back on the boat, we still had miles to go, but the waters had calmed, the sun was still shining. Solway pointed out Penikese Island, with its own unique back story. It was once home to a teenage boy’s reform school, a former leprosy hospital, and the Anderson School of Natural History. Today, it’s a state-owned wildlife refuge.

Nearby, were hundreds of seals basking on a tiny island outcropping. “This is a small colony,” Solway says. “The whole ecology out here has changed because of the overpopulation of gray seals. And they’re drawing in the sharks.”



The Gay Head Cliffs in Aquinnah JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

We left the cute, controversial seals in our wake and headed for the dramatic Gay Head Cliffs and the Gay Head Lighthouse, on the western end of Martha's Vineyard, before putt-putting slowly into Menemsha Pond, looping around the harbor. The small harbor and docks were filled with working fishing boats, including the Tomahawk. "That boat is owned by Buddy Vanderhoop, a well-known charter fisherman on the island," Solway said. "His great uncle was a Wampanoag who once harpooned Moby Dick, the only white sperm whale ever taken."

Menemsha Village is also known as a filming site for the movie "Jaws"; the remains of the Orca II, the boat that was sunk at the end of the film, sits abandoned on a beach across the village docks.

We listened to the cackling of sea birds and the shrill calls of oystercatchers as we made our way back to the Vineyard Haven town dock, before returning to the quiet, plush sanctuary of Nobnocket, windswept and sun-drenched, and happy (with photos of wading cows). *Nobnocket Boutique Inn*, 60 Mt. Aldworth Road, Vineyard Haven, 508-696-0859, www.nobnocket.com; off-season rates \$195-\$280, in-season \$375-\$499. *Island Girl Excursions*, 508-364-1936, www.islandgirlexcursions.com; Vineyard Sound & Cuttyhunk Loop, up to six passengers \$950.

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