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JULIANNE MOORE

On beauty, loving Lagerfeld, and overfamiliar men



TOTAL LOCH-DOWN
*Vanessa Branson on Eilean Shona,
where JM Barrie was inspired
to write the screenplay for
the film of Peter Pan*



'his island is a lot smaller than mine...'

Thirty times bigger than Necker and miles more exclusive, Eilean Shona, the Scottish island retreat of Virgin scion Vanessa Branson, is a back-to-nature Neverland, says Lily Worcester

Photographed by SIMON UPTON Styled by FREDERICA LOVELL-PANK

Vanessa Branson is expertly building a campfire on the white, windswept beach of her remote and exclusive Scottish island. The vibe is low-key, the mood as wholesome and determinedly pastoral as a Royal Family Deeside picnic – and perhaps not what might be expected on an island that belongs to the younger sister of the billionaire Virgin tycoon Richard Branson. Although his island, Necker, is famed for its luxurious glitz, Vanessa's Eilean Shona, off the west coast of Scotland, is quite the contrast. 'They are so different. His island is so lovely and... it's a lot smaller than mine,' she chuckles. 'There is a little sibling rivalry.'

Vanessa's style is bohemian and unshowy: silver braids hanging either side of her face, mismatched beaded earrings, a woolly camel gilet and a well-worn pair of walking boots. As she guides us through the moss-covered trees and over gorgeous, rambling streams, it's not difficult to see why JM Barrie was inspired to write the screenplay for the film of *Peter Pan* on Eilean Shona when he spent the summer here in 1920. 'You have that feeling here of being eternally young,' she says, 'because the days are so long, and you're so immersed in nature, and magic happens around every corner.'

She's right: beachside hot tubs and floodlit tennis courts may be all well and good in the Caribbean, but on Eilean Shona the landscape is simply otherworldly, with its moody, misty view of neighbouring islands and the *Game of Thrones*-like ruins of Castle Tioram looming in the distance. Owning your own wilderness is a precious thing, one that only a lucky few can aspire to; no wonder both aristocrats and hedge-fund zillionaires are drawn to Scottish islands. Vanessa and her now ex-husband Robert Devereux, with whom she has four children, bought the island in 1994. Although the purchase was his idea, she took the reins when they divorced: 'It's God's little joke that I ended up with this.' Now she island-hops ▷



A colourful mural by Fred Pollock covers the dining room walls; the table is set with mismatched crockery and tablemats Vanessa picked up in Morocco

'Richard Branson is the big man in the family, but we don't let him take over – he lights the fires'

◁ between here and her homes in London and Sussex. The best and most environmentally friendly way to get here is the Caledonian Sleeper train from London to Fort William (she is passionate about the environment), then an hour's drive to a tiny jetty on Doirinn beach and a half-hour dinghy ride to Eilean Shona.

A wonderfully rustic barn, filled with sweeping bunting and large tartan sofas, is what Vanessa calls the 'Village Hall'. This is the island's party centre, and Vanessa talks excitedly about the raucous New Year's Eve *ceilidh* she hosted last year: 'We all dressed looking flipping sexy.' Kate Winslet, who is married to Vanessa's nephew Ned and who, coincidentally, starred in *Finding Neverland*, the 2004 film about the inspiration behind Peter Pan, was among the revellers. And even though Vanessa says that 'there was lots of bad behaviour', it didn't stop a gung-ho Winslet from getting up early for a pre-breakfast swim. There are paddleboards on Eilean Shona too,

and Vanessa says that 'last summer we had these incredible, flat and still days, and she and Ned paddleboarded for an hour before breakfast every morning. She's a wonderful addition to the family and up here she's in her element, so we have a lot of fun.' Winslet has said that the island is her favourite place in the world and describes it as 'heaven on Earth', adding, 'If you feel the need for extreme peace, look no further. If you long to look at your mobile phone and see that it constantly shows "No service", this is the sanctuary you have been searching for.' Princess Eugenie, a close friend of Vanessa's daughter Florence, has also spent time here.

The 2,000-acre island has eight cottages and a main house that have been available to rent since 2016. There are no cars, no televisions and no Wi-Fi, apart from in one corner of the Village Hall. 'It's that simple pleasure of being in a plastic-free, car-free, pollution-free, pristine environment [that] is becoming a real luxury,' says Branson, 'but also having really good-quality sheets and a good wine cellar. I love that combination.' Three of the cottages are totally off-grid: gaslit and 'achingly romantic'. Each one is complete with cosy fires and a firepit outside. 'There aren't many places left in the world, unless you're very fortunate, where you can just cook a sausage on a campfire. Campsites don't let you have campfires any more.' ▷

Cotton shirt, £155, by **MARGARET HOWELL**. Silk trousers, £895, by **ROKSANDA** at Harvey Nichols. Vintage gold Bud brooch by **ANDREW LOGAN**, Vanessa's own

Previous pages, checked coat, £1,495, by **AMANDA WAKELEY**. Leather belt, £134.50, by **ELLIOT RHODES**. Cashmere jumper, £1,230, by **BOTTEGA VENETA**. Calfskin boots, £895, by **RUPERT SANDERSON**





BRUSH HOUR
Vanessa in the studio – artists' retreats are hosted on the island but guests are also welcome to use the space



The staircase in the main house. Below, the entrance of the main house, with fishing rods and walking sticks above the fireplace



◁ The main house is late Victorian and in classic Scottish country-house style, but was initially built as a hunting lodge – the acclaimed architect Sir Robert Lorimer remodelled some of the interiors in 1891. Vanessa thinks the original part of the property may well date back 300 years: ‘Redecorating, I’m realising that every detail is extraordinary – all of the tracery and the panelling and the angles of the archways. It’s an amazing house.’

Every inch of the interior is brimming with eclectic character and charm. Red tartan arm-chairs are paired with antique Moroccan rugs and the art-covered walls are painted in bold and daring hues. Vanessa enjoys taking risks and refuses to conform to ‘good taste’: ‘I’ve slightly swum upstream against the taupe-and-cream tide. I love colour, it really lifts my spirit.’ She believes that designing a house is one of the most creative things you can do. ‘Like making a movie, really. You’re pulling in the skills of a lot of different people to make it work.’ And although she enjoys the process and insists on working without a decorator,

‘Kate Winslet is a wonderful addition to the family – she says the island is her favourite place in the world’

there is pressure: the pressure of living up to the glamour of her Marrakech hotel, El Fenn, which, according to her, is one of the most photographed hotels on Instagram.

But the *pièce de résistance* is the art. Surfaces are laden with quirky *objets* and walls hung with striking paintings and drawings, all by artists she appears to know personally as a result of her long career in the industry – she owned a gallery in Notting Hill and then went on to launch the Marrakech Biennale in 2004. Each piece prompts a colourful anecdote or poignant memory.

The snooker room, for instance, is lined with Grayson Perry prints. ‘When my husband had a midlife crisis and left the family, I was rather bereft... I asked [Grayson] to make a pot for my ashes, my mortal ashes, and he said, “No, I’ll do something better than that.” He did a monument to the midlife crisis. It’s this extraordinary piece. It’s a really monumental pot and on the lid there’s a masturbating ape – and then there’s all this amazing iconography relating to men losing the plot.’ That piece lives in her London home, but on Eilean Shona





BARNSTORMING
Vanessa and Bebe on the steps of the 'Village Hall'. Opposite page from top, the White Cottage. A bedroom in the main house

Merino-wool jumper, £155, by **JOHN SMEDLEY**. Cotton skirt, £890, by **MARNI**. Hiking boots, £275, by **GRENSON**

For stockists, see Address Book.
Hair and Make-up: Lou Box.
Photographer's Assistant:
Socrates Mitsois

there's a Paula Rego ('the painting I'd save in a fire'), William Kentridge drawings (one has the words 'Responsible Hedonism' on it) and multiple works by the Scottish abstract artist Fred Pollock.

Branson relishes the strengths of a close-knit family. Every two years she organises an epic Branson clan gathering on the island. Her mother Eva, brother Richard and sister Lindy, their children, their children's partners and the grandchildren all descend for a big party. '[Richard] is clearly the big man in the family, but we don't let him take over.' So does the hedonistic Virgin giant take to rustic island life? 'He's brilliant, he's absolutely brilliant. All men like lighting fires. It's always a great joy when he comes and it's special time because it's family time.'

Getting involved in her brother's work has never appealed to Branson: 'I think it's quite important that you have your own identity as a sibling, and Richard has never been that interested in the arts and that's where I could really grow without having his big shadow coming over.' However, she isn't coy about admitting that her famous surname has had its perks. 'It's a sort of trusted name; it would be churlish to say, "Oh, it's been a setback" – it's been lovely. I've been really lucky to have the whole Virgin story running parallel, it's been really fortunate.' The only downside, she says, is people perhaps assuming that she's wealthier than she is. But, she adds with a chuckle, 'that's no bad thing.'

The next morning, Branson decides we should go to the beach for lunch. It's a lengthy hike away but can also be reached by boat in half an hour. So Branson, her elderly cocker spaniel Bebe and the *Tatler* crew clamber into a rubber dinghy. There's a stormy patch but Branson won't countenance turning back: it will, she insists, be worth it. It's the right call. When we arrive, the white-sand beach is bathed in glorious sunshine and the sky is bright blue.

The world of Westminster seems a million miles away, but it's on Vanessa's mind. She's a staunch Remainer and is deeply concerned about Brexit; when she realised she would miss the People's Vote march in London, she decided to stage her own protest on the island, complete with hand-painted signs. There's political history to Scottish islands: George Orwell wrote *1984* on Jura, and in 1963 Rab Butler lost the contest for leadership of the Tory Party in part because he had been weatherbound on the Isle of Mull. But there's nowhere more idyllic to ride out a political storm than Eilean Shona – especially when Branson stokes the fire and sets a cauldron of mussels to cook on the blaze. Bliss. Go as soon as you can. □ eileanshona.com