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STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATIE AND GENE HAMILTON

ISLAND HOPPING AND RIVER RAMBLING ON THE CHESAPEAKE'S LOWER EASTERN SHORE

We've been cruising Chesapeake Bay for 20-odd years now, and we enjoy revisiting places as much as discovering new ones. We like to return to our favorite spots and see how they've evolved over time. There's always someplace new to explore—a harbor town we never quite got to, or a stop we simply missed along the way.

That's why we headed this past spring to the Bay's lower Eastern Shore, where the Maryland and Virginia state boundaries meet, to visit both familiar and unfamiliar places. We left from our home port of St. Michaels, Maryland, setting course for the 80-mile run to Crisfield, on the Little Annemessex River. The seas were calm and the weather temperate as we made our way out Eastern Bay. We ducked behind Poplar Island, then ran down the Bay and through Kedges Straits to pass just north of Smith Island and into Tangier Sound. When we saw the marshlands of Janes Island State Park, just north of Crisfield, we knew we were close to our destination.

The approach to the harbor is straightforward, but over time the shoreline has changed considerably. Once a bucolic, tree-lined, sandy shore, Crisfield is now dotted with some high-rise condos that you can see from a distance. The main action in and out of the harbor comes from the local fishing fleet of charter and head boats. There's a lot of mail-boat and tour-boat traffic, too, with ferries heading to and from nearby Smith and Tangier Islands. The ferries bring tourists to the islands, but just as important, they transport local residents, as well as supplies and building materials, to and from the mainland.

Crisfield is called "the town the oyster built" because oyster shells were used to fill in the marshlands surrounding the town. In Crisfield's heyday in the 1800s, the railroad was

CLOSE TO HOME



extended from Salisbury to the harbor so that watermen could send their seafood, freshly caught and processed, to markets inland.

Today, Crisfield is a popular cruising destination. Somers Cove Marina, nicely protected by a break wall, offers 100 transient berths, a swimming pool, and wi-fi connections.

A VISIT TO SMITH ISLAND

For us, a big part of cruising is taking side trips. So when we saw a fleet of small tour boats leaving from the Crisfield City Dock for Smith Island, we booked round-trip passage on *Island Belle II* for the 13-mile run west across Tangier Sound. (Tickets were \$25 each.) As we approached the island, the captain followed a string of red and green markers that led into the harbor basin, along the way passing weather-beaten crab shanties, home to the soft-crab shedding business.

Smith Island is 8 miles long and 4 miles wide and has marshland, creeks, and canals separating its three villages of Rhodes Point, Tylerton, and Ewell; the tour boat docked in Ewell. The island is part of a marshy archipelago that is preserved in an extraordinary natural environment. A stop at the Smith Island Center provides visitors with a shaded porch and rocking chairs where they can rest. Inside, exhibits portray the life and times of the islanders over the years and

the community's deep roots in oystering, crabbing, and fishing.

We stopped at the Bayside Inn Restaurant for a soft-shell crab sandwich and next door saw the Smith Island Marina, which has a few transient slips available. We decided that the next time we visited, we would cruise to Smith Island on our own boat, *High Life*. We could use the same entrance the tour boat had used, called the Big Thoroughfare, with a reported 6-foot controlling depth, or the main entrance to the west on the Bay side.

Visitors to the island stroll the picket-fence-lined streets to see the quaint houses and browse the small shops, and few leave without getting a taste of crab and the official Maryland State Dessert—Smith Island cake, made of nine thin layers of cake and icing.

UP A LAZY RIVER

From Crisfield, we headed southwest into Tangier Sound, watching the outline of Tangier Island off our bow. You have to travel south all the way to Watts Island, Virginia, before you can turn into Pocomoke Sound, which leads to the river of the same name. We followed channel markers to the narrow mouth of the river as it wound its way north for about 15 miles to Pocomoke City, Maryland. Our river cruise was a quiet one, passing lovely riverfront homes and an occasional water-skier jumping our wake. The Pocomoke is a beautiful river, lined with cypress trees and mountain laurel and shallow pond lilies hugging the shore.

As we got closer to town, we saw a few fishermen and passed paddlers in kayaks and canoes quietly treading through the water, helped by an incoming tide. The Pocomoke is a tidal river with a 3-foot rise and fall. Once through an old railroad bridge opening, we saw the town dock, which offers free moorage with power and water for two nights to visiting boaters. We were the only takers.


Anyone driving on Highway 13, which passes over the river, gets a quick glimpse of the Pocomoke City waterfront. The town dock is at the foot of Market Street, next to the visitors' center and the Delmarva Discovery Center, where we learned about the area's early history. The cypress trees alongshore bear witness to the river's maritime heritage. In the 1800s, with the river's bounty of hardwoods and a sawmill on its



Top: Crisfield, Maryland, is a popular fishing center and stopover for cruisers hailing from Norfolk, Virginia Beach, and the Chesapeake's lower shores. Above: The Cape Charles, Virginia, town harbor, at the southern end of Chesapeake Bay, has slips just a short walk from downtown.

banks, the town was known for its shipwrights and boatbuilding. Like other areas of the Eastern Shore, the Pocomoke River was a stop on the Underground Railroad, the swamps bordering its shoreline providing refuge to escaped slaves. Bootleggers and smugglers found cover there, too.


The river, part of the Great Cypress Swamp, is coffee colored; the name "Pocomoke" comes from a Native



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American word meaning “black water.” The tannic acid found in the cypress needles and decaying leaves seeps into the river, creating the dark-brown color. A local tour-boat operator told us that, for its width, the Pocomoke is one of the deepest rivers in the world, with an average depth of 25 feet.

Before leaving, we couldn’t pass by the Bay Queen Galley without grabbing a sandwich for lunch and a Smith Island baby cake, a mini version of the Maryland delicacy.

ONANCOCK—ALWAYS A STOPOVER

As we made our way downriver, we noticed eagles perched proudly in the treetops. One soared high into the sky, and we wondered if the hum of our engine had disturbed him. We also noticed a change in the vegetation as we moved south. Salt marsh appeared on both sides of the shoreline as we neared Pocomoke Sound and headed south to Onancock, Virginia, one of our favorite destinations.

Once we reached the Sound, it was a short run to the clearly marked Onancock Creek, which runs about 5 miles to the harbor. Somewhere along the way, we crossed the Maryland state line into Virginia. We were happy to be revisiting this charmer of a harbor town. We noticed a few waterfront McMansions had been built since our last visit, but the sandy beach and sea grasses were familiar lower Eastern Shore scenery. We passed ospreys bedded in their channel-marker nests and watched as crabbers tended their pot lines between the markers and the shore. At marker no. 20, seagulls sat proudly on the sandy shoal at low tide, reminding us to pay attention.

The harbor scene was a familiar one. With the oil tank straight ahead and a barge to port, the town marina looked just like we remembered it. You can anchor near the marina, and that’s often necessary because of the limited dockage. Either way, you’re at the foot of Market Street, and the center of town is just a short walk up the hill.

Some of our favorite eateries are the Corner Bakery (not on a corner) for fresh pastries and Janet’s General Store and Café for a good breakfast or lunch. For dinner we like Mallards at the Wharf on the waterfront. In town, the Blarney Stone Pub and the Charlotte Hotel on North Street are also terrific choices. Art lovers will enjoy perusing the galleries in town; shoppers seem to like Dawn, which sells women’s clothing and home accessories, and Purls is a yarn lovers’ favorite. On the weekend, you can catch a movie at the Roseland Theater. Quiet, laid-back harbor towns like Onancock will always be on our must-return-to list.

DAY TRIPPING TO TANGIER ISLAND

When we saw that *Joyce Marie II*, a lobsterboat, was offering transportation from Onancock to Tangier Island, we were curious. We didn’t know much about Tangier but had been intrigued by its island neighbor to the north, and we liked the idea of visiting another place we’d never been to, so we bought two round-trip tickets and left on the morning “ferry.” Most of the other passengers were visitors like us, some with duffels for spending a few days. Others were locals returning to their homes with groceries and supplies.

We passed Watts Island and in just over an hour’s time were approaching Tangier Island from Tangier Sound. As the lobsterboat made its way into the harbor, we saw both shorelines surrounded by crab shanties on spindly stilts. The docks were piled high with crab pots, markers, and nets, and a skiff sat idly in a slip.

We took a golf-cart tour of the island and learned there are 550 permanent residents and that the K–12 school yielded a graduating class of five students last year. We marveled at the narrow roads, whose lanes were wide enough for two carts, but certainly not two cars. In fact, we saw few cars, and the ones we did see were compacts—most people here travel by golf cart, scooter, or bicycle, or on foot. Our guide explained that many islanders keep cars in Crisfield for transportation on the mainland.

The public garbage cans were cleverly concealed by elaborate lighthouse tops. The word “Push” was the only clue to their purpose. We also saw the island’s new medical center, serviced by a doctor who flies in from the Virginia mainland. There were no banks or ATMs on the island, and we noticed that none of the local kids had cell phones glued to their ears. We were truly living on island time.

At the Tangier History Museum & Interpretive Cultural Center, we chatted with one of the volunteers, himself a transplant, who answered our questions about jobs on the island. We learned that the tugboat industry is the largest employer of Tangiersmen, followed by the businesses of fishing and tourism. The tug companies find the young men from Tangier so highly qualified and experienced in working on the water that they make excellent employees.

Later, we sat along the waterfront and enjoyed a crab sandwich as we watched kayakers and watermen pass by. Other visitors to the island raved about the home-cooked family-style meals at Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House.

We had noticed when we’d arrived aboard *Joyce Marie II* that there were two large cruising boats tied up at



CRUISE LOG

BOAT NAME

High Life

BOAT TYPE

Grand Banks 36 Classic

POWER

120hp Ford Lehman

ROUTE

St. Michaels, Maryland • Crisfield, Maryland • Pocomoke City, Maryland • Onancock, Virginia • Cape Charles, Virginia • Solomons, Maryland • St. Michaels

TOTAL DISTANCE

330nm

TOTAL FUEL USED

100 gal. (at \$3 per gal.)

TOTAL FUEL COSTS

\$300

MARINAS AND COSTS

Somers Cove Marina, Crisfield • 2 nights • \$128

Pocomoke City Dock • 2 nights • free

Onancock Wharf & Marina • 2 nights • \$128

Bay Creek Resort, Cape Charles • 2 nights • \$154

TOTAL MARINA COSTS

\$410

TOTAL FUEL AND MARINA COSTS

\$710

Park's Marina, a small dock that's nicely located in the heart of the island, and we were told that most boats approach the island from the Bay side. That planted the seed of an idea to make Tangier Island one of our cruising destinations aboard *High Life* the next time we are in the area. The island is certainly a place you could revisit time and again and never regret making the stop.

CAPE CHARLES—WHERE OLD MEETS NEW

From Onancock we headed some 40 miles south to Cape Charles, Virginia, with its high-style golf resort and marina and waterfront town at the foot of Chesapeake Bay. It was a complete contrast to the other towns we had visited on our Eastern Shore cruise. The Bay Creek Resort & Club boasts two 18-hole championship golf courses designed by Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus and a state-of-the-art marina set among a lush landscape

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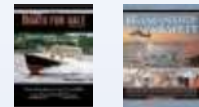
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dotted with colorful homes. You could easily think you're in Florida as you follow Kings Creek channel north and then turn east into the marina basin and see the expansive marina and houses.

The floating docks lead to the Marina Village, a complex where you'll find the marina office and marine supplies, elegant and eclectic shops, and a swimming pool. The beautiful setting and abundant amenities make the resort a popular weekend destination for Virginia Beach and Norfolk cruisers, and many Bay boaters from farther north choose Cape Charles as a "turnaround" destination.

In the marina complex, our favorite restaurant was Aqua, where you're served seafood specialties and local produce in a lovely setting. The open deck overlooking the Bay makes it a perfect place to sip wine and watch the sun set.

A ride through the town's neighborhoods reveals the diverse architecture, ranging from elaborate gingerbread Victorians to modest Sears Roebuck mail-order houses from the 1920s. You can stroll through town and see the interesting mix of specialty shops and stop at the Cape Charles Coffee House, where breakfast and lunch are served in a beautifully restored setting. A walk across the railroad tracks takes you to the town marina, where transient slips are available.

To break up the long trip from Cape Charles to St. Michaels, we cruised to Solomons, Maryland, 76 miles up the Bay, and anchored in Back Creek for the night. From there, we had an easy 44-mile run to our home slip at the Miles River Yacht Club.


Along the way, we relived some of the highlights of our lower Eastern Shore cruise: visiting Onancock, one



Left: Ferries bring visitors to Tangier Island from Reedville, Virginia, on the Bay's western shore, and from Crisfield and Onancock, to the east. Right: Crab pots are stacked high next to a crab shack along the shore of tranquil Tangier Island.

You can rent a bike or golf cart at the marina and head over to the course for a round of golf or follow Fig Street, the main artery of the community, through a neighborhood of pastel-colored houses surrounded by ponds lined with sea grasses and walking trails. In town, the Cape Charles Museum and Welcome Center showcases the local history of sailing vessels, steamers, barges, and ferries that came across the Chesapeake. The town was the southern terminus of the New York, Philadelphia & Norfolk Railroad and was a transfer point to Norfolk. At the turn of the century, four trains a day arrived from New York, just a day's journey away. Today, the Bay Creek Railway offers various weekend excursions on a restored railcar; one is an afternoon pizza run for kids, and in the evening there's an elegant dinner trip for adults.

of our favorite harbor towns; discovering the remote and rambling Pocomoke River; marveling at the disparity between the high style of the Bay Creek Resort complex and the step-back-in-time lifestyle on Smith and Tangier Islands. We had a new appreciation for the significance of the railroad in the history of cities like Crisfield and how it altered the lives of residents and helped the town prosper in its early days.

Our close-to-home cruise had given us a fresh perspective on living and boating on the peninsula known as Delmarva, where Maryland, Virginia, and the waters of the Chesapeake converge so nicely. 

To view a list of resources that can help you plan an Eastern Shore cruise, visit this issue's Web Extras at www.passagemaker.com.