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## **P.J. Thomas: Venture to Virginia's bay country for vacation**



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CARS FILLED with vacationers whiz along U.S. Route 13, destined for Virginia Beach, North Carolina's barrier islands and other places known for the very thing they are passing by - an easygoing region with natural beauty, pristine beaches, outdoor recreation and some of the freshest seafood you will find anywhere.

The Virginia Eastern Shore is the tip of what's known as the Delmarva Peninsula, beautifully situated between the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay. About 3 1/2 hours' drive from Philadelphia, it begins at Chincoteague Island and reaches southward 60 miles to Cape Charles, a charming, blink-and-you'll-miss-it town at the foot of the 21-mile Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel.

The communities, farms and former plantations here are inhabited by people who can often trace their linages to early 17th-century settlers, enslaved African-American ancestors or indigenous people. For years, they lived in relative isolation, forging a simple living from land or sea.

But the Eastern Shore is increasingly being discovered by retirees and others lured by small-town life yet is close to Washington and other major cities. Here's a look at some of the major destinations in Virginia's Eastern Bay country.

### **Assateague Island**

Perhaps most familiar is Assateague Island, home to the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and the Assateague Island National Seashore. Here the famous wild ponies have roamed since the 17th century, when legend says they swam ashore from shipwrecked Spanish galleons.

Cars, bikers and hikers are welcome; however, no pets are allowed - not even in cars - lest they disturb the fragile environment. A two-hour narrated tour departs from the visitors' center and provides a good understanding of these barrier islands and the importance of the seashore in protecting wildlife, especially birds that stop here during long migratory journeys.

### **Chincoteague Island**

There are a few three- and four-story chain motels here, but its bed-and-breakfast inns give this island its charm.

Go 10 minutes in any direction and you will come to the water's edge. Whether enjoying a beach loaded with sun worshippers and surf fishermen, or watching waterman hauling in a catch of oysters, you'll feel that life here moves as slowly as the ebb and flow of the tide.

### **Onancock**



Virginia's Eastern Shore is about 3 hours from Philadelphia.

Continue another 30 miles south along Route 13 to this little coastal jewel, with its Victorian B&Bs - and restaurants ranging from flip-flop casual to fine dining, which you'll find at the Charlotte Hotel & Restaurant. Gentlemen, bring your khakis and golf shirts.

Savvy residents have restored many of the town's old buildings into retail businesses, including several fine-art galleries. Onancock (pop. 1,500) was voted one of the coolest small towns in America in a *Budget Travel Magazine* survey.

### **Cape Charles**

If you're the type of person who falls in love with places, you'll quickly be stuck on Cape Charles, the Eastern Shore's southernmost town and one that's filled with so many early- Victorian and turn-of-the-century homes and buildings that it is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Cape Charles is "almost Mayberry," said Roberta Romeo, while serving her famous Grand Marnier-flavored pancakes at the Cape Charles Coffee House on Mason Avenue, the town's main drag. "It's a collection of exciting people who ask, 'How are you?' and actually wait for an answer."

There is a yearlong calendar of festivals and activities, including a kayak and wine tour by Southeast Expeditions that takes a leisurely journey along the Nassawadox Creek and culminates at the Chatham Vineyards. The Eastern Shore Birding & Wildlife Festival will be here Oct. 8-10.

Mild weather, scenic landscapes, affordable accommodations and a year-round schedule of events and festivals make the Virginia Eastern Shore a prime destination within a short drive.

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