

Peaceful coastal retreat in Cape Charles, Va.

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SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

An entry in the diary of Lillian Gaylord describes arriving in Cape Charles, Va. (pop. 1,500), as a time to: "shed stress, leave the worries behind and focus on peace and the water." That could well be the motto for the Chesapeake Bay town on the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula. Here, days seem to melt away like waves rolling back into the sea, and the tiny coastal community has become a refuge of choice for in-the-know escapists seeking a respite from their frenetic lives.



A renovated three-bedroom, two-bath historic house one block from the beach, at \$279,000.

"The reason I come here is to unwind," said Gaylord, a Virginia native who owns an apartment in Fair Lawn. She spends several weeks each summer and year-round weekends at her Cape Charles home, a modest three-bedroom ranch just outside town she bought last winter for \$159,000.

"During the summer, many beach towns on the Jersey Shore are completely packed. You find yourself fighting crowds everywhere. Although things can get relatively busy in Cape Charles, it's nothing like Belmar or Ocean City. You can still breathe, even between Memorial Day and Labor Day."

Once a busy and prosperous railroad and ferry stop from which steamships and trains carried passengers and freight across the bay to Norfolk, the second half of the 20th century saw the town drift into a deep slumber, slowly fraying as a former rail depot and working port.

If you go

Perks

Affordable coastal real estate. The only public beach on the bay side of the Eastern Shore. Freshly caught trout, flounder, blue crab and scallops.

Drawbacks

Large-scale shopping requires a bit of a drive. The nearest Walmart is about 40 minutes away in Onley and the nearest Home Depot and Target are an hour away in Norfolk.

The weather

Summers are hot and humid. Winters are milder and shorter than back home. The hurricane threat looms from April through November.

The costs

The average listing price is \$389,000, while the median sales price is around \$200,000.

Getting there

Continental and US Airways provide round-trip service to Norfolk International Airport, with advance purchase tickets starting at around \$210. Alternatively, the drive takes about six hours from North Jersey.

Where to stay

Cape Charles House (\$140-\$200; 757-331-4920; capecharleshouse.com) is a well-run historic bed and breakfast close to the beach.

Sea Gate Bed and Breakfast (\$120-\$130; 757-331-2206; seagatebb.com) is an intimate inn with a reputation for fine hospitality.

Must see

The annual Eastern Shore Birding and Wildlife Festival (esvafestivals.org), held each October, features a weekend of family-friendly educational exhibits, tours and other activities.

For more information

The Daily News (delmarvanow.com) covers regional news; The Northampton County Chamber of Commerce (cncchamber.com) provides a wealth of area information.

But Cape Charles is down on its heels no more. The town has reawakened to emerge as a summer vacation and second-home destination. Most of its "come here" homeowners are Washingtonians, but they are not alone. Part-timers also come from Philadelphia, Delaware, Maryland and, increasingly, North Jersey and New York City.

A devotee of the off-season, Gaylord most prefers the relaxed pace of fall days. "It's a time that's really peaceful," she said. "The weather is still very nice and Cape Charles Beach, which has some of the most beautiful sunsets, gets very few visitors. It's the perfect place for quiet reflection."

While Cape Charles is conducive to doing nothing much at all, there are leisure activities. Besides beachcombing, swimming, fishing, boating, sailing and biking, the Cape Charles Museum and Welcome Center (smallmuseum.org/capechas.htm) features exhibits documenting local history. The restored historic Palace Theatre (artsentercapecharles.org) presents stage plays and musicals throughout the year.

South of town, Kiptopeke State Park has a beach, fishing pier, trails, campsites and yurt rentals. The adjacent Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge (easternshore.fws.gov) is a protected habitat for a range of plants, animal and insects. For shoppers, an outlet mall, big-box stores, antiques shops and specialty boutiques are 90 minutes away in Williamsburg.

Cape Charles' seven-block downtown has mom-and-and shops, eateries and other business establishments. The Cape Charles Historic District features a large concentration of late-Victorian and turn-of-the-century architecture, and the town's streets are lined with a hodgepodge of residences (including 1920s mail-order kit houses from Sears, Roebuck and Co.), most of which sell for between \$200,000 and \$400,000. The 1,729-acre Bay Creek (baycreek.net) is a newer luxury gated community with home sites, condos and houses that range in price from about \$250,000 to \$2 million.

The town's growing prosperity has sparked some local concern that new development aimed mostly at affluent and seasonal homeowners is diminishing the strong sense of community. Gaylord understands the quality-of-life concerns, but said the pockets of gentrification haven't greatly affected Cape Charles' character or close-knit feel in the 12 years that she's visited. "Change was necessary if the town was ever going to thrive again. It's still a wonderful place to be and I think it will remain that way for the foreseeable future," she said. "Maybe I'm just optimistic, but I can't imagine it changing too much, at least not in my lifetime."