

Virginia's Eastern Shore: A natural fit for Summer

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By [Andrea Sachs](#) June 28



Sunset Beach, near Cape Charles, Va., lives up to its name (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)

The sun was setting in a pastel-pink sky when Virginia's Eastern Shore finally revealed itself to me. Near the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, a flash of brilliant blue appeared in the distance. Moments later, the water vanished.

But the siren's lure had worked.

I drove straight to Sunset Beach, the last stop before the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, and hastily parked in the lot of the Sunset Beach Inn. I dashed down a sandy hill, flip-flops in hand, and walked onto the warm sand, then stood at the edge of the bay and watched the sun dip its own toes in the water before it dove in.

Another day on the Eastern Shore comes to a natural close.

Travelers familiar with the extrovert to the north, Maryland's Eastern Shore, will be surprised by Virginia's subdued and understated character. Maryland is the lazy man's summer retreat: Simply follow the dancing crabs to your stretch of sand or pot of seafood. Virginia's section is more mysterious and challenging. You have to work for your water views, your beaches and your summer requisites.

"We're more rural and tied to the coast," said Bo Lusk, marine steward with the Nature Conservancy's Virginia Coast Reserve program. "The most accessible beaches are on the bay side. If you want to visit the barrier islands on the sea side, you gotta figure out how to get there."

The 70-mile-long strip of land is corseted by the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay, and zigzagged with inlets and creeks. Despite the wash of marine blue, I glimpsed the water only once along the main

road, Route 13. (See above moment.) Most times, the landscape seemed more American heartland than Atlantic Coast: fields of wheat, soy and corn; dense groves of trees; pickup trucks and agricultural equipment; Wal-Mart.

But I knew that the beaches, and therefore summer bliss, were out there. I just needed to follow nature's instructions. If I played it right, I could unlock the secrets of Virginia's Eastern Shore and experience a season of sand-flecked serenity.

Island 101

Before I could swim, I needed to learn how to speak and read.

"I'm going to teach you how to talk Eastern Shore Virginia," said Laura Vaughan, executive director of the Barrier Islands Center in Machipongo.

Vaughan was part of a continuing-education program that had started the night before. On the drive to my Exmore hotel, I'd passed a sign for Silver Beach, imagining a sparkling strand with sand spun of the precious metal. When I asked a Holiday Inn employee for information about it, she had none. Instead, she directed me north to Chincoteague (done it, and didn't want to repeat it) or south to Cape Charles (on the itinerary). Silver Beach, I later learned, is a community in Northampton County with a YMCA camp that runs a private beach. The public is not invited over for a plunge.

The takeaway lesson: Don't take signs so literally.

The Barrier Islands Center resides on a 19th-century almshouse farm, in a former residence for destitute individuals. Vaughan, a North Carolinian who knows her barrier islands, ushered me into a quasi-classroom with rows of chairs and a map of the Eastern Shore pinned to the wall.

Holding a pointer, she began the lesson. The Chesapeake Bay is called "bay side," she explained; the Atlantic side is "sea side."

"But it's the Atlantic *Ocean*," I countered.

"I know," she said with kindness, "but we still say 'sea side.'"

About 20 barrier islands form a broken line a few miles from shore on the sea side, a protective shield that Vaughan referred to as "Mother Nature's speed bumps." From the 1800s through the mid-1900s, islanders established dynamic communities on the narrow slips of land. They worked, prayed, grazed sheep, hunted, fished and flagged down passing ships to sell their goods up north. But these halcyon days were numbered.



MACHIPONGO, VA - JUNE 24: Artifacts spanning centuries of settlement on the Eastern Shore are on display at the Barrier Islands Center and Almshouse Museum on Tuesday, June 24th, 2014 near Machipongo, Va. (Photo by Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post) (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)



MACHIPONGO, VA - JUNE 24: Artifacts spanning centuries of settlement on the Eastern Shore are on display at the Barrier Islands Center and Almshouse Museum on Tuesday, June 24th, 2014 near Machipongo, Va. (Photo by Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post) (Jay Westcott/Jay Westcott/For The Washington)

In August 1933, the Chesapeake-Potomac hurricane shattered island life. Winds whipped up to 80 miles an hour, and the water surged. Families climbed onto furniture and held up their babies, saving them from the rising ocean. (The museum owns some of the lifesaving pieces, such as the bed of Mae and Wendell Bowen.) They lost their homes, their livelihoods and their nerve. They could no longer stay on the islands, so they moved to the mainland, hoisting their entire communities onto barges and relocating them to a less vulnerable part of the shore.

“You have a very intact migration of a unique culture over to the seaside peninsula,” Vaughan said. “You won’t see a stick or a brick or a sign that someone was living out there.”

Some of the original buildings still stand on their adopted land. The back half of the Methodist church in Oyster came from Hog Island, as did several homes on Hog Island Lane in Willis Wharf.

The current island occupants are birds, birds and birds. They live off the land, sea and air, plus the generosity of the Nature Conservancy, which owns all or part of 14 of the islands (a designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserve) and protects the seabirds’ habitats. However, the nonprofit organization does allow day visitors, with a few don’t-you-dares. On the “no” list: commercial tour groups, kites, dogs, fires and overnights.

To preserve the nesting grounds, the conservancy encourages guests to stay out of the interiors and remain on the sandy fringes, below the high tide line. Here, you’ll find big, wide beaches covered in seashells. Also, no ticks, and few other people.

“It’s one of the only places in the world where you feel like you’re on the edge of a continent,” Vaughan said.

Parting lesson: Strap on your water wings for your journey to the edge.



Hiking trails at Savage Neck Dunes Natural Area Preserve lead to dunes and a mile-long stretch of Chesapeake Bay beach. (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)
Among the dunes

To illustrate the scale of beach access on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, I will use sea life. This is a big reel ‘em-in-spot, after all.

In the easy guppy category, we have Chincoteague and the Cape Charles area, which includes Kiptopeke State Park, Sunset Beach and the blocks-long town beach. To reach the beaches, simply drive into the parking area, amble a few yards on the hot sand and throw down your towel. (For Cape Charles’s strip, you can walk over from your hotel or the commercial district.)

The elusive giant squid are the barrier islands. To visit these, you’ll need a power boat (or a watercraft-owning friend), serious upper-body strength to kayak the choppy waters — or \$200. The Wachapreague Inn, in the tiny flounder-fishing town of the same name, offers a water taxi ride to Dawson’s Shoal, a sandbar between Parramore and Cedar islands.

And finally, in the adrenaline-required sailfish category: Savage Neck Dunes Natural Area Preserve.

Winding rural roads in Eastville lead to the secluded 298-acre preserve, which is surrounded by wheat fields and tall stands of trees. The hiking trails to the beach passes through several ecosystems and over a variety of carpets, from silken grass to prickly pines to massaging sand. The path starts with coastal greenland, a lush meadow with waist-high vegetation that tickles bare legs and provides cover for migratory songbirds. Coastal shrub, maritime forest and Custis Pond follow. At the 4.8-acre freshwater pond, green frogs and dragonflies were holding an incredibly noisy concert. The volume turned way down once I entered the dunes zone. The sandy mounds rise up to 50 feet above the bay, creating a soundproof chamber.



Beach-bound hikers pass by Custis Pond, home of very vocal frogs, in Savage Neck Dunes Natural Area Preserve. (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)

Before descending the last dune to the beach, I stopped to read a sign about the northeastern beach tiger beetle, the preserve's star resident. En route to the water, I stumbled upon the insect surrounded by wiggly larvae. I gave it a wide berth, just as I would a family freighted with beach gear and a gaggle of kids with pincers.

Alone on the one-mile beach, I followed paw prints that disappeared into the water, then reappeared a few yards ahead. I watched a cargo ship inch along the horizon and inspected a full fish skeleton placed on a rock. I scattered crabs with my toes.

To the south, I heard the warning coughs of thunder. Time to turn back.

Before re-entering the trail, I looked for the beetle, but it had fled, leaving behind only a small impression in the sand.

A bit of tipling

The man pouring wine at Chatham Vineyards' tasting room assured me that the five samples would barely add up to a glass. Friends don't let friends kayak tipsy.

Our group of eight, including guide Ethan Watkins, had started SouthEast Expeditions' Paddle Your Glass Off adventure on the other side of Church Creek. We'd met at a working waterman's wharf and traded names and brief histories (a young engaged couple, a Virginia Beach pair who had "won" the trip in an auction, a friend visiting her military pal from Los Angeles) while Ethan dragged our kayaks to the edge of the water. One push, two push and we're off.



On a SouthEast Expeditions tour, kayakers paddle more than two miles on Church Creek to a wine tasting at Chatham Winery. (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)

Once on the water, we gathered near an oyster-cleaning tank (aquaculture is a common sight) and began to paddle the 2.5-mile course to the winery. The wind pushed us forward while the current pulled us diagonally. I steered with all the grace of a drunken gull.

The route was more nature than people. We saw one house with an enviable yet empty hammock and two osprey nests, also vacant, though the likely owner was perched on a nearby branch.

Ethan had us bob in place near a forested island while he debriefed us on the winery. The working farm estate is nearly 400 years old, he told us, and Jon Wehner, a second-generation winegrower, planted his first grapes in 1999. Ethan mentioned a few more facts — I caught “20 acres” and “Civil War” and “English patent” — but I was so preoccupied with an imminent collision with the Navy guy’s kayak that I missed the full story. Thankfully, Jon repeated the narrative during a tour of the winery.

Before setting off on the final leg, I noticed the perfect setup on the island: a sun chair arranged in a clearing — unoccupied, of course. I asked Ethan whether I was allowed to shipwreck there, and he said I could as long as I left no trace behind. I agreed to take full responsibility for the furniture.



A visitor waits for a pour of Church Creek Cabernet Franc at Chatham Vineyards. (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)



The winery was constructed in 2005 and is run by a second-generation Virginia winegrower. (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)

From our landing spot, we trekked a short distance to the tasting room, which is set among wheat and barley fields. Lynn, one-half of the Virginia Beach team, plucked a sheaf of wheat, and we each popped a kernel into our mouths — bar snacks, Eastern Shore-style. Inside the main building, we took our places before our glasses. The pours followed a colorful arc, from white to rosé to red and, finally, dessert.

After our drinks, Jon led us through the oak barrels and to the back of the building, where stainless steel fermentation tanks glistened.

“All of these tanks are empty,” he said, referring to the recent bottling of 3,200 cases. “That’s a great feeling.”

A member of the group asked about the perils of growing grapes on the Eastern Shore. “We picked 30 tons of chardonnay before Hurricane Irene,” he said. But he played down the drama, saying that no winery is safe from storms, frost and other natural threats.

As part of the outing, we could each pick a wine to take home. Jon said that the “site-expressive” steel-fermented chardonnay reflects the region’s unique climate and soil: sandy loam with a band of clay and ancient shells scattered among the layers of earth.

Back at the kayak, I tucked the bottle into the hatch and paddled off with 750 milliliters of Eastern Shore sloshing around in my boat.



Tour leader Ethan Watkins, left, with John White, center, and Bonnie Wyckoff, right, prepares the kayaks for the scenic paddle to Chatham Vineyards. (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)
Clearing the barrier

It was time to catch my giant squid.

On Sunday morning, I woke up early and drove to Nassawadox, the “land between two waters” in the Algonquin language. I was meeting Marcus Killmon, a Nature Conservancy employee who’d agreed to take me out to the coveted barrier islands.

Marcus maneuvered the boat through serpentine guts, or creeks, and entered Hog Island Bay. Up ahead, I noticed small figures that resembled nails standing on their points. As Marcus drove closer, the pegs turned into small trees, and the outlines of the island sharpened into view. He aimed the bow for Hog Island, which filled the narrow space between Cobb and 7.5-mile-long Parramore, one of the largest islands.

“All of the islands have unique traits,” Marcus said. For example, Hog Island has sand dollars and, once upon a time, “cows that would chase you.”

(Note: Not all the islands are open to visitors. Check with the Nature Conservancy before you go.)

Marcus’s family has owned 1.25 miles of the south end of Cedar Island since the 1880s. Fierce weather has ravaged the family’s buildings — the ’33 hurricane damaged a 1900s hotel, then the Ash Wednesday storm in ’62 knocked down a cabin used for summer kicks and winter duck hunting. Last year, his cottage disappeared when the beach eroded. “It was a hassle,” he admitted.



The sun goes down on Sunset Beach, near Cape Charles, a golden close to another summer's day on Virginia's Eastern Shore. (Jay Westcott/For The Washington Post)

Waves and weather are continually altering the shapes of the islands and the overall design of the chain. Old inlets are closing, new passages are opening and sandbars are materializing.

“That was never there before,” Marcus remarked of a sandbar near Parramore. “The currents moved it and piled the sand up.”

We were now within shouting distance of North Hog, and I could clearly see uninterrupted beach the color of toasted almonds. Tangled locks of seaweed dried on the sand, and shorebirds soared overhead. Bands of dune grass segued to clumps of wax myrtle and stands of pine trees.

I tried to imagine the island supporting a robust community, but I couldn't. Or maybe I didn't want to, preferring to regard the land in its current state of wild beauty.

Marcus didn't drop anchor that day, but I knew that I could return. I had a ride but, more important, Virginia's barrier islands weren't going anywhere, unless nature said so.