

## Escapes

# A NASA island that packs an emotional wallop

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

In early January, on a field a couple of miles from a launchpad on Virginia's Wallops Island, I gazed eastward and listened to a countdown. The numbers descended, and then in the distance, a rocket lifted silently, gracefully, as if in slow motion. Ten seconds later, a wave of sound hit me square in the chest with such power that I felt as if a Harley were rumbling through my body.

I tilted my head skyward, watching the rocket move at unfathomable speeds. But my eyes kept shifting to the ground — to the launchpad, the giant cloud of smoke, the void where a 13-story-tall rocket just stood. In the blue sky, it was now a fiery bulb. Then it was gone. My eyes watered. And I'm certain that it wasn't because of the wind.

For all the exquisite preparation and precision, all the gee-whiz science and engineering involved in sending a spacecraft into orbit, watching a launch is bizarrely emotional.

"I got choked up," said one of my fellow spectators, a lifetime space nut and tough-guy attorney who had driven four hours and was tweeting about the launch. "But don't quote me," he said. "I've got an image to keep."

If watching a launch is on your bucket list, and you live in the Mid-Atlantic region, checking it off just got a lot easier. One of Virginia's best-kept secrets is that you don't have to travel to Cape Canaveral in Florida or Vandenberg in California to see a launch. NASA's Wallops Island Flight Facility is less than 200 miles from a good chunk of the Eastern Seaboard, including Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Richmond and Norfolk. And Virginia's two launchpads at the new commercial Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport (MARS) at Wallops are about to get busy.

"We've become a major player in space launches," said Dale Nash, executive director of Virginia Space, which owns and operates MARS. He said that the port is now equipped for what space folks call "medium-class" missions, which can send 10,000 to 15,000 pounds into orbit. That's a big deal, according to Nash, who likened it to an airport upgrading from commuter planes to Boeing 737s.

It's also an exciting time for commercial companies partnering with NASA. Dulles-based Orbital Sciences tested its Cygnus spacecraft from MARS last year, boosted into orbit on its new Antares rocket. And now the company has a \$1.9 billion contract for eight International Space Station (ISS) resupply missions through 2016 — the first of which I watched this month.

Originally scheduled for December, this Cygnus payload contained Christmas presents for the ISS crew, spare parts and 23 student science experiments — testing, for example, the effectiveness of antibiotics in space and the behavior of ants in microgravity. But it didn't quite make it there in time for Christmas.

Launches can be delayed for countless reasons — days, hours or even seconds before liftoff. There's just a few-minute window during which the launch can occur each day or night, depending on where Earth and the ISS are in orbit, so it isn't uncommon for spectators to hang out longer than expected when a launch is scrubbed.

But the good news is that there are plenty of ways to kill time in the Wallops area. Best known for their wild ponies, Chincoteague and Assateague islands are a bridge away from the NASA Wallops Visitor Center. You can explore by bike or kayak, take a day trip to Smith Island or hit the Delmarva Wine and Ale Trail.

Chincoteague's Main Street is lined with shops and restaurants, though many businesses still close for the off-season. For now, the area has a sweet,



CHRIS PERRY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Reaching for the stars: An Antares rocket launches from NASA's Wallops Flight Facility on Wallops Island, Va. Wallops became a test range for rockets and missiles by the end of World War II, and today is NASA's most active launch range.**



STEVE EARLEY/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT VIA REUTERS

**Thrilling view: A spectator watches from the beach of Assateague Island as the Minotaur I rocket launches from the Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport.**

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kitschy appeal, but growth is expected as the spaceport attracts more visitors. In September, an unmanned launch to the moon (visible in the night sky as far as New York) attracted 13,000 spectators, who then created a couple-hour backup on the bridge from Chincoteague to the mainland. Chances are, it won't be long before we see vendors setting up on launch days, selling T-shirts and ballcaps.

The December launch was delayed several times — once because of cooling problems on the ISS that required a spacewalk; once for the polar vortex; and once for high levels of space radiation. It finally succeeded on Jan. 9 at 1:07 p.m.

The visitor center is about seven miles north of the launchpad, across the street from part of the facility where U.S. Navy pilots practice simulated aircraft carrier landings and takeoffs. I learned from the exhibits that Wallops became a test range for rockets and missiles by the end of World War II, and that today, the facility is NASA's most active launch range.

NASA suggests watching from the visitor center or from the beach on Assateague Island National Seashore/Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

Locals tend to scout out the best viewing spots, such as Arbuckle Neck Road or other streets off Atlantic Road. You're bound to get some good viewing tips if you stop by the lunch counter at T's Corner or one of the restaurants on Chincoteague.

Some of the kids with experiments headed to space watched the launch from a side street with a wireless PA system attached to a smartphone, blaring NASA TV to a few hundred spectators. One local I talked to, who'd taken the day off from work, said that every launch from the past three decades has a special place in his heart. "It's history-making," he said, "and it's a sense of patriotism."

Virginia Space's Nash watched from mission control. He has probably seen 150 launches, including working 64 shuttle launches. Still, he said, he gets butterflies every time. "It's hard to believe the sheer energy that rockets have," he said. "It rattles you. It shakes your entire body."

Launch experiences are different for everyone, but I can't imagine walking away feeling unmoved. I watched my first launch a decade ago from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, a Russian launch facility in Kazakhstan. In the middle of the night, shortly after I saw three humans behind glass in quarantine, I watched them shooting into space in a Soyuz. As the ground shook, tears streamed down my cheeks.

This time, I was much closer to home and — thanks to more stringent safety regulations — much farther from the launchpad. During the countdown, I thought about the ants that would live out their lives in space, and the Christmas gifts finally en route. And once again, when it came time for liftoff, I was in awe.

Three days later, astronauts aboard the ISS used a robotic arm to capture the Cygnus (as both orbited at 17,500 mph). They unloaded 2,780 pounds of cargo, and they'll re-pack it with trash from the station. In mid-February, the capsule will head on a trajectory away from the ISS. Its mission then complete, the spacecraft will reenter the Earth's atmosphere, and in one last fiery display, it will burn up and disappear over the South Pacific Ocean.

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### IF YOU GO

#### GETTING THERE

NASA Wallops Visitor Center is about 165 miles from Washington. Take U.S. Route 50 east over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and toward Ocean City. Continue onto U.S. Route 13 south/Salisbury Bypass into Virginia. Turn left onto Va. Route 175 east/Chincoteague Road. The visitor center is about six miles on your right.

#### STAYING THERE

##### Waterside Inn

3761 S. Main St., Chincoteague Island  
877-870-3434

[www.watersideinn.biz](http://www.watersideinn.biz)

Waterfront rooms with private balconies overlooking the Chincoteague Channel start at \$100, including breakfast, March 1-June 6. Rates are higher in the summer.

##### Snug Harbor Marina and Hotel

7536 East Side Rd., Chincoteague Island

757-336-6176

[www.chincoteagueaccommodations.com](http://www.chincoteagueaccommodations.com)

Waterfront cottages adjacent to the Snug Harbor Marina. Rooms \$99 to \$289 per night, depending on day of the week and season.

#### EATING THERE

##### Ray's Shanty

32157 Chincoteague Rd., Wattsville  
757-824-3429

[www.raysshanty.com](http://www.raysshanty.com)

Family-owned seafood restaurant. Flounder sandwich, \$9.95; all-you-can-eat steamed shrimp \$19.95 per person Wednesday and Sunday.

##### T's Corner Exxon Station

6491 Lankford Hwy., Oak Hall  
757-824-5935

[www.exxonstations.com](http://www.exxonstations.com)

Old-fashioned fountain service where you can order a burger (\$3.59), a fish sandwich (\$4.69) or an ice cream float (\$2.99). Plus more.

##### Bill's Prime Seafood & Steaks

4040 Main St., Chincoteague Island  
757-336-5831

[www.billsseafoodrestaurant.com](http://www.billsseafoodrestaurant.com)

A half-dozen local clams or oysters on the half shell \$5.50 or \$8.50; fried or broiled crab cakes \$23.50.

#### PLAYING THERE

##### NASA Wallops Visitor Center

757-824-2298; 757-824-1344

[www.nasa.gov/centers/wallops/visitorcenter](http://www.nasa.gov/centers/wallops/visitorcenter)

Monday-Friday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; open on launch days regardless of day of the week. Free. This year there will be 15 to 20 sounding rocket launches (next one in April) and two more Antares launches (next one in May).

##### Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

8231 Beach Rd., Chincoteague Island  
757-336-6122

[www.fws.gov/northeast/chinco](http://www.fws.gov/northeast/chinco)

Miles of trails for hiking or biking. Daily pass \$8.

##### Snug Harbor Marina

7536 East Side Rd., Chincoteague Island

757-336-6176

[www.snugharborva.com](http://www.snugharborva.com)

Rent kayaks or canoes for \$38 per half-day and \$48 a day, pontoon boats for \$69 per hour.

#### INFORMATION

Future launches: [www.nasa.gov/wallops](http://www.nasa.gov/wallops), [www.facebook.com/NASAWFF](http://www.facebook.com/NASAWFF) or 757-824-2050.

[www.marsspaceport.com](http://www.marsspaceport.com)

— M.D.G.K.