

The Long Weekend

Eats · Sleeps · Adventures · Short Flights · Etc.



2004 PHOTO BY STEVE EARLEY — ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel has four man-made islands where drivers transition between roadways that sit above the water and lanes that run beneath shipping channels. About 5 million cars take this route every year.



BY GENE THORP — THE WASHINGTON POST

Where to Go, What to Know

Writer **Melanie D.G. Kaplan** traveled the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. Here's her reporter's notebook.

DRIVE TIME
About
three hours



COST
\$12 toll
\$102 bunk house in park



GETTING THERE

The southern end of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel is about three hours from the Capital Beltway. Take Interstate 95 south 100 miles to I-64 east. Follow signs for the bridge. The CBBT Commission accepts E-ZPass, and it provides drivers for travelers who have fears associated with making the journey.

WHAT TO DO

The Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel (757-331-2960, www.cbbt.com) charges a \$12 toll. It has a free **fishing pier**, where travelers can cast for bluefish, trout, rockfish and flounder. It's 3½ miles into the ocean and open 24 hours a day, with restrooms, fish-cleaning stations and a certified weighing station. On Nov. 29, fish there for striped bass (and cash prizes) at the Rock Around the Clock Pier Fishing Tournament. SouthEast Expeditions (32218 Lankford Hwy., Cape Charles, 757-331-2680, www.sekayak.com) offers **kayaking trips** year-round such as a Kayak Winery Tour to Chatham Vineyards that includes a bottle of wine per couple. Two hours \$45; half-day \$85; full day \$125. **Bay Creek Railway** (weekend trips depart from Mason Avenue in Cape Charles, 757-331-8770, www.baycreekrailway.com) is a restored 1913 Interurban Dining and Excursion car that began its round-trip runs in May. Through December, there's a four-course dinner Saturdays at 6:30 p.m. (\$65 per person) and all-you-can-eat pizza Saturdays at noon (adults \$18, children \$14, plus tax and 18 percent tip). Saturday "Fun Runs" will start again next May. The **Barrier Islands Center** (Route 13, Machipongo, 20 miles north of the bridge, 757-678-5550, www.barrierislandscenter.com) is open Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m.-4 p.m. and has relics and artifacts from the area.

STAYING THERE

Kiptopeke State Park (3540 Kiptopeke Dr., Cape Charles, 757-331-2267, www.dcr.virginia.gov) has camping facilities and rents RVs, new lodges and beautiful yurts (yurts available peak season only). Check online for reduced off-season rates. Pets allowed. The pet-friendly **Rittenhouse Motor Lodge** (23054 Lankford Hwy., Cape Charles, 757-331-2768, www.rittenhousemotorlodge.com), 10 miles north of the bridge, is a homey throwback to a '50s motel. Rooms are \$75-\$85. The **Charlotte Hotel** (7 North St., Onancock, 757-787-7400, www.thecharlottehotel.com) is a boutique hotel with one of the area's best restaurants. Rooms \$110-\$180.

EATING THERE

Sea Gull Pier Restaurant (on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, 757-464-4641, www.cbbt.com) offers nearly every fried fish platter you can imagine — and a killer view of the bay. It's worth stopping for dinner at **Sting-Ray's Restaurant** (26507 Lankford Hwy., at the Exxon station, Cape Charles, 757-331-1541, www.cape-center.com) just so you can order a glass of wine at a gas station. **Aqua** (Bay Creek Marina Village, Cape Charles, 757-331-8660, www.baycreek.net) is one of the few fine-dining options in the area, with an international wine list and one of the best sunset-watching perches in town. **Kelly's Gingernut Pub** (133 Mason Ave., Cape Charles, 757-331-3222, www.freewebs.com/kellysgingernutpub) is the Cheers of Cape Charles, housed in a century-old bank building. (You can even dine in the vault.)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism, 757-787-8268, www.esvatourism.org, or Northampton County Chamber of Commerce, 757-678-0010, www.northamptoncountychamber.com.

Virginia's Bay Crossing: Hardly a Bridge to Nowhere

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

After a morning of driving down Interstate 95 and then I-64, my beagle Darwin and I finally arrived at our destination. The traffic was behind us, and we rejoiced by opening the windows and sniffing/inhaling (respectively) the ocean air. Then we pulled up to a tollbooth and bought our \$12 ticket, getting a couple of dog biscuits in return. Seat belts fastened, arms and floppy ears secured in the vehicle, we began the mother of all East Coast rides — across the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel is one of the world's longest such complexes. But the 17.6-mile journey from shore to shore is just as much a nature excursion as an engineering spectacle. After maneuvering through Hampton Roads congestion on the southern end, the CBBT — not to mention the sanctuary on the other side — felt like freedom.

Until the bridge-tunnel opened in 1964, the only way to get from the Norfolk-Virginia Beach area to Virginia's Eastern Shore was by ferry, which took 90 minutes on a good-weather day. Now, about 5 million cars use the bridge-tunnel every year. It consists of more than a dozen miles of trestled roadway over shallow water; two mile-long tunnels; two bridges; four man-made islands that anchor the tunnels; and nearly two miles of causeway. The tunnels run beneath two important shipping channels used by the U.S. Navy and commercial vessels. It's not uncommon for drivers to see an aircraft carrier entering the bay.

Our first stop was at the southernmost island, the only one open to the public without a permit. It was windy and overcast, and I felt a lot farther than 3½ miles out to sea. At the Sea Gull Pier Restaurant, I fol-

lowed locals' advice and ordered the flounder sandwich. Someone had described the size of it as a "two-by-four on bread," and that was more or less accurate. I bought saltwater taffy at the gift shop and walked Darwin to the end of the 625-foot pier, where she sniffed bait and fishermen.

Before the trip, I had tried to imagine a tunnel in the middle of water and kept getting hung up on a couple of structural riddles: Could you look out your window and see the waterline as you went underwater? How was water kept out of the tunnel entrance?

Fortunately, crafty engineers figured it all out, and islands are the perfect solution: They allow drivers to enter the tunnel before they're underwater. But it started to make real sense only when I walked around the first island and saw the tunnel entrance from the side, a boulder-covered area that looks somewhat like a jetty and disappears into the water as the tunnel descends below it. The fact that everything, down to the islands themselves, is man-made reinforces the feeling of being on a ride: a slow-moving roller coaster.

For someone like me, who loves being on, near, over or in the water, the bridges and tunnels were fun. But a fleeting second of panic in the tunnel (even knowing the tunnels are constantly monitored from a control room) helped me understand that this crossing would not be fun for everyone.

The other three islands looked unremarkable, but for migrating birds all that concrete, steel, asphalt and rock in open water seems to be the Mardi Gras of rest stops. Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, only birds have full access to these spots of land; humans, mostly birders, must obtain a permit (through CBBT's Web site, www.cbbt.com/birding.htm; \$50 per hour).

The bridge-tunnel attracts tourists, and it transports locals. But as I headed across the bridge and drove past part of the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife

Refuge (which has free public tours Saturdays through mid-March), I realized that the communities on each end couldn't be more different.

While the southern end caters largely to the military, the northern end is so peaceful and remote that it felt like a trip back in time. Residents of the Eastern Shore are justifiably protective of their delicate ecosystem, and several folks said they were thankful for the \$12 bridge toll to keep the masses from invading their haven. Nobody wants it to become Virginia Beach North.

Fortunately, a lot of the coastal land is under protection, including the wildlife refuge, where I paddled through saltwater marshes with kayak guide Dave Burden. "We've got the best paddling in the mid-Atlantic," he said.

As we paddled through a maze of tall cordgrass dotted with tiny periwinkle snails, Dave explained that migratory birds pass through the area, but the refuge is also a prime wintering area, thanks to the mild climate.

That night, I drove into Cape Charles, a former railroad boom town where only a couple of houses on each block showed any signs of life. At Kelly's Gingernut Pub, I met just as many folks visiting for the weekend as town residents: A foursome came to play on the Jack Nicklaus- and Arnold Palmer-designed golf courses at Bay Creek Resort & Club, and a Virginia Beach couple stopped en route to the Chincoteague Oyster Festival.

Darwin and I spent the night at Kiptopeke State Park. After sunrise, we walked to the beach, where I saw an oddly beautiful sight: a row of concrete World War II ships that I later learned forms a breakwater and artificial fishing reef about 1,500 feet offshore.

After breakfast in Cape Charles, Darwin and I moseyed up the coast on Route 13. We stopped in towns where businesses give directions by indicating the number of miles they are from the bridge. The pastoral landscape made me want to stay another day . . . or three. But soon we hit the Maryland border, and too soon thereafter we crossed back to the mainland on the other bridge, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

And just like that, our bargain Eastern Shore ride was over. Taffy and tollbooth biscuits were dwindling, but I felt at peace, knowing that little snails, fresh fish, soaring birds, maritime bliss and freedom were only a few bridges and tunnels away.



Wednesday

Escapes searches for distant galaxies in Green Bank, W.Va., in Style.

Next Sunday

The Long Weekend explores the only property in Virginia commemorating a slave, in Travel.