

Keeling Me Softly

Novices get a gentle introduction to wooden boat building in St. Michaels, Md.

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

Bob Savage says we all have boats in our blood. “Deep in everyone’s psyche, there’s a maritime connection,” the boatwright had said from the floor of his shop at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels. Not *this* psyche, I thought. But as I stood there breathing in the smell of wood and watching boat builders toil away, my inner water girl began to emerge. I knew I’d be back, and next time, wielding tools.

Fortunately, the museum has a program for people like me, who get sucked into the romance and nostalgia of traditional wooden boat-building. Apprentice for a Day allows visitors with any level of woodworking experience — and any concentration of boating in their veins — to help build a 13½-foot rowing or sailing skiff. The apprentice program, managed by Savage, produces and sells a boat roughly every four months.

So for just \$25 for the day, I decided to sign up and bring along my dad as a birthday present. He gets queasy stepping over a puddle, but he did once make me a wooden paddleboat as a bathtub toy.

And that’s how I came to find myself back in the shop a few months later, sanding down Atlantic white cedar seats — called thwarts — between coats of varnish. Savage had each of the apprentices working on a different job around the shop. He set me up in the paint room, so I could look out and see sun streaming across the water, hear sea gulls crying and breathe in that intoxicating smell of sanded wood and varnish. (It’s all a happily olfactory experience: “Walking around the shop with all the smells, I go nuts,” said Dennis, one of my fellow apprentices.)

Our workday started at 10 in Savage’s small, cluttered office. Blueprints hung from shelves and pictures of boats covered the walls. Savage offered us coffee and doughnuts and told us he had a hit list of projects he’d

like to get done that day but wasn’t counting on it. “The main objective,” he said, walking us into the high-ceilinged barn, “is to have fun and make some wood shavings.”

The boat shop has a dirt floor and is heated by a wood-burning stove. Pulleys and ropes hung from every possible beam, and a flat-bottomed rowing skiff named the Jennie Wren (which Savage said will have a cameo in an upcoming romantic comedy, “Failure to Launch,” with Matthew McConaughey) dropped from the ceiling. Shelves were lined with Mason jars of nails, and every horizontal surface seemed to be littered with coffee cups or tools. Savage told us we’d be finishing a rowing skiff and its oars and would start work on a sailing skiff. “I’ll tell you what needs to be done, and you gravitate toward what turns you on.”

A lanky man with a beard and bright blue eyes, Savage spent 14 years making large-scale topographic maps before he got the boating bug. After boat-building school, he arrived at the museum in 2002. He has an accent that turns “boat” into “boot,” and he uses words such as “nifty” to express awe. He has a habit of losing pencils, along with a tendency to get carried away with technical explanations. That was gravy for folks like Dennis, but it occasionally made my eyes glaze over.

Savage tosses around terms like spider system and rolling bevels. When he applied the Pythagorean theorem to making oar handles round, my dad said under his breath, “Beautiful!” Savage replied, “It is beautiful.” And just like that, my dad had the bug.

We broke for lunch at noon and walked over to Taste Gourmet Deli. I ate a grade-A Reuben on a Styrofoam plate while the guys made fun of their own fanaticism about wooden boats. The three other day laborers were demographic clones of my father: men in their late fifties or early sixties. Two of them, like my dad, were engineers, and all three were wooden boat enthusiasts. Dick, who used to build boats, was making a weekend of it and would be back for more the next day. Dennis, who owns a boat canvas shop in Allentown, Pa., drove four hours that morning just to get some technical questions answered.

“I call them boat freaks,” Savage said about the fanatics. He made a scary, wide-eyed face to mimic the zealots. “I’m the same way.” The guys all agreed that fiberglass boats are pretty much lowlife and that Jon Wilson, who founded *WoodenBoat* magazine, is responsible for keeping wood-



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL TEMCHINE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

At the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Md., above, novices can be boat-building apprentices for a day. Below, boatwright Bob Savage checks his students’ work.

en boat-building alive and exciting. Dennis has made two trips to Wilson’s boat camp in Maine. “I can still smell it when I close my eyes,” he said.

Back in the chilly barn, I made some instant hot chocolate, and we all took turns using a band saw to cut the transom, which runs across the stern and is one of the first steps in construction. “Just slide the wood into the

the day, and eventually we said our goodbyes and tore ourselves away from the boatyard.

My dad and I had dinner at Key Lime Cafe. Then he drove home to northern Maryland, and I walked down the street to browse at Salty Dog Books & Music. I spent the night at the Five Gables Inn, where I detoxed in the steam room, wrapped up in an oversize robe, switched on the gas fireplace and called it a night.

Sunday morning I borrowed one of the inn’s bikes, a green cruiser with a white metal basket, to ride the flat, wide-shouldered road to Tilghman Island. The 15-mile ride on a bike built for meandering around town took the better part of an hour. When I got there, I rode over the Knapps Narrows Bridge, past the tackle shop and the volunteer fire department to fuel up with a drink at the corner store. Back in St. Michaels, where seemingly every other storefront is a real estate office and houses without American flags look out of place, I window-shopped my way to lunch at the Town Dock, where I found

mediocre crab cakes and an excellent view of the marina.

But I soon found myself drawn back to the boatyard. Someone had observed that sometimes the most fulfilling part of boat-building is simply being in the shop. “Is Bob here?” I asked a ponytailed man. Off at sailmaking school, he said. So I walked up to the observation deck and watched a young couple work on the oars I’d measured out Saturday. And I breathed in the boat-building smells as deeply as I could, down to a maritime connection I had after all.

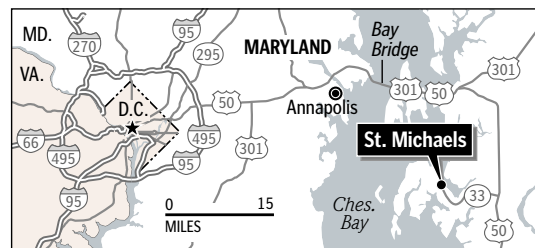
Sunday in Travel | Venice reborn.



saw like a pool cue,” Savage instructed.

“That does smell good,” I said stepping from the saw, taking a deep breath. “See,” Dennis said. “You’re getting hooked already.”

Near the end of the day, we gathered around everyone’s stations for show and tell. Dennis showed off his chisel work and Alan presented the oar he had shaped. Dick and my dad explained how they used a low-angle block plane — which looks like a Craftsman-made cheese slicer — to shape the transom (the floor was now covered with curly wood shavings). I showed the pieces I’d sanded and how they would fit onto the boat. Savage hinted several times that he needed to clean up for



BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSO — THE WASHINGTON POST

ESCAPE KEYS

GETTING THERE: St. Michaels, Md., is 80 miles from Washington. Take Route 50 east across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Bear right at the Route 50/301 split and follow Route 50 to Easton. Turn right onto Route 322 and follow that for two miles. Turn right onto Route 33 (St. Michaels Road) and follow it for 10 miles into town.

APPRENTICE FOR A DAY: The program takes place year-round at the **Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum** (213 N. Talbot St., 410-745-2916, www.cbmm.org). It is offered most Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Cost is \$25 per day (or \$15 for museum members). A more formal apprentice schedule for building a 16-foot sailing skiff will run for 13 weeks starting Jan. 7. Check the Web site for the **Journeyman Special:** For \$90 (\$50 for members), you can apprentice for any four days during that 13-week period and choose the work you do. Preregistration is encouraged because the program is limited to six participants.

WHERE TO STAY: Few places could be cozier after a winter day in a boatyard than the **Five Gables Inn & Spa** (209 N. Talbot St., 877-466-0100, www.fivegables.com), around the corner from the museum. The inn has off-street parking (which is at a premium in town), a full-service spa, rooms with gas fireplaces, steam and sauna rooms, continental breakfast and to-die-for chocolate-chip cookies in the lobby. Weekend winter rates start at \$200 per night. The **Victoriana Inn** (205 Cherry St., 888-316-1282, www.victorianainn.com) is on the harbor. Weekend winter rates start at \$149, based on a two-night stay, and include a hot country breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT: **Key Lime Cafe** (207 N. Talbot St., 410-745-3158) serves breakfast, lunch and dinner in a charming home. The menu changes every Friday, and reservations are recommended (entrees from \$14 to \$25). Pick up your morning pastries and hot drinks at **Blue Crab Coffee Co.** (102 Fremont St., 410-745-4155), and do the same in the evening at **Salty Dog Books & Music** (402 S. Talbot St., 410-745-2974). **Taste Gourmet Deli** (105 N. Talbot St., 410-745-4100) is a bona-fide deli with all of the signature sandwiches you could want along with great clam chowder.

INFO: **St. Michaels Business Association**, 800-808-7622, www.stmichaelsmd.org.