

“Finding this eastern shore shallow broken isles, and [the main] for the most part without fresh water, we passed by the Straits of Limbo for the western shore. So broad is the bay here [that] we could scarce perceive the great high cliffs on the other side. By them we anchored that night and called them ‘Riccards’s Clifts.’”

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH

Remote Beaches and Marshland

EXPLORING TANGIER SOUND AND THE LOWER EASTERN SHORE

Looking for precious minerals, powerful Indian tribes, and the Northwest Passage, Captain John Smith spent only a short time exploring the low-lying lands and the islands of the Lower Eastern Shore and Tangier Sound. Even so, this part of his first exploratory voyage up the Chesapeake gave him and his crew their first major tests of hardship and interaction with outlying Indian tribes. Today, this region of the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia remains the least settled in the Chesapeake, with offshore islands and vast salt marshes that still give the modern explorer a distinctive flavor of the Bay that Smith saw.

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH ON THE LOWER EASTERN SHORE AND TANGIER SOUND

On June 2, 1608, Captain John Smith and his hand-picked crew of 13 left Jamestown Fort in their *Discovery Barge*, heading downriver on the James on an ebb current. They took a tow in the lower river from the Virginia Company ship *Phoenix*, which had just brought a new supply of colonists and various necessities and was now headed back to England.

Just outside Cape Henry, the *Phoenix* dropped the tow line, and Smith and his crew headed north to explore the Chesapeake. They took a short run up the seaside of what is now Virginia's Eastern Shore and planted a cross near modern-day Oyster, before turning back into the Bay. Here they encountered two Accomack fishermen with spears who directed them to the chief's town near present-day Cape Charles. The Accomack chief received them hospitably and told them a great deal about the lands to the north, which were rich in shells for making beads and good soils for growing crops, but not for any of the resources for which Smith was searching.

After a short diplomatic visit to the Accomack chief's brother, leader of the town of Accohanock on today's Occahannock Creek, Smith pressed north until he spied Watts and Tangier islands to the northwest. He headed for them, but then he and the crew were hit by a fierce but short Chesapeake summer thunder-squall. They stood up to it but tucked in behind Watts Island for the night before exploring Tangier Island the next morning and naming the island complex Russell's Isles for Dr. Walter Russell, the expedition's "Doctor of Physic."

Now short of drinking water, Captain Smith and his crew headed for the first big river they could find, which he called "Wighcocomoco," though it would in time come to be called Pocomoke. They explored up to today's Pocomoke City. There they filled their water kegs with muddy water, an irony since they would have found plenty of sweet water had they continued a couple of miles further upriver.

Coming out of the Pocomoke, they rowed around Great Fox Island (just off the southern tip of the Cedar Island Marsh, which separates Pocomoke Sound from Tangier Sound), worked their way past the Little and Big



PHOTO BY STARKE JETT

The Pocomoke River is a paradise for birds and other wildlife.



PHOTO BY STARKE JETT

The peaceful Pocomoke invites exploration.

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An aerial view of Tangier Island
PHOTO BY STARKE JETT



PHOTO BY STARKE JETT

The town of Crisfield provides good facilities for cruising boaters, and a chance to watch watermen at work.



PHOTO BY STARKE JETT

The Tangier History Museum, the Chesapeake Gateway on Tangier Island, offers free use of canoes and kayaks to paddle the island's water trails.

Annemessex rivers and found some very warm but fresh water near today's Deal Island before encountering another, fiercer thunder-squall around Sharkfin Shoal, off the mouth of today's Wicomico River.

This storm was more vicious than the earlier one, blowing out a sail, dismasting the boat, and forcing the crew to bail for their lives. Disabled and facing a two-day nor'wester after the squall, they limped under oars to the large nearby island that is today named "Bloodsworth." There they made repairs while enduring enough additional rain and biting insects that they named the island "Limbo." Resuming on June 8, they made their way around the head of Tangier Sound before entering the Nanticoke River.

EXPLORING THE LOWER EASTERN SHORE AND TANGIER SOUND TODAY

The region from Cape Charles (the land at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, not the town of the same name a few miles to the north) up to Fishing Bay, at the head of Tangier Sound, is still the most thoroughly rural part of the Bay region. It is an area of high salinity, fringed by broad marshes with low, fertile land behind them and multiple short creeks with good harbors for boats but not ships.

Though their stocks are somewhat depleted by heavy harvests and localized water pollution, this part of the Chesapeake Bay is still rich in fish, shellfish, and waterfowl, including wintering ducks, geese, and swans as well as summering brown pelicans and eight species of heron. The fish and shellfish sustain the offshore island communities of Tangier, Virginia, and Smith Island, Maryland, though both communities are struggling today to make a living off "the water business." Both towns are aware of their region's ties to Captain John Smith, and they welcome visitors interested in following in his wake.

This area of the Chesapeake has changed considerably in one important way since Captain Smith and his crew came through in June of 1608. Rising sea level, land subsidence (sinking), and long fetches of open water have together allowed wind and waves to chew at marshy shorelines and even wooded "hammocks," greatly reducing land acreage. The islands to the north of Smith Island, several of which made up the then-large Limbo Isle on which the English repaired their *Discovery Barge* after the vicious storm, have been hit particularly hard, with land/marsh loss obvious to observers over periods of time as short as ten years.

Even so, exploring the Lower Eastern Shore and Tangier Sound offers a stirring taste of the Chesapeake that Smith saw, and these broad open waters offer the same challenges to a modern explorer's seamanship that they did to Smith and his crew four centuries ago.

Good Vessels for Exploring



PADDLE CRAFT (CANOES AND KAYAKS)

Experienced sea kayakers regard Virginia's Eastern Shore and the islands of Tangier Sound as a wonderful playground, but they must call on all of their training, experience, and stamina to handle these broad open waters, with strong winds, currents, and occasional storms.

For folks with less experience, there are several outfitters available to lead explorations of these waters, and both Tangier and Smith islands offer protected water trails for paddle craft. Outfitters also operate on the Eastern Shore mainland, especially in Onancock, Virginia, and the complex of protected water trails at Janes Island State Park in Crisfield, Maryland. The award-winning Janes Island Trail is also appropriate for intermediate paddlers who want self-guided explorations.



SKIFFS AND RUNABOUTS

Sturdy open powerboats of 17 to 28 feet make good vessels for exploring the Bayside Eastern Shore and Tangier Sound, if operated prudently. Skippers of boats at the low end of that range will have to watch the weather carefully and be prepared to slow to their lowest planing speeds if caught out in the open by strong winds and storms. They and their crews will be happiest in adverse conditions if they are clothed appropriately, including sturdy foul-weather gear and deck boots.

In Tangier Sound, it is particularly important to pay attention to the combined effects of wind, tide level, and current. The sound offers a fascinating combination of shallow underwater grass flats, sand beaches, and channels that delight anglers, bird watchers, and beachcombers. But inattention to tide levels can leave explorers stranded among a fierce array of biting insects for hours. The best time to visit an island is on a rising tide.

Also, when visiting islands, be sure to check for "No Trespassing" signs. Some islands are in private ownership and landing is prohibited. Other islands are closed periodically to protect nesting birds, especially herons, brown pelicans, gulls, black skimmers, and shorebirds such as willets.

In these waters, a tidal current running against the wind creates a nasty mess of short-period, tall, breaking seas that can cause a small powerboat a lot of trouble. The same wind blowing with the current merely produces easy swells. Captain John Smith and his crew kept sailors' eyes to fair winds and currents, and they waited out adverse conditions. Small boat skippers will do well to follow that example religiously.



CRUISING POWERBOATS, TRAWLERS, AND SAILBOATS

Virginia's Eastern Shore and Tangier Sound are great and underutilized grounds for cruising boats. In particular, Cape Charles, Onancock, Tangier, and Crisfield offer good facilities. At the head of Tangier Sound, boat captains can either turn east into the Nanticoke to visit Vienna, Maryland, and Seaford, Delaware, or go west through Hooper Strait and across the Bay's main stem to Solomons Island at the mouth of the Patuxent.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION *Chesapeake Bay Gateways*

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail is part of a much larger story of the Chesapeake Bay—a story with rich historical, natural, and environmental chapters for your discovery and enjoyment. Throughout the Bay watershed a variety of parks, wildlife refuges, maritime museums, historic sites, and trails tell their part of the Chesapeake story. These special places are part of the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network. Visit them to experience the authentic Chesapeake.

Many of these Gateways to the Chesapeake are located along the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. Those with boating access to the water trail are noted throughout this Boater's Guide. Others await your exploration by land. You can make virtual visits via the Gateway Network's website at www.baygateways.net where you can find sites by name, location, activities, or themes. As you travel the Lower Eastern Shore, learn more about important Chesapeake connections at the following Gateway sites and attractions.

CHESAPEAKE GATEWAYS ALONG THE LOWER EASTERN SHORE

Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge • Cape Charles, VA

Kiptopeke State Park • Cape Charles, VA

Cape Charles Historic District • Cape Charles, VA

Onancock Historic District and Town Wharf • Onancock, VA

Virginia Eastern Shore Water Trails • Onancock, VA

Tangier History Museum and Intercultural Center • Tangier, VA

Smith Island Center • Princess Anne, MD

J. Millard Tawes Museum & Ward Brothers Workshop • Crisfield, MD

Janes Island State Park • Crisfield, MD

Delmarva Discovery Center • Pocomoke City, MD

Pocomoke River State Forest and Park, Pocomoke City, MD

Sturgis Memorial Gateway • Snow Hill, MD



PHOTO BY STARKE JETT



PHOTO BY DEANNA BEACHAM

Boaters of all types of vessels will enjoy Onancock Creek and the Town of Onancock on Virginia's Lower Eastern Shore.

Trip Itineraries

KIPTOPEKE STATE PARK TWO-WAY, 8–12 MILES



Kiptopeke State Park (named after a 17th-century Accomack chief) is a great facility for bird-watching, fishing, and exploring the southern end of the Eastern Shore. The boat ramp at the park is protected by two long breakwaters (“The Concrete Ships”), but once outside of them, a small boat or kayak is in wide-open water.

It is just under four miles down to Fishermans Island—where Captain John Smith and his men met the two Accomack spear-fishermen—which supports the northern end of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. At that point, an explorer can turn east into the small boat channel that leads inside the barrier island that Smith’s crew named for him or turn west to circumnavigate Fishermans Island, which is part of a national wildlife refuge of the same name. This is an interesting small boat trip, but the exposure to open water and powerful currents around Fishermans Island demand the most prudent level of seamanship. Bear in mind, there is no public access to the island.

ONANCOCK CREEK AND TOWN TWO-WAY, 6–10 MILES



Anyone in a cruising boat entering Onancock Creek can look forward to five miles of well-marked channel leading from open beaches and broad salt marshes past attractive older waterfront houses with natural shorelines and big trees to the town’s docks. These docks accommodate everything from tugs pushing oil barges and large, fast gillnet boats to charter fishing boats and the colorful craft of the local kayak outfitter.

Smith didn’t stop here, but he mapped the mouth of the creek. The Accomack had lived on the creek for centuries. English settlers moved in by the mid-17th century. The Virginia Assembly officially established the town of Onancock as a deepwater port-of-entry in 1680. Today, the creek and the town are well set-up for cruising boats, both sail and power. The creek is also made to order for skiffs, runabouts, canoes, and kayaks. Small-craft operators need to be careful of larger boats’ wakes and pay attention to wind and weather.



PHOTO BY STARKE JETT

Parts of the Pocomoke River are tidal cypress swamp well suited to exploration by canoe and kayak.

POCOMOKE RIVER: WINTER QUARTERS TO REHOBETH ONE-WAY, 8 MILES



Check the Pocomoke River current table before you paddle this pretty stretch, and make sure you go with the flow. Then you’ll be in for a delightful canoe or kayak trip through the river’s transition from brackish marsh with scattered cypress trees to full-blown freshwater tidal cypress swamp.

This is also a fine trip for a skiff or runabout, or even a cruising sail or powerboat, whose skipper might be tempted to explore all of the lower river below Pocomoke City. For small boats, the river from Pocomoke City to Snow Hill, Maryland, and even above is lovely too, as is the tributary Nassawango

Creek. These sections are not, however, on the Captain John Smith trail, as he went no further than Pocomoke City. (If he had, he would have found better drinking water.) In addition to two free launch ramps, Pocomoke City offers a linear marina/park along its waterfront where cruising boats can tie up.

Whatever your craft, don't miss the new Delmarva Discovery Center, now open in the former Duncan Brothers Chevrolet building right on the waterfront. If you happen to find yourself in Pocomoke City without a boat, check with the Discovery Center about a trip on the *River Queen*.

JANES ISLAND WATER TRAILS MOSTLY TWO-WAY, 2.5–12.5 MILES



Janes Island State Park sits on a long canal, opposite a large island cut by multiple tidal creeks. The longest trail in this award-winning system of water trails circumnavigates the island. All of the trails are well-marked, and the park offers downloadable GPS coordinates for them, as well as an online order form for a printed trail guide from Maryland's Department of Natural Resources. The trails are great for bird-watching and shallow water fishing.

SOMERS COVE MARINA TO TANGIER AND SMITH ISLANDS



TWO-WAY, 30 AND 24 MILES, ROUND-TRIP, RESPECTIVELY

There are people who have paddled these long routes, but they are exceptional. A better option is to take a ferry and arrange to paddle the trails on the island. Many more people have made the trip in sturdy 17- to 28-foot open powerboats, after careful checks of wind and water conditions. Cruising sail and powerboats routinely make this trip, too, though they must take great care with the channels around the islands. Lodging is available for those in open boats who want to visit overnight. Somers Cove Marina offers a launch ramp and full marina services for cruising boats.

RESOURCES & CONTACTS

For a copy of *Janes Island Water Trail Guide*, visit:
www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/eastern/janesisland.asp

For a copy of *A Paddler's Guide to Smith Island*, visit:
www.paddlesmithisland.com/trails.html



PHOTO BY MIKE LAND

Janes Island State Park is dissected by many small waterways, including more than 30 miles of trails marked for paddlers.

TRAILHEADS

ALONG THE LOWER EASTERN SHORE

Kiptopeke State Park, Northampton County, VA  
 37° 10' 02" N, 75° 59' 15" W
 757-331-2267, www.dcr.virginia.gov/state_parks/kip.shtml
 (ramp fee)

Cape Charles Harbor, Northampton County, VA   
 37° 15' 53" N, 76° 00' 55" W
 757-331-2357, www.capecharles.org
 (ramp fee)

Onancock Town Wharf    
Accomack County, VA
 37° 42' 42" N, 75° 45' 20" W
 757-787-7911, www.onancock.com, www.onancock.org
 (ramp fee)

Tangier Island, VA    
 37° 49' 47" N, 75° 59' 36" W
www.tangierisland-va.com
www.tangierhistorymuseum.org

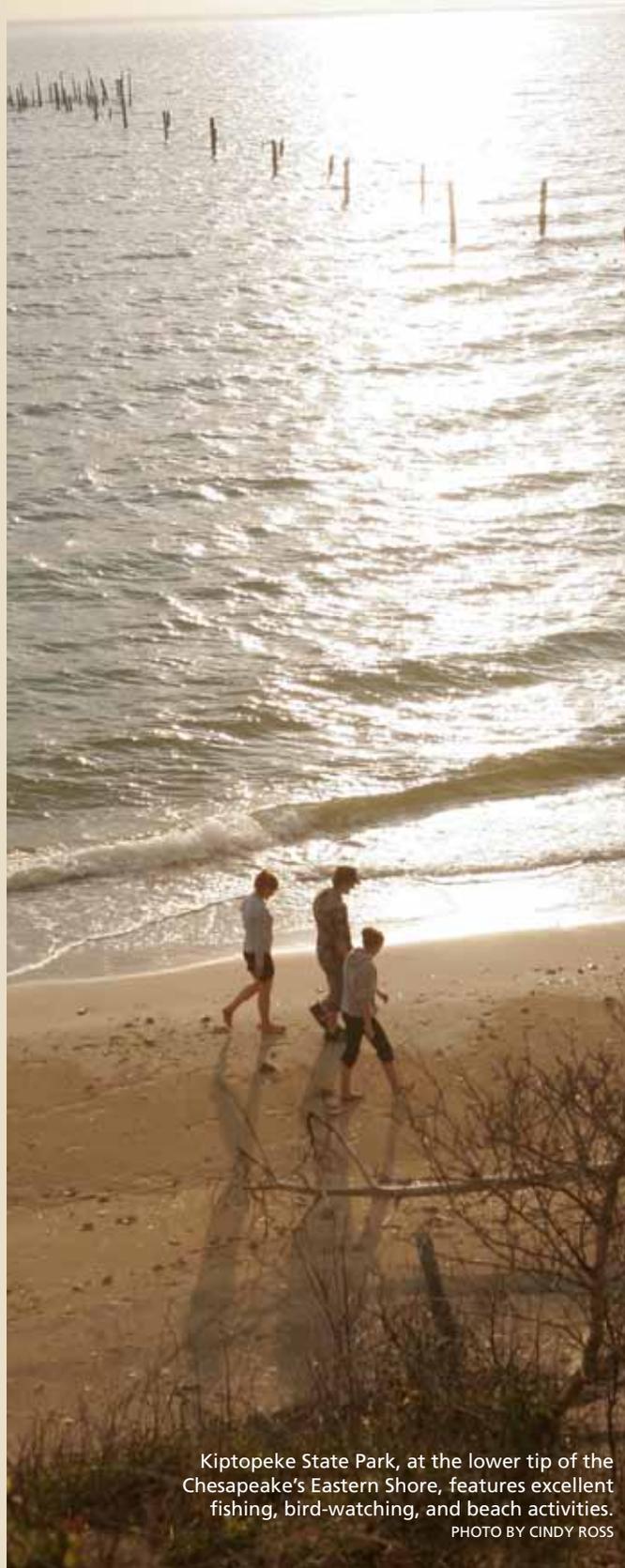
Laurel Street Boat Landing    
Pocomoke City, MD
 38° 04' 24" N, 75° 34' 20" W
 410-957-1333
www.cityofpocomoke.com (Click on "Tourism.")

Rehobeth Boat Ramp, Pocomoke River, MD  
 38° 02' 19" N, 75° 39' 41" W
www.dnr.state.md.us/boating/boatramps.asp
 (Search Somerset County.)

Somers Cove Marina, Crisfield, MD    
 37° 58' 32" N, 75° 51' 35" W
 410-968-0925
www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/eastern/somerscove.html
 (ramp fee)

Janes Island State Park, Crisfield, MD  
 38° 00' 35" N, 75° 50' 53" W
 410-968-1565
www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/eastern/janesisland.html
 (ramp fee)

NOTE: Trailheads indicate access points for the suggested itineraries. River maps indicate trailheads as either private or public. All launch sites are open to the public. Those listed as private are part of privately owned businesses. Public trailheads are located on local, state, or federally managed properties. Fees may be charged at any of the launch sites and are subject to change. Contact the site directly for the latest information.



Kiptopeke State Park, at the lower tip of the Chesapeake's Eastern Shore, features excellent fishing, bird-watching, and beach activities.
 PHOTO BY CINDY ROSS

The Lower Eastern Shore

SECTION MAP

-  TRAILHEAD (PUBLIC)
-  TRAILHEAD (PRIVATE)
-  TRIP ITINERARY



NOT FOR NAVIGATION
NOT TO SCALE



| LINKS TO ONLINE MAPS | CLICK SOURCE ▼ |
|----------------------------|----------------|
| Cape Charles Harbor | GOOGLE NOAA |
| Janes Island State Park | GOOGLE NOAA |
| Kiptopeke State Park | GOOGLE NOAA |
| Laurel Street Boat Landing | GOOGLE NOAA |
| Onancock Town Wharf | GOOGLE NOAA |
| Rehobeth Boat Ramp | GOOGLE NOAA |
| Somers Cove Marina | GOOGLE NOAA |
| Tangier Island | GOOGLE NOAA |

**Captain John Smith Chesapeake
National Historic Trail**

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



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