

Around the Delmarva Peninsula

Lately I've found myself dreaming of where I've not been, and how I'll get there in my dreams as that's the only way it seems it will take place. When I do travel to the Grenadine Islands each winter and meet new and old friends they always comment about the wonderful sailing and cruising around my home port, the Chesapeake Bay. I've been on the bay for over 20 years, sometimes feeling I've seen it all and been everywhere, other times wondering just what's up 'that ' river, one of about 55 that's within a day or two's sail from my slip; like the Potomac and Susquehanna. So when two young(er) mates asked me if I'd join them for an around the Delmarva Peninsula (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia) cruise last winter as we languished over the long cold months and a rum in a bar in Philadelphia in March, it seemed like the right thing to agree to and we got underway early June for a week's cruise.

Both crew members had little cruising experience, no offshore work and hadn't any night sailing experience but are very good sailors, eager, smart and strong and I was able to be a 'crew consultant' by request, meaning not allot of grinding and heavy lifting for me and they both heartily agreed.

The Eastern Shore is a narrow 135 mile long peninsula. The words remain capitalized as an unofficial practice to this day. It has been called the Eastern Shore since the Jamestown colonists first looked across the Chesapeake; John Smith mentioning it in his writings. It was our intention to head north from our port in Oxford MD to the C&D Canal then east through that 14mile ditch, southeast in the Delaware Bay to Cape Henalopen and then south offshore by way of the Atlantic to the bay entrance at the bridge tunnel and Cape Charles; then cruise north back to the Choptank River's mouth and the last leg to the Tred Avon River and Oxford thus completing the circle.

Rock Hall and its lovely Swan Creek became our first anchorage, and we were halfway to the C&D at that point. Good southerly wind astern drove us up the middle of the bay, the Island Packet 35 'Odyssey's two head sails set wing on wing as this boat felt like a old Desoto with both front doors open, pushing forward. The next afternoon we made the C&D Canal, separating the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and the Delaware River and its bay. The canal was an early idea from about 1650, though wasn't dug until 1804 and not completed until 1829. As larger ships were built, it has taken on its current configuration, 450 feet wide and 40 feet in depth, with a current that was a blessing at the end of a long sail day, delivering us to the eastern side in short order and another lovely anchorage behind Reedy Island overlooked by a nuclear tower, it was a mixed viewscape.

The Delaware Bay has none of the gentleness of the Chesapeake, it's all business with plenty of shoals and when the wind is against the tide, steep and choppy making it universally disliked by complete agreement among cruisers. I've sailed it many times, for a few years even moored in one of its rivers. Being underway with crew having always single handed, and on a favorable tide, with a pretty summer day and flat water, porpoises aplenty, all was good with the cruise and smiles were contagious. At our day's destination, the town of Lewes in Delaware at Cape Henalopen, there was few services but we managed to get some diesel and then leave the narrow canal to a

harbor built of a stone breakwater, and a spit of sand with the Atlantic thundering on the other side.

The next day we were heading into nice big square ocean swells and later as the sun set, I was back steering by the stars in motion and the crew began with navigation by radar and charts, all the while the smell of burning pine forests waiving past as a North Carolina forest was engulfed and winds forward brought us the scent from afar. We passed Ocean City MD, then Assateague Island, famous for its herd of horses. The ponies have roamed the beaches, pine forest, and salt marsh of Assateague Island since the 1600's. Assateague Island National Seashore has a combined total of over 300 wild ponies in Maryland and Virginia. Some people believe the horses arrived on Assateague's shores when a Spanish galleon ship (with a cargo of horses) sank offshore. Here the first known landing took place on the Eastern Shore by Verrazano sailing for King Francis of France, he made landfall and reported meeting an Indian boy on the island. In the morning the seas flattened, the breeze freshened and all things previous that were uncomfortable were forgotten. We began observing pods of porpoises circling fishheads to capture their breakfast and that would have been entertainment enough, but the sailing was terrific and into the bays southern end we came now passing under the bridge tunnel. The previous day, sailors spotted a whale at this same fix. The 17.6 mile long Chesapeake Bay Bridge and tunnel, completed in 1964 took three and a half years to build. The first idea was to build a huge bridge to Norfolk but the navy objected citing the possible ruins of a bombed bridge may prevent the fleet from leaving. And so a system of twelve miles of bridges, two tunnels both under channels, and four islands were built to connect it all together.