

Easy Going, Eastern Shore

by Terry Conway

Skipjacks are a vanishing breed. First launched at the turn of the 20th century, these Chesapeake Bay workboats were an integral part of an oyster harvest that once assumed all the frenzy of the California Gold Rush. Recognized for their beamy, open decks, skipjacks were built to brave the wintertime rigors of dredging oysters under sail.

But as the Bay's ecology and the overall economy sputtered in the 30's and 40's, the skipjack numbers tumbled. When the skipjack was nominated to the National Register in 1985, a mere 35 vessels remained. Today, the number of skipjacks still working the bay has shrunk to less than a dozen.

Maryland's Eastern Shore Dogwood Harbor serves as the homeport of the largest skipjack fleet in North America. They have no winches, just manpower and blocks and tackle. These boats are favored for their abilities in light wind and excellent performance in heavy winds.

During the warmer months, 32 visitors step aboard the *H. M. Krentz*—a 70-footer with 2,000 square feet of sail—experiencing the life of a waterman. They help haul up the sails, learn about dredging oysters, marvel at the osprey, heron and



Skipjack "H.M. Krentz"

waterfowl as well as take in the alluring tidewater and historic towns.

The Eastern Shore is a swatch of Maryland topography that is dotted with quaint fishing villages and marinas stretching along the Chesapeake Bay and flanked by farmlands, rolling hills and picturesque horse farms. The protected and preserved enclave is celebrated for its restaurants' enticing aromas of steamed crabs and fresh-baked breads, a myriad of shops, galleries, enchanting inns, B&Bs,

and museums along with well-worn bike paths and plenty of ways to get out on the water.

St. Michaels, Tilghman Island, Oxford and Easton are what most people think of when they talk about the Eastern Shore. Filled with colonial charm, the quaint maritime village of St. Michaels attracts thousands of sailing enthusiasts each summer as tall-masted boats race around the buoys in the broad Miles River. Tree-lined streets, beautifully restored and historic homes, restaurants, specialty and antique shops, and B&Bs

elegantly line Talbot Street.

Just beyond the glitter of the year-round getaway and attractions, the gritty life of the area's watermen unfolds—oyster dredgers, crabbers, fishermen and boat builders who squeeze out a hard-scrabble living from the Bay as they have done for generation after generation. Those tough, hard-bitten watermen were featured in the epic novel "Chesapeake," researched and written by author James Michener, who leased a ranch-style home near St. Michaels.



Knapps Narrows Bridge

A visit to the Maritime Museum on the waterfront tells the history and tradition of the bay. The Steamboat Building exhibit deals with the use of the

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bay as a highway and the change from sailing to motor-driven vessels. In the boatwright shop, visitors can watch craftsmen restore and maintain the museum's boat collection.

If you get hungry, stop by Carpenter's Street Salon, a cheery, high-ceilinged spot where locals chow down on burgers, fries and delectable crabcakes. Down the road, you'll find Baines, a free-and-easy diner that serves up overstuffed sandwiches, subs and tasty homemade chicken noodle soup. Madison's West End on Talbot Street offers an art-deco style that's hung with bright original paintings and a menu that includes duck breast with savory peppercorn sauce and Pasta New Orleans with sausage, duck, shrimp, peppers and tomatoes.

Fifteen winding miles west then south at the end of Rt. 33 resides Tilghman Island. Neatly tucked away, it reveals a near perfect balance of nature, water and people. Geese paddle down the river, while egrets find haven in marsh grasses and gulls swoop to snatch what the fishermen



Harrison's Chesapeake Inn

lost.

A landmark on Tilghman Island is the bridge connecting the mainland to Knapps Narrows, a spot that's been pinpointed on maps since the late 1600s.

A unique residential house style (circa 1890) that features three gables on the front of the structure, it has become a Tilghman classic.

Local chefs here blend the freshest seafood with zesty local produce serving up not only regional cuisine, but terrific dishes splashed with island and European touches.

Harrison's Chesapeake Inn entertained its first guests ten years after the

Civil War fell silent. Renowned for a relaxing atmosphere and great sport fishing, Harrison's boasts the largest fleet of fishing boats on the Bay. In late afternoon, the Inn's picnic tables groan under the weight of huge platters of steamed crabs, pit beef and pork flamed on the grill, mountains of corn on the cob, pitchers of icy beer and brewed tea.

There are plenty of choices for intimate, care-free accommodations that evoke the warmth and charm of the Island. Proprietors will gladly arrange sunset sails, kayak tours, nature cruises, horseback riding or a skipjack excursion. You can set sail on one down at Dogwood Harbor, where each morning commercial watermen renew a pact with the Bay that has created the legendary maritime history and lifestyle of the Eastern Shore.

For more information call 410.770.8000 or visit www.talb-gov.org.



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