

The Changing Tides on Smith Island



by Terry Conway

As dawn arrives, a cluster of watermen pile into their trim, low-slung, shallow draught work boats. Passing ospreys perched on channel markers, they head out into the vast expanse of the Chesapeake Bay to harvest and set crab pots. On Smith Island watermen have been plying their trade for the past 300 years.

The name Smith Island is a bit deceptive since it's actually dozens of islands, some comprised only of smooth cordgrass and the ripple of marsh grass, threaded by a maze of tidal channels. Only roughly 900 of the 8,000 acres are habitable.

Fiercely independent, resourceful and self-sufficient, Smith Islanders lead an unhurried life with a sense of community running generations deep. A 45-minute ferry ride from Crisfield, on the Maryland mainland, Smith Island's marshy archipelago has preserved an extraordinary natural environment and island culture. The shallow waters surrounding Smith Island are also a fishing haven for herons, egrets, ibis, ospreys and pelicans. You frequently spy them diving and stalking, their elegant silhouettes reflected in the water.

Boats ferry visitors, residents, mail and supplies back and forth from the island daily. Still, the ferry is not nearly as much fun as sailing there. It's a 10-hour cruise from the town of Oxford, but be forewarned— arrive on a rising tide to avoid getting stuck in sand.

Most residents on Smith Island are related by blood or marriage, a bit over 200 folks spread between three tiny villages. Ewell (the largest) and



An aerial view of the village of Ewell on Maryland's Smith Island

Rhodes Point share one landmass, connected by a two-mile-long blacktop road that can vanish at high tide. Across Tyler Creek from Rhodes Point, picket-fenced Tylerton sits on its own islet. It's an island way of life tied to the simple pleasures and rugged realities of the bay.

Captain John Smith was the first European to see and chart the island during his famous "voyage of discovery" in 1608. The early British settlers arrived via the colony of Jamestown, VA to farm the soil that, even then, barely poked through the surface of the bay. In 1679 a Virginian named Henry Smith was granted 1,000 acres, where he built a substantial plantation known as Pitchcroft. The island reaped its name from this man a hundred years later.

During the 1700s, the island's fiercely independent watermen also became pirates (known locally as "picaroons"), preying on both British and patriot ships during the Revolution. In those lawless days Rhodes Point was better known as "Rogues' Point."

By then serious erosion problems saw more and more cropland washed away, so Smith Islanders turned to the bay for their living, which shaped both daily life and seasonal rhythms.

The men did the oystering and crabbing; the women shucked oysters and plucked the sweet crabmeat. The harvest of oysters was often contentious due to Smith Island's proximity to the Maryland/Virginia state line. It was re-drawn several times due to oyster squabbles.

These days the general store, post office and Methodist church form the social hub, and while there are some cars, primarily golf carts and bicycles are used to get around on paths not much wider than a sidewalk. Newcomers receive a warm, local welcome at the Smith Island Center. A member of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network, the Center's exhibits explore the human heritage of the island from the Native Americans to the English settlers to their contemporary descendants, as well as the role of the bay in their lives. One local puts it this way: "It's our provider, protector, jailer and tormentor."

A corner window in the Visitors Center frames



Crabbing boats at Smith Island.

the neighboring Methodist church, a faith introduced in the early 1800s by Joshua Thomas, a fisherman turned preacher. There has been a Methodist camp meeting every summer since 1887. During the summer tourist season the island plays host to 5,000 people, with the Smith Island Crab Skiff Races each May a big draw. A colorful general store and crab shack across from the Visitor Center, red-shingled Ruke's is a mainstay of Ewell. Close by the village's tour boat docks is the Bayside Inn, offering a family-style seafood lunch, while over in Tylerton, Drum Point

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Ewell Tide Inn, Bed & Breakfast.

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Market offers basic grill fare including delicious, juicy crab cakes.

The Ewell Tide Inn is a three-story white clapboard farmhouse that offers four guest rooms overlooking the Bay. Bikes, canoes and small fishing skiffs are available for guests, as well as dock space. Tylerton offers the Inn of Silent Music, an old-fashioned farmhouse surrounded on three sides by water. The "English cottage" rooms offer a sunny interior, a mix of antiques and flea market finds, scores of books and large windows for splendid views of the sparkling water. The eclectic innkeepers pick up

guests at the village dock and will cook a fresh seafood dinner for \$25 a person.

Smith Island neighborhoods hug the narrow streets, where you will hear the twang that colors the accent of the residents. Often described (incorrectly) as Elizabethan, it's what linguists call "Tidewater English" or "Ocracoke Brogue," a unique blending of Old English, American Southern and coastal accents.

Visitors will also hear about the decline of the Chesapeake Bay and how the watermen's lives have changed dramatically. For the past three decades scientists

and environmentalists have clashed with watermen over the declining health of the crab and oyster populations, caused by pollution, disease and overfishing. The stricter regulations and declining catches of the crustacean and oyster harvest are taking their toll on the island's main source of income.

Enter the Smith Island Cake, which that has become the coin of the realm. The unique multilayer cake that is a sweet blend of flour, butter, eggs and chocolate can be traced to Welsh and English settlers who came to the island in the late 1600s. The local confection packs 8-12 pancake-thin layers alternat-



The famous Smith Island cake.

ing yellow cake with layers of homemade frosting that imparts rich taste, dense texture and structural integrity. Recently named the state's official dessert, the decadent cake has become the darling of glossy food magazines and cable network cooking shows. Orders pour in from all over the country into the recently opened Smith Island Cake company located in a former general store.

The decadent cakes have always held a special place here and in the 21st century are boosting the sagging economy of Maryland's only inhabited offshore island. A patchwork of land and water, Smith Island is indeed an island out of time.

For more information, call 800.521.9189, or visit www.smithisland.org



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