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Maryland's treasured islands

Three remote retreats that make perfect weekend getaways

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



Envision escaping to a secluded island destination where even your iPhone doesn't roam. Paradise.

Images of idyllic, uninhabited beaches and authentic local fare instantly flood your brain. Then you start thinking about long flights, passports and pricey accommodations, and the idea quickly flees your mind.

Wait — come back! Did you know that there are exotic islands just off the coast of Maryland?

Yes, really. We've uncovered three remote retreats, all within a three-hour drive from Baltimore, where you can unplug, recharge, and, blessedly, not know a soul.

St. George Island

At 2.77 miles long, St. George Island is so small it doesn't even warrant its own ZIP code. (It shares it with nearby Piney Point.)

Surrounded by St. George Creek and the lower Potomac River in southern St. Mary's County, the narrow isle has uninhabited pale-sand beaches spotted with saltwater foliage. Its landscape of tall timbers and indigenous undergrowth harbors myriad habitats for nesting birds. Native seagrass tickles age-old wharf planks, which are festooned with clinging oysters. A campsite, hotel and restaurant are the only commercial venues.

Founded in 1634, St. George Island was the scene of Maryland's first Revolutionary War battle; it was taken over by British soldiers then and again during the War of 1812. Peaceful today, it's home to watermen and summer residents seeking coastal tranquillity.

Check in at the waterfront Island Inn and Suites, where the accommodations include decks with Adirondack chairs for viewing spectacular Potomac sunrises and sunsets. Bicycles, canoes and kayaks are available to guests.

Launch a kayak and circumnavigate the island — about a 7-mile trip. For up-close views of herons and nesting osprey, cut up the midisland creek next to the Chesapeake Bay Field Lab, a nonprofit devoted to restoring oyster beds, river fauna and historic skipjacks. On the island's southern tip is the pristine, rustic beach of Camp Maryelande.

Paddle across to the mainland, to the circa 1836 Piney Point Lighthouse, the oldest on the Potomac. Climb its spiral stairs to panoramic Potomac views, and visit the museum's exhibit on the German U-1105 submarine, which sank just offshore.

Charter an afternoon boat tour of the lower-Potomac shoreline. Meet Captain Will Weston at the hotel dock and cruise to St. Mary's City, the living-history museum of Maryland's first colony (think Williamsburg in Maryland), and the replica of The Dove, the 1634 trade vessel from Lord Baltimore's expedition to Maryland. End the day with a plate of garlicky mussels and a frosty Land Shark lager, at sunset from the deck of the Island Inn Crabhouse.

Getting there: St. George Island is 100 miles from Baltimore, about a 2 1/2-hour drive.

Stay: Island Inn & Suites, where rates start at around \$79. 16810 Piney Point Road. Go to stgeorgeislandinnandsuites.com or call 301-994-1234.

Dine: Island Inn Crabhouse, 16810 Piney Point Road, 301-994-1234.

Activities: Captain Will Weston Charters, lisaannecharters.com, 301-481-0478. From \$200 for a half-day. Also, check out Piney Point Lighthouse, 44720 Lighthouse Road, 301-994-1471. Adult admission is \$3.

Smith Island

Its secluded setting surely explains why Smith Island remains an obscure destination for many. A tiny chain of marsh-laden islets, its bird and dragonfly populations overwhelmingly outnumber its 240 human inhabitants. Getting there requires driving to Crisfield, in Somerset County, and catching a 12:30 p.m. ferry — crowded with bundles of provisions and mailbags — 12 miles across the Chesapeake Bay. Captain Larry Laird, operator of the Smith Island ferry, advises visitors that "reservations aren't necessary but have your feet onboard 10 minutes before departure."

Visited by John Smith in the 17th century while he was charting the Chesapeake, the island is named for Henry Smith, one of the original landholders. Most present-day natives are descendants of the original settlers. They speak quirky "Tidewater English," a fusion of Elizabethan English and American Southern drawl: "Ye" instead of you, house sounds like "hay-ose," about is "a-bow-t." And there's backwards talk too. "Her cake tastes bad" means it tastes great.

Smith Islanders reside amid three fishing villages; Ewell (pronounced "YUL"), Rhodes Point and Tylerton. Tylerton is the most primitive — and authentic — accessible from the others only by boat.

Tylerton's only innkeepers, Linda and Rob Kellogg, meet guests at the town dock in a golf cart. The Inn of Silent Music has three cozy guest rooms. Happily, Linda Kellogg is a gourmet cook, since Tylerton's single public eatery is a lunch counter. Her four-course dinners, served on the porch at sunset, feature regional treasures, including crab and rockfish. Since Smith Island is a dry island, guests are encouraged to discreetly BYO.

The Inn provides bicycles, kayaks and canoes, gratis. Very little here has been gentrified for tourists. Folks travel on foot, golf cart or bicycle. Tylerton's dwindling population of about 70 struggles to subsist much the way they always have: crabbing and oystering, then selling their catch on the mainland. Incredibly, Smith Islanders have never instituted a local government or police force; there just isn't any crime.

Pedal to the Drum Point Market, the village convenience store, for lunch — a crabcake — and a water trail map. Local women visit with each other here over a slice of Smith Island cake while waiting for the mail boat, talking about tidal surges, church events and recipes.

After lunch, check out the rapid-fire crab pickers at the Smith Island Crabmeat Co-op, launched by the watermen's wives, who often sing gospel songs as they pick. Visit the watermen's crab shanties; many contain "floats" to cultivate "peelers" — crabs molting their hard shells, becoming highly sought soft-shells. Later, borrow a kayak and paddle through 8,000 or so acres of reedy water trails, nesting sites of terrapins and native birds like blue heron, egrets, ducks and the wondrous cormorant, which can fly underwater.

Tylerton after dark is quiet. The inn has no television and Wi-Fi is sketchy. Stretch out on the porch lounge and count the stars.

In the morning, the innkeepers will arrange for 87-year-old Waverly Evans, the second-oldest man on Smith Island, to take you on his boat to the spectacular pelican colony nesting in the marshes before motoring you to the village of Ewell.

Compared to Tylerton, Ewell feels almost like a big town, with its prominent microwave tower and satellite dish visible from the water. Just off the town dock sit three weather-beaten seafood joints that serve up the daily catch.

Wander into Rukes, a Mayberry-ish general store with a restaurant on the back sunporch. Across the gravelly pathway is the Smith Island Cultural Center, which chronicles the island's history. It's a five-minute walk, past the Methodist Church, to the Smith Island Baking Co., known for its cakes. Before catching the ferry back to Crisfield, indulge in a fresh soft-shell crab sandwich at the Bayside Inn.

Getting there: Catch the ferry to Smith Island at the Crisfield dock. Ferry departs at 12:30 p.m. daily. Rates vary.

Stay: Inn of Silent Music, Tylerton. Rates from \$110. Dinner is \$25 per person. Call 410-425-3541 or go to innofsilentmusic.com.

Dine: Bayside Inn Restaurant, meals from \$12, in Ewell. Call 410-425-2771.

Activities: Drum Point Market, Tylerton; Smith Island Crabmeat Coop, Tylerton, crabs.maryland.com; Smith Island Cultural Center, Ewell, 410-425-3351, smithisland.org; Smith Island Baking Co., Ewell, smithislandcake.com 410-425- 2253.

Information: visitsmithisland.com

Solomons Island

Spring, winter and autumn, weekend boaters coast in to tiny Solomons Island for festive events and cultural activities.

At the southern tip of Calvert County, where the Patuxent River meets the Chesapeake Bay, Solomons straddles the mainland and a small isle, separated by a small creek. The island has a charming boardwalk, fishing and docking piers, museums, shops, and eateries.

Settled in 1680, it was named Solomons Island in 1865 when Isaac Solomon arrived to launch an oyster cannery, attracting shipbuilders and fishermen.

Stay at the Holiday Inn, which has unexpectedly plush guest rooms and scenic waterscapes. Rent stand-up paddleboards or kayaks at the resort's marina and explore the meandering Back Creek of the Patuxent River. Or book a riveting Michener's Chesapeake boat tour with Solomons native Captain Rachael Dean.

The vibrant Calvert Marine Museum has sea life, 15 million-year-old Miocene fossils and the historic Drum Point Lighthouse. For environmental enlightenment, take the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory's Lab Tour on Wednesday or Friday, featuring researchers developing new global approaches to marine-based environmental problems.

Dine at the Blue Heron Inn's Bistro Belle Maison. Innkeeper and chef Amanda Comer (she apprenticed at Petit Louis Bistro in Roland Park) dishes up small-plated creative fare with seasonal ingredients procured from local farms.

Before you leave, visit Annmarie Garden, 30 acres of art and sculpture, many on loan from the Smithsonian.

Getting there: Solomons Island is 80 miles from Baltimore, a bout a 2-hour drive.

Stay: Holiday Inn Solomons, 155 Holiday Drive, 877-859-9095, holidayinn.com. Rates from \$130.

Activities: Solomons Island Heritage Tours, 301-672-3509, solomonsislandheritagetours.com. Tours are \$100 for an hour. Also:

- Calvert Marine Museum, 14200 Solomons Island Road, 410-326-2042, calvertmarinemuseum.com. Admission is \$7 for adults and \$2 for children.

•Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, 1 Williams St., 410-326-7420, umces.edu/cbl/visitors-center-outreach. Free.

•Annmarie Garden, 13480 Dowell Road, 410-326-4640, annmariegarden.org. Admission is \$3.

Dine: Bistro Belle Maison, 14614 Solomons Island Road, 410-326-2707, blueheronbandb.com. Dinners offered Thursday-Saturday, ranging from \$10 to \$19.

Information: solomonsmaryland.com

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