

# BRAKES ON AFTER THE BRIDGE

KENT ISLAND - SO MUCH TO EXPLORE & ENJOY

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY MAGGIE HALL

The sight of the awesome Chesapeake Bay Bridge looming ahead always gives me that special “going somewhere” thrill. Most people see it on their way to the Eastern Shore. But there’s no need to go that far to experience a getting-away-from-it-all feel.

Just take the first exit as you come off the bridge, and you’ll run right into everything you need for a great short break, be it a day-out, or an overnight.

Exit 37 puts you right in the heart of Kent Island, with miles of fascinating Chesapeake Bay shore-line, and rolling hinterland, to explore. Kent Island, settled in 1631, is the oldest community in the United States, after Jamestown, Virginia and Plymouth, Massachusetts. But despite its historic claim to fame, it is vastly overlooked by the thousands who race (or sit in traffic) across the bridge, heading to the pleasure pastures of Rehoboth Beach, Bethany Beach or Ocean City, almost a 100 miles further on.

If a luxurious night in an antique-filled bed and breakfast without the stress of a long drive is your idea of heaven, this is your place. Within minutes of the Bridge, hidden away in a wonderful wild-life world of tidal marshes, is the Kent Manor Inn. But if you’d rather spend your hard earned cash on other things, then there are several chain hotels to fulfill the overnight need. And all accommodations will put you within easy reach of the enticing “secrets” of Kent Island.

## Stevensville – the island’s #1 treasure

To the left of the Bridge as you come off it, the historic hamlet of Stevensville is a jewel in the crown of Kent Island. Here you will find, among the charming, pretty houses, a delightful array of arts, crafts and antiques and a yard alive with chickens and hens. And there is a bakery, whose speciality cakes are a marvel of confection, a restaurant that’s worthy of any city, a day beauty spa, and a bar that tells you that Stevensville is a place where “real” people live.

You might, now and then, see a face you recognize, for Stevensville is known to every headline guitarist. It’s where PRS guitars, ranked among the world’s finest, are custom-made. Paul Reed Smith, who hails from Bowie, MD, set up his speciality workshop here 11 years ago. He set a tone that has been followed by other artists and crafts people.

Joan McWilliams, who owns My Little Studio -- an eclectic mix of arts and crafts -- is passionate about Stevensville. Originally from Iowa, she and her husband, like so many others, settled in Northern Virginia when he got a job in DC. But then 25 years ago they discovered Kent Island and promptly moved. “People are on such a mission to get to the Eastern Shore, they just fly on by. Those that do find Stevensville usually discover it by mistake,” she says.

Such a mistake brings wonderful rewards. A sense of yesteryear pervades the village. The architecture of the colorfully, inventively, painted wooden buildings is picture-postcard lovely and quite sufficient, on its own, to warrant a visit. No wonder it’s on the National Register of Historic Sites. A perfect way to spend time in Stevensville is to take the self-guided walking tour. Pick-up the brochure, pin-pointing 23 stops on the route, at any of the shops.

A highlight is the minuscule train station that dates back to 1894 and saw its last passengers in 1952, the year the Bay Bridge opened. That halcyon era of transportation is captured in the delightful collection of stream-train-travel memorabilia housed in the combined ticket office and waiting room, that has been lovingly restored. The Old Post Office is another charming reminder of a world that no longer exists. It’s now occupied by the Kent Island Heritage Society, which has taken it back to its original rural post office look, along with a display of postal and mailing artifacts of the early 20th Century.

If antiquing is on your agenda, you’ll be more than happy. In the heart of the village there two antique shops, both housed in historic buildings and less than quarter of a mile away, on State Street, you’ll find Lowery-Turner Antiques. The outside of the store is nothing to look at. Just a little wooden, single-storey, building. But it’s wonderfully stocked with everything from fine Georgian furniture to early Pyrex. And if you’re looking for dining chairs, look to the ceiling. They’re strung up, to save space.

The heart of the village is bursting with talent, with half a dozen shops and studios, specializing in all manner of artistic offerings. You can order a mural or a portrait; get something crafted in stained-glass; fall in love with piece of whimsically hand-painted furniture; pick-up exquisitely hand embroidered linens; visit with an interior designer; lust after handcrafted jewelry. But no visit is complete without spending time in the wonderful building that was, in 1900, home and office to the village doctor. It now houses the Kent Island Federation of Art. There is always an exhibition, always a class or workshop. And the standard is very high.

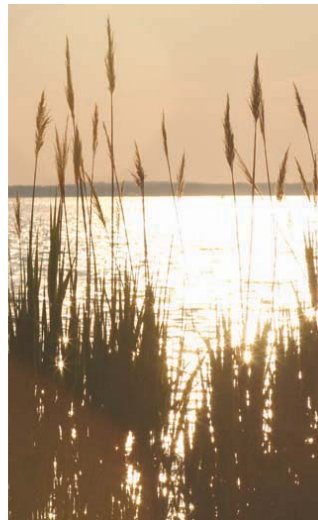
Time for a drink or something to eat. Stevensville, happily, has a “hole-in-the-wall” hangout. There’s nothing fancy about No Place, but if all you want is a beer, a hot-dog and a game of pool, this is it. But there are other options. Stevensville is about to celebrate the opening of Rustico, an Italian restaurant and wine bar. The owner/chef is Gino Romano. His name alone is an indicator of good things to come. Just down the street is the Ram’s Head, where a lively crowd salivates over a 100-plus types of ales and beers and a wide-ranging menu.

And just a mile away is the most wonderful restaurant -- in the most bizarre setting. Lisa’s Small Plates is easily overlooked because it’s in a

Tidal inlets, nature at its best on Kent Island.



Kent Island farm land meets the Chesapeake Bay at Sunset.



Once over the Chesapeake Bridge it's only minutes to this sandy trail that leads to the beach.



Historic Kent Manor Inn has helped turn Kent Island into a vacation destination.

strip-mall. Its neighbors are a dollar store and a laundromat. But don't be put off by its highly unlikely location. This tapas restaurant and bar, with a lazy-Susan on every table to make sharing easy, is a true discovery. As for the wine selection, Lisa's puts other restaurants to shame. It offers 50 reds and 50 whites at \$20 a bottle. But if you insist on spending more, the wine-cellar stocks bottles up to \$230.

### Outdoor Attractions

If outdoor activities are your pleasure, hit the cross-island six mile trail. It will take you by rolling pastures, through wooded glades, over a wooden bridge crossing an inlet. The trail is also designed for bikers. The best starting point is the Eastern end, just by Kent Narrows, so you finish the trail at Terrapin Park Beach.

And what a surprising treat this stretch of beach is. Find a washed-up log to sit on for a while and watch the traffic streaming over the Bridge and think: lucky me, down here gazing over the Bay, while they're stuck up there. But the Bridge is far enough away that you don't hear the roar of the traffic. Instead you hear the skirl of the sea-birds, the gentle lapping of the tidal waves, which on stormy days turn into beach lashing rollers. Every season brings good reasons to spend time in the 280-acre park, with its soaring trees, and winding trails that join wetlands to tidal pools and finally onto the beach. It has two bird blinds and attracts ornithologists from all over. The Audubon Society talks about Terrapin Beach Park as "a small natural gem." As for winter, it offers an opportunity to walk the almost one mile long beach, skim a few pebbles search for shells, marvel at the swooping of the blue-birds that stay year round - and all without driving far.

### Other highlights of Kent Island

Turn right after the Bridge, onto route 8 and you'll soon run into signs for Kentmorr and Queen Anne marinas. Both offer all the sorts of activities you associate with the Bay, like fishing trips, winter duck hunting, crab feasts, and beach life. Also on route 8 is Matapeake Park, which is a good place to stroll alongside the Bay. It has a public boat-launch ramp, a grouping of picnic tables and grills, and a 900 foot fishing pier. Another section of the cross-island trail (which is waiting to be connected to the previously mentioned stretch) leads from here, for five miles, down to Romancoke, at the tip of Kent Island, where there is another pier and a tremendous

vista of the Bay.

Another way of getting close to the Bay is to pick whatever produce is in season, at Kent Fort Farm, which is well signed, off Route 8. The strawberry fields, the peach orchards, the egg-plant patches, run alongside the water, making it difficult at times to concentrate on filling your basket!

To steal a well-known slogan, Save the Bay -- more specifically Stevensville and Kent Island -- for those few days when you're desperate to escape the city but don't want to spend time traveling. As guitar maker supremo Paul Reed Smith has discovered, there's sweet music to be made just the other side of the bridge.

### IF YOU GO:

**Drive:** Stevensville is 43 miles from Capitol Hill.

**Fly:** If you have your own plane, it has the landing strip; [www.airnav.com/airport/W29](http://www.airnav.com/airport/W29)

#### Where to Stay:

Historic Kent Manor Inn & Restaurant, beautifully restored 1820 grand waterside property, set in 224 acres; 24 rooms and suites, many with four-poster beds, balconies & verandahs; complimentary bikes and paddle-boats; special holiday events and winter cooking-class and murder-mystery weekends; winter midweek rates from \$160 to \$275; tel 410-643-5757; [www.kentmanor.com](http://www.kentmanor.com)

**Within three to six miles East of Stevensville:** Best Western, Sleep Inn, Hilton and Holiday Inn Express.

To rent a Kent Island home, go to [www.vacationrentals.com](http://www.vacationrentals.com)

[www.airnav.com/airport/W29](http://www.airnav.com/airport/W29)

#### Where to Eat:

Lisa's Small Plates, 1235 Shopping Center Road, Stevensville, 410-604-2550, [www.lissmallplates.com](http://www.lissmallplates.com)

**Rustico**, 401 Love Point Road, Stevensville, 410-643-9444, [www.rusticoonline.com](http://www.rusticoonline.com)

**Rams Head**, 800 Main Street, Stevensville, 410-643-2466, [www.ramsheadtavern.com](http://www.ramsheadtavern.com)

**Check-Out in Stevensville:** the bakery, 314 Love Point Road, 410-604-0355, [www.peaceofcake.info](http://www.peaceofcake.info) ; the art center, 405 Main Street, 410-643-7424, [www.kifa.us](http://www.kifa.us) ; the day spa, 102 Main Street, 410-604-1500, [www.swancovespa.com](http://www.swancovespa.com)

[www.kifa.us](http://www.kifa.us)

For all kinds of info: [www.kentisland.cc](http://www.kentisland.cc)

[www.discoverqueenannes.com](http://www.discoverqueenannes.com)

[www.crabdeck.com](http://www.crabdeck.com)

[www.islandfurniturestudio.com](http://www.islandfurniturestudio.com) ■