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Somewhere Over the Bay Bridge

Stop on Sleepy Kent Island and It'll Hit You: You're Not In D.C. Anymore

By Zofia Smardz
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"What a view," my husband said. I had just tucked into my crab cakes at Hemingway's waterfront restaurant on Kent Island, and the setting sun was shooting pink streaks across the Chesapeake Bay.



A view of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge from Kent Island, Md. (Zofia Smardz - By Zofia Smardz)

"Mmm," I replied, gazing at the lights on the distant shore, near Annapolis.

"No, over here." He tapped my arm. "I mean the bridge. Look at all that traffic."

Ha. Such a jokester. I hadn't come all this way to watch red taillights crawl across a steel silhouette as though it were some romantic sight. After all, the William Preston Lane Jr. Memorial Bridge -- you know it better as the Chesapeake Bay Bridge -- is for one thing only: to get you from the heat and hustle of Washington to the Delmarva beaches and back again.

Of course, I had always wondered about those curious place names that pop up right at the span's eastern end. Love Point. Romancoke. Now those sound vaguely romantic. So as soon as we cleared the bridge one recent weekend, when I wasn't in the mood for another couple of hours of beach traffic and fighting the battle of the boardwalk, we detoured onto Kent Island for a look-see.

If you don't know about Kent: It's the largest island in the Chesapeake and, per its own boasts, the most historic place in Maryland, having been the site of the third-oldest permanent English settlement in the Colonies, founded in 1631. The island was mostly into farming throughout those first couple of centuries, but thanks to that bridge, it's now chiefly a bedroom community to the Washington-Baltimore region.

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And I do mean bedroom. Kent, which is in Queen Anne's County, houses more than half the county population of 40,000-plus, according to Bambi Legg Pilkerton, a tourism department staffer at the Chesapeake Exploration Center in Chester. But talk about sleepy hollows: This one's about as slow-paced and quiet as you can get. Still, don't let that hum of silence fool you -- they're well hidden, but Kent Island harbors some lovely surprises.

Such as the Kent Manor Inn, the 24-room 1820 mansion where we stayed. It rose up unexpectedly at the

end of a winding road through the cornfields, its white porches gleaming in the sun.

We'd managed to miss the inn's famous Sunday brunch, darn it, but this meant we'd pretty much have Kent Island to ourselves. Once the wedding party from the day before decamped, the only other guests we saw were a couple celebrating their 35th anniversary. We all laughed about the island's snoozy cast: Their drive up to amorous-sounding Love Point (I'd pictured lots of hand-holding couples) had revealed just a residential community.

But that was okay with us. We headed to Stevensville, the island's biggest town, to hit the antiques shops and historic sites before they closed. We needn't have rushed. Most apparently had never opened. Maybe that was because there weren't any people around, except for a fellow trying to enjoy lunch on his porch while I peppered him with questions about the 19th-century post office, the 19th-century Cray House and the 1902 train depot, all looking pretty but shut up tight. "Sometimes there's people there," the porch sitter said, "but best I can tell, it's pretty sporadic."

Which seems to be the island's easygoing, low-stress way. Maybe we'll be there, maybe we won't. The sign at one antiques store gave its Sunday hours as 1-5:30 p.m., plain as day, but at 4, the door was bolted fast. We were feeling like characters in a "Twilight Zone" episode until we found three women having a lively chat in Stevensville Antiques, where I checked out an etched blue seltzer bottle for my colored-glass collection and told my husband that, no, he could *not* buy that ugly metal contraption so we could grind our own hamburger meat.

It wasn't till we reached Romancoke that we saw anything like a crowd. In the early evening, about two dozen people had set up rods and lines for fishing and crabbing on the long Romancoke Pier, which stretches into the bay. Competing boomboxes pumped music into the air, and children rode tricycles in circles on the boards beneath signs prohibiting swimming.

It all pointed up the irony of Kent Island: There's water, water everywhere but hardly a place to take a dip. Fishing and boating are big -- the island's several marinas were crammed with motor launches and sailboats -- but you can't hit the beach unless you happen to own it. "I know, it drives people crazy when they come here," Legg Pilkerton said. "But we're working on it."

Meanwhile, she urged us to enjoy the island's natural scenery, directing us toward a walking beach in Terrapin Nature Park. "It has fantastic views," she said.

"Of what?" I asked.

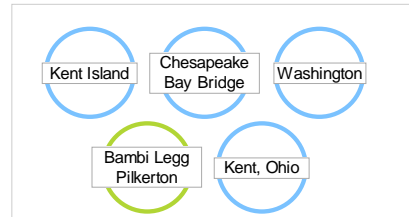
"The bridge," she said.

So after a seafood lunch at Harris Crab House, just across Kent Narrows, we struck out on the Cross Island Trail, a biking, walking and jogging path that traverses the island. As we walked, red-winged blackbirds flitted in the trees, and a heron rose out of a creek to wing slowly toward a boat with bright orange sails.

In Terrapin, a pair of swans cooed and billed on a pond, and a handful of the park's eponymous reptiles sunned themselves on logs. And then, there beyond the dunes, was the bay.

The day had been hot and hazy, but the sun was slipping back. Its light shimmered on the water like a million gold medallions and glinted off the distant steel silhouette that snaked its slithering way across the vast stretch of water, to a far shore I could barely see. It looked lacy and lovely and altogether wondrous. And I had to admit: What a bridge. And what a view.

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