

Becoming Cape Charles

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photographs by Steve Earley



With spanking new docks on the harbor front and a can-do attitude, Cape Charles, Va., takes a big step toward prime time.

Cape Charles was not on the itinerary. But we had committed that most typical of sailing mistakes; we made a plan based on an assumption. In this case, we had planned to anchor behind the concrete ships off Kiptopeke on Virginia's lower Eastern Shore after a 29-hour passage from Cape Lookout, N.C. It was the end of our month-long, 2,750-nautical-mile journey from Panama to the Chesapeake, and we were ready to drop the hook in Bay water and toast success. The assumption was that this anchorage was the same as it had always been, a good spot to shelter for a night from a strong seabreeze and potential thunderstorms. We hadn't figured on a field of spring crab pots so thick it looked like someone had shaken loose a truckload of Skittles on the water. Anchoring was out of the question.

We were losing light, and we were tired. Cape Charles was only a few miles north up the Cherrystone Channel. Maybe we could anchor in a tiny spot near the harbor entrance where we had once anchored our former boat, Luna. It was far from ideal (and possibly illegal, since Osprey is much bigger than Luna and we might have to swing slightly into the channel), but it might work. As we approached the entrance, I glanced east into the harbor and saw something that made me grab the binoculars. We motored in for a closer look. Sure enough, where last I had seen only a

crumbling industrial bulkhead, there was a set of brand new floating docks. It took us about two seconds to slide Osprey along one of the T-heads and secure her for the night.

I went looking for anyone who might know how to find the harbormaster and came upon two folks from a small sailboat that had also just tied up. "We passed him on our way in; he was in a skiff heading out," the woman told me. "He said just go ahead and take whatever slip we liked and he'd see us in the morning." She asked if I knew where to grab some dinner. Sunday night in Cape Charles, a week before the high summer tourism launch of Memorial Day Weekend? Not likely, I thought. Last time I was here, the only place open on Sunday night was the Burger King, miles away out on Route 13. But I asked a fellow off a fishing trawler called Captain Ed out of Kitty Hawk, N.C., tied up nearby. "Oh yeah!" he said enthusiastically. "Kelly's Pub, right there on the main street. You can see it from here. Try their buffalo burger, it's awesome."

"You think they're open now?" It was already early summer dark, almost going on 9 p.m.

"Sure. They're open every night. Great place." (And he was right about that.)

I'd only been back in Cape Charles for about ten minutes, but it was already clear to me that something had changed. The new floating docks--44 new slips plus T-heads, as it turns out--were the obvious outward sign, as was a local restaurant open for dinner on a Sunday night in what might still constitute the off-season. More subtle was a commercial trawler tied up in the same slips as our recreational boats, and a fisherman who pointed us into town, acting in effect as a local guide to us sailors. Maybe this doesn't seem like much. But the last time I was in Cape Charles, which was about six years ago, nothing like this would have happened. I'd always been enchanted by this beautiful, historic railroad town and had followed its difficult steps out of depression and near abandonment with a distant cheerleader's interest. It had so many natural attributes, and always seemed just on the verge of becoming a great destination, but never quite getting there. Had Cape Charles finally cleared that endless edge of almost? Had it finally arrived? Serendipity had brought us here. It was, I decided, time to revisit.

Cape Charles was little more than a mosquitoey, sandy, swampy nowhere when Alexander Cassatt came here in 1882 on horseback from Pocomoke City, Md. He was scoping a railroad route down the Eastern Shore, and in this empty place he envisioned a harbor in which ferries and barges could take freight and people from the railroad across the Chesapeake to Norfolk, Hampton Roads and all points beyond. He saw a tidy town springing up to serve the railroad, with fine homes, department stores, theaters, markets and schools. And his vision was true. By 1925 some 2,500 people lived in Cape Charles, and the New York, Philadelphia and Norfolk Railroad churned in and out of town with 41 locomotives, 2,108 freight cars, 30 passenger cars and 33 ferries, tugboats and other vessels. The town's future seemed secure.

But by 1964, when the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel opened and the last steamship had long since left, the town's need to exist--its once-critical role moving goods and people across the Chesapeake and, by extension, north and south along the East Coast--simply vanished. Like an old-fashioned caboose left on a siding, the town sat, slowly decaying, gravity the only thing really holding it in place. Eventually the town was bankrupt, most of its once-grand storefronts boarded up, the harbor barely used except by some commercial fishermen and the tugs and barges serving Bayshore Concrete on the harbor's south side (which, ironically, opened in 1961 to build the Bridge-Tunnel's concrete components).

In the 1980s and early '90s, people started stumbling upon the beautiful, if lonely, town and its Colonial Revival, Neoclassical, Gothic Revival and Craftsman style homes. They bought them for a song, and while many needed renovation, they still had good bones, and the town still had its fabulous Bayside location with its deep harbor and unparalleled public beach looking west. Some people came to stay and invested their time and hearts into reviving the town, finding a way for it to move forward from its past. But many just bought properties to flip them for fast profits, and by the mid '90s, real estate prices (as they did in many other communities) shot to unsustainable levels, leaving many investors high and dry with empty houses they couldn't sell.

There was tension between the town and local developer Dickie Foster, who had created the enormous, lavish Bay Creek community, a series of linked subdivisions and championship golf courses that literally enveloped the town north and south. While some people insisted that the new community would bring more tourism and revenue to Cape Charles, others felt that Bay Creek held itself apart, providing everything its visitors and residents needed so they could ignore the town's businesses altogether if they wished. Most boaters bypassed the town's small marina, which was tucked deep into the back of the harbor and had few facilities, for Bay Creek's snazzy new 130-slip marina in nearby Kings Creek, with its pool, restaurants and shops. Businesses came and went. It seemed like the town was a living yo-yo, with any progress only of the most bipolar variety. By the time the housing market completely crashed in 2008--09 and the recession began, some felt it was almost a blessing in disguise.

"We hit the pause button during the recession," says Dave Burden, whose kayaking and kite boarding business Southeast Expeditions has succeeded in town since 2005. Though it slowed some of the town's progress, he says, "in

the long run it will be good for us as a community because it gave everyone a chance to catch their breath and make sure we're doing things right."

Tom Bonadeo, Cape Charles's town planner, agrees with that assessment. "We've come full circle here in fourteen years," says Bonadeo, a former director of telecommunications at James Madison University who bought property here in 1997 and moved in full time shortly thereafter. "We have three historic restorations for tax credits going on here now, for the first time ever. The folks buying here are buying and staying here. They're young families who can't afford a half-million-dollar home so they come here, spend a hundred thousand, and they come to stay." Despite the past grumblings over Bay Creek, he echoes others who tell me that the relationship between the town of Cape Charles and Bay Creek has steadily improved, and that there's no question that the latter has helped the former. "Bay Creek got full-time people in here with money we needed and real estate taxes we needed," he says.

Cape Charles is a town made for walking, so in the morning we do just that. From the town harbor, it's a short stroll across what used to be a huge rail yard but is now a mown meadow with only a few train tracks left. There are a couple of bright blue Bay Coast Railroad engines here, and we cross the tracks right next to the wharf where rail barges still occasionally tie up to take on railcars. The right-of-way across the tracks is one of the first things the town wants to improve to make it safer and easier to walk over to Mason Avenue, the main street that parallels the tracks. Of course, since it belongs to the railroad and not the town, it's a matter of negotiation and patience to achieve the goal. But for now, the dirt path is fine with us, and we walk to Mason Avenue and west a few blocks to the public beach, surely one of the town's most enduring features. Long and shallow, backed by a grassy dune, the beach is the place to watch the sun set over the Chesapeake or take your kids for an afternoon swim. They even let you run your dog here as long as you do it before 8:30 a.m., and we toss the tennis ball for our puppy and say hello to the locals who wander by.

On the way back, the town is awakening. We stop by Watsons Hardware, a wonderfully throwback establishment where you can find everything from beach gear and porch furniture to hand tools and bait. Johnny goes inside to purchase some hinges and a clasp for a project on the boat; I take a load off in the rocking chairs out front and strike up a conversation with one of the fellows who's moving merchandise out to the sidewalk to entice prospective buyers. Like everyone I meet in Cape Charles, he's friendly, cheerful and more than willing to just hang out and chat about whatever. That is, after all, what the rocking chairs are for. Spend a little time in one of them and you'll quickly learn that everyone seems to know everyone here, and it would be rude if they didn't stop and jaw awhile as part of their daily peregrinations.

We keep walking and pass the construction zone that was the Cape Charles Hotel (it's undergoing another renovation and restoration) and the grand Cape Charles Coffee House, located in a restored 1910-era building that once was a bank. Across the street, the local grocery store is still closed; I'm told later that it will probably stay closed since the Food Lion on Route 13 is leasing the space to prevent any competition from moving in. Nearly every business on Mason Avenue keeps a little garden of some sort along the sidewalk, and the spring flowers make a colorful juxtaposition to the construction across the street, where a \$1.3 million upgrade to the town's force mains and sewers is nearly done. The new plumbing will serve the \$18 million, no-discharge sewage treatment plant under construction just past the town harbor (slated to be finished by January 2012).

A clear example of the town's commitment to growth and future development, the state-of-the-art sewage treatment plant is laudable and necessary. It is not, however, sexy. No, to steadily attract more tourism--and for more months than the typical Memorial Day to Labor Day high season--all agree that the harbor and waterfront are key. And to talk about that, you have to meet the man to whom everyone points as one of the town's greatest assets, Harbormaster William "Smitty" Dize.

The harbormaster's office presently shares space in a tidy trailer that houses two shower-bathrooms and flanks the fuel dock. Along the docks here, well tended gardens thrive with bright red roses and other flowers, as well as tomato plants, peppers, summer squash, rosemary, mint and thyme. By late summer, these bathrooms will be augmented by a new bathhouse closer to the new slips. Next to the older part of the harbor, a trencher works to lay in the new broadband cable that's bringing the harbor high-speed internet.

In the mid-afternoon, this stretch of the docks in front of Dize's office is busy with watermen offloading their catch into refrigerator trucks. Alicia Rachel, Kaylie Jean, Shanna & Brandon--one by one the boats offload, then fuel up and pull into their slips, where the men wash them down for the next day's work. "Only seven or eight of them now," says Kent Pruitt, the assistant dockmaster, who also happens to be a walking encyclopedia of Bay workboat knowledge. "First of spring could have twenty-five or thirty, but with the warm weather now the crabs'r movin' north and they're chasin' 'em north."

Smitty Dize makes no bones about setting me gently, if firmly, to rights when I ask him about the new slips. I have made the mistake of saying "marina."

"First of all, we're a harbor, not a marina," he says. He isn't the first person who's corrected me on this, and I ask him why it's so important to make the distinction.

"A marina puts it out there that it caters more to the yachts and sportfish, that kind of thing," he says. "We are anybody and everybody. If you've got a boat and you need a place to tie it up we can help you. We're mixed use, commercial and recreational. We don't want to segregate anybody, and I think that's what makes it unique."

Dize's perspective is based partially in his own history; he's a fourth-generation waterman from Smith Island, with family also from Tangier, whose forebears worked out of this harbor for decades. In the 1980s, Dize kept his own workboat here until he reached the decision that being a waterman wasn't going to take him into the future he wanted. He became harbormaster in 2005, but he clearly holds his heritage close and proud as he points to one of dozens of framed photos of all manner of Bay workboats lining the walls of his office. He taps a finger to a figure on a buyboat: "That's the Bessie L, and that's my grandfather right there."

There's more to it, though, than one man's background. For one thing, it's the town's heritage, too. The fact that Cape Charles has been a working harbor for generations isn't going to get tossed by the wayside just to get more recreational boats and tourist dollars in here, an attitude I find refreshing on a Bay where I've seen too many communities do exactly that over the last 20 years. "To me, these two boats fit together," Bonadeo says to me later, pointing to the trawler Captain Ed and a Hunter sailboat. "If this one can't put up with the smell that sometimes comes off that one, then he can go around the corner to a place [Bay Creek Marina] where he won't see or smell that. We know from experience that these kinds of boats mix, and there are people in recreational boats who like being around commercial boats, because we've been doing it."

For another thing, much of the funding for the new slips and harbor upgrades have come through the Virginia Port Authority, which every year grants local communities money for such projects. Out of an annual \$1 million pot in the last three years, the authority has granted half of it--for a total of \$1.47 million over three years--to Cape Charles. Much of that support is directly aimed at the commercial watermen, and to exclude them from the new harbor would jeopardize that money. The town has to match the grants with its own cash (so far about \$856,000, says town Manager Heather Arcos), and this is also why, to an outsider's eyes, the harbor project may seem to be taking longer than it should. "We're a grant-driven operation," Bonadeo says. Also, before the town could even begin to install the new floating docks, it had to get approval and funding for five new jetties--two of which are now in place--just outside the harbor entrance. The jetties will protect the harbor from storms and seas from the west and northwest.

"The infrastructure is what people don't see," says Ralph Orzo, who moved here eight years ago from Garrison, N.Y., to a home in Bay Creek. He used to keep his Pearson 424 Sandpiper there until the new docks opened. "That costs a lot for engineering and planning, and you spend a lot of money on stuff that people don't see. Like those jetties; those changed this harbor."

The town's success in getting that annual financial shot in the arm Bonadeo and others--including Mayor Dora Sullivan and Vice Mayor Chris Bannon among them--attribute to Dize. Consistently, they say, he has shown the grantors that if they fund the project, the money won't sit or go to waste. Even when there was little money, he installed a boardwalk around the older portion of the harbor, making it more pleasant and safe to walk around, and a gazebo at the end of the pier. These small improvements didn't go unnoticed by the grant-making authority.

"It's him," says Sullivan, whom you can usually find at her office supply store on Mason Avenue, where she also shows and sells her sea glass art. "He is our asset. He has a way. It's his rural style, that's the word for it. If he were any other way--his collar too high--it wouldn't work."

But Dize is quick to credit the people running the town. For example, one of the first changes he sought was a separate harbor fund. The only way to clearly show how much money the harbor was (or wasn't) generating--and to put it back into the harbor--was for the town to stop dumping that money into the general fund. Asking officials to take money from their general funds can be like asking a toddler to give up his favorite toy. But the town agreed. "There's nothing that's been done over here [in the harbor] without the town manager, the council and the mayor," Dize says.

Along with the new bathhouse, top priority this summer was improving the walk between the new slips and Mason Avenue. After that--which will hopefully be in place by next spring--is a crabhouse-style restaurant, featuring local seafood, to be built at the westernmost end of the property. In June, the harbor hosted the Delaware tall ship Kalmar Nyckel for a week, and in August it will host a Chesapeake buyboat reunion. "All stuff we could not have done before," says Arcos. "We're very excited to have these docks done."

For the people who've been steadily working toward it over the years, there's little doubt that Cape Charles is well on its way to being a prime boating destination. They can see it happening, step by step. But what about the visitors? I quizzed some of the boaters who were sharing the new slips with us during our stay.

Walker Stephens of Whitestone, Va., had sailed his Island Packet 40 Friendship over here with three buddies from North Carolina. Stephens's last visit to Cape Charles was about three years ago, and he'd stayed at Bay Creek Marina. While he agreed that the new slips were fine, he'd been hoping for more.

"The right-of-way has to be improved," he said of the walk to Mason Avenue. "And the coffee house was supposed to be open at 7:30. I was surprised it wasn't operating." I had just come from the Cape Charles Coffee House, which had indeed opened about 45 minutes late. I hadn't minded sitting outside and talking to passers-by as I waited. Stephens said they had waited too, but after 20 minutes opted to walk up Mason Avenue to Rayfield's Pharmacy, a local standby that offers breakfast and lunch at its soda fountain (we'd had a tasty, inexpensive lunch there the day before, with delicious, honest-to-God milkshakes). "The western exposure is tricky," Stephens said. "And I wish they could do something about the noise, but I can see why they can't." He was referring to Bayshore Concrete, which is admittedly an inescapable industrial presence across the harbor. It's big, it's loud and it starts operations early.

"They're obviously putting money into the infrastructure, and that has to come first," Stephens' friend Emory Sadler said.

Stephens agreed, but still said he would wait a while before returning. "I think it's gradually happening but I thought they'd have done more. They are headed in the right direction, though."

A few slips away, childhood friends Stan Bury of Lusby, Md., and Greg Carson of Jarrettsville, Md., were hanging out on Bury's Beneteau 373 Boundless. Both keep their boats at Point Lookout Marina on the Potomac (Carson has a Hunter 37), and have been coming here for years. Both like Cape Charles because of its authenticity. It's not "plastic," they said, a sentiment I heard more than once.

"We come here every year," Bury said. "It's our favorite spot. We like it because of its laid-back atmosphere, good support and the people are super-nice. We came down one day and just walking down the street we met the mayor and the police chief. And the people who run this facility will bend over backwards for you."

Both acknowledged Cape Charles's growing pains. New businesses might only last a season, and there's been a lot of stop-and-start. But they point to the harbor as an example of steady, committed progress. "Years ago all they had was port-a pottys and no shower," Bury said. "They have done huge leaps and bounds here and they still are."

As for my original question--has Cape Charles finally arrived?--the answer may come down, in the end, to something as subjective as beauty in the eye of the beholder. Cape Charles may never be a flawlessly quaint destination. Its growth will continue in fits and starts, its harbor will remain a busy place with some rough edges. Bayshore Concrete will compete with the birdsong in the morning, and you might only have a couple of restaurants to choose from, rather than half a dozen. But for me, this town's attributes lie in its friendly people, its beautiful, tree-lined streets and gracious homes, its captivating history, and maybe most of all, its very determination to go on. The place isn't perfect, nor does it need to be. It's real.