

Seaside Safari by Kessler Burnett

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Only a maniacal mind could have built this dock. The odd-sized planks erratically rise, fall, twist and wobble, reducing me to a high-wire act with each step. The “net” below is but a soupy tidal flat, where an inattentive audience of fiddler crabs chaotically flit in and out of their dens, assuring me of a creepy landing place if my third-grade balance-beam skills fail to keep me dry. But the anticipation of finally entering the oyster watch house at dock’s end commands my attention, and soon I am striding like an old salt toward my home away from home for the next 24 hours.

Like an arthritic spider, the nearly 100-year-old watch house rises above the marshlands of Smith Island, the second southernmost in Virginia’s chain of 17 barrier islands that skirt the Atlantic seaboard. Propped on slanting stilts and covered in flaking asphalt, the 400-square-foot structure is quaint from a distance. But to overnight guests such as I who haven’t exercised their wilderness muscles in ages, the promise of a day (and night) without electricity or plumbing is admittedly a bit unnerving. While photographer Michael Bowles and I have come here for an authentic eco-tourism experience, the original purpose of these shacks was purely business – Easter Shore style.

Common sights in this region during the 19th century, these wooden structures were constructed by watermen near their oyster beds, where they’d hole up for weeks on end, well-

armed, guarding their harvests from poachers. With the invention of the outboard motor in the early 1900s, watermen could travel to and from the mainland at all hours with ease, thus ending the need for these overnight camps. Out of the estimated 100 watch houses that once dotted this expanse, today fewer than a dozen remain.

This particular watch house is the inspiration behind the overnight kayak excursions hosted by Southeast Expeditions, a Cape Charles based eco-tour company owned by Dave Burden, our guide for the trip. The watch house weekends have become a popular venue for everything from bachelor parties to girlfriends' getaways to second honeymoons. Itineraries can be as rugged or as gentle as clients crave, with activities that range from shell hunting on the islands to tours of an aquaculture farm to dock-side Reiki massage administered by shipped-in masseuses to chef-prepared sunset suppers. "People who book this trip are looking for something unique," explains Dave, his shaggy, blond hair falling into his face as he lugs a cooler down the pier. "These are people who want an adventure but don't want the same adventure that everybody else has had. They want to feel like they've left their world behind for a completely different one."

And oh, what a different world this is. Pushing back the front door, scaly with peeling paint and rigged with a coat hanger as the knob, I enter an honest-to-goodness man cave. Cluttered with tools of an outdoorsman's trade – Deep Woods Off, lighter fluid, fishing books, kerosene lanterns, toilet paper rolls – it's an advanced study in testosterone. All four corners of the interior have dedicated themes (living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom) that spill into one another. The prima donna in me is grateful for the few amenities: the clean, white bed on the lower bunk and the "bathroom," a closet-sized space with a plastic accordion shower door and a portable head, operated by a series of mysterious knobs and levers that I never fully master. While my

idea of roughing it is using paper napkins at dinner, Michael is completely at home in these conditions. Raised in Zimbabwe, he has experienced countless safaris, paddled the hippo-laden Zambesi River and hunted crocodiles. Unwilling to be outdone by a man, I face my bathroom breaks with the same unfazed attitude as he, and save my cringing for behind the accordion door.

While Michael and I map out our day with Southeast Expeditions' Bill Burnham, a guide and certified Virginia Master Naturalist, Dave cranks up the propane stove and prepares a wonderfully civilized lunch of grilled chicken atop mixed field greens and pine nuts. He promises that dinner, to be a surprise, will be equally elegant. In an instant, all concerns I've harbored about surviving this trip vanish. Sometimes the assurance of a good dinner is all the encouragement a girl needs to get through the day.

After a quick "kitchen" clean-up, Bill and I climb into a pair of kayaks tethered to the end of the dock and head for the white-sand beaches of Cobb's Island. Michael and Dave opt for the speed of the powerboat, and once their wake has rolled past, we are left to glide amid the wild, gentle rhythm of the salt marsh. Our paddles create a soft splash and gurgle as they cut into the still, murky water, but that is hardly the only sound: there is the buzz of crickets in the background, along with the sporadic chatter from clapper rails nesting deep within the spiky grasses. A pair of skimmers in flight paces our boats, their fire engine-red mandibles grazing the surface to scoop up to-go meals of shrimp and minnows.

Bill encourages me to keep an eye out for diamondback terrapins poking their heads above the grasses as well as for tiny marsh periwinkles that spend their days traveling up and down the cord grass blades, running to and from the tides. Taking mental inventory, I realize that I've completely surrendered to my surroundings, grateful for the chance to float eye-level with a

world that is too easily forgotten amid the clutter of worries that are eight delicious miles away on the mainland.

Although the turtles have chosen to remain hidden, the shells on Cobb's Island are a dime a dozen. As the four of us watch the scallop-hemmed shoreline, our heads bowed in shell-seeking mode, Dave explains how, due to waves, weather and tides, these islands live in a constant state of change, shifting shape by degrees every year. The billowy sand sinks like zoysia grass under my feet as we approach a handful of sandpipers erratically darting about. At the water's edge, we stand in silence, listening to the breaking waves toss shells against one another, producing a soulful, muted chime with each buffered collision. "That's one of my favorite sounds," says Dave with soft enthusiasm.

The peaceful moment is soon shattered with my inevitable inquiry regarding the island's dark side: sharks. Dave assures me that while nurse, sand, and even small great white sharks have been sighted off the coast, they're rare. I take him at his word but inch a tad closer to his defensive tackle-sized frame as we head back to the boats.

Pushed homeward by the rush of the incoming tide, the effortless paddle back is a gentle luge ride through the curvy cuts. In no time, the drift delivers us back to the watch house, where our surprise, chef and local caterer Amy Brandt, has been ferried out to prepare dinner. While she whips up an entrée of Chesapeake Bay stew, a brothy concoction of red drum, scallops, clams and basmati rice, Michael and I move the dining room table out to the dock for an al fresco supper, complete with linens, a vase of lavender, candles and wine from Chatham Vineyards in nearby Machipongo. Dave mans the pot of steaming Cherrystone clams, which he serves with a

plastic cup of Chardonnay for dipping, an unexpected twist that gives the bite-sized bivalves a buttery flavor.

As the sun slides below the horizon, the lights from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel flicker in the distance, and the evening's ceiling is a glow-in-the-dark mosaic of planets and stars. After lingering over wine and a few hands of poker, we turn in, I on the bottom bunk, Amy in a cot, and Michael on the air mattress on the floor. As for Dave, he opts to sleep under the stars on the dock.

Dawn in the summertime marsh is like a newborn's shrill cry. Once it erupts, everyone in the house is up. The early light is intense and impatient, quickly illuminating every square inch of horizon as it reflects off the water's flat, calm surface. I wake to the sound of Michael climbing on the roof to grab a shot of the sunrise. He shouts an order to me to jump into a kayak for a photo op before the soft light loses its charm. Opening my eyes, my first thought is of Dave, who I fear has rolled off the dock and floated halfway to Bermuda by now. I peer out the window to see him safely asleep, wrapped in a dew-logged Mexican blanket like a human chimichanga.

After a short paddle, we pack up our belongings, load the kayaks into the boat and make the 20-minute cruise back to the mainland. We share the waterway with cownose rays and pass old WWII submarine watchtowers and derelict hunting lodges on Mockhorn Island, where, in the early 20th century, city swells came to shoot sage hens, ducks and geese. Staring at the clouds that dot the blue sky like pillowy snowball hydrangea, my thoughts begin the slow turn back toward reality, where deadlines, lawn care and my anemic 401K steal the spotlight from small wonders like periwinkles, the call of the curlew and the earthen hues of the marsh. I make all

those requisite promises to myself that returning travelers conjure, about keeping the memories and holding on to the calm and all the revelations of self-growth. But this time, I will.