

St. Michael's, Maryland
By Suzanne Wright

Gently, gently, using a small pocketknife, the captain of a skipjack dubbed the H.M. Krentz, an oyster dredger carefully worked to pry open the hinge of this mollusk. We seven adults hold our breath. Perhaps a moment later, we stare with wonder at the tiny, beating heart. It was an educational two-hour sail up the Miles River—like the Discovery Channel at sea.

After disembarking, I walk past the watermen at the harbor, sinewy males with forearm hair bleached golden blond by sun and appealing wrinkles around their eyes. There are also the skilled boat builders to observe as I amble through the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, an 18-acre complex of buildings that includes steamboat, oystering, waterfowl exhibits. All this and more is the bounty of St. Michael's, Maryland, the jewel of the Eastern Shore.

I passed corn and wheat fields on my hour and a half drive from the bustle of Baltimore, bound for Talbot County's premier town. I'd come to sail, to eat blue crab in all its forms and to relax in the updated splendor of the shore's most storied hotel, The Inn at Perry Cabin. The Inn sits on 25 acres overlooking the bay of this picturesque town and has recently expanded to 81 rooms, doubling the capacity of this 1816 mansion. I learned that generation after generation has vacationed here; there's even an on-staff family reunion stylist who specializes in helping plan your celebration.

While I sip a robust bloody Mary and tucked into a crab frittata on the patio overlooking the bay, I chat with Susan and Adrian, a forty-something couple who had uncharacteristically left their three kids with the grandparents in Virginia. Adrian, a Marine major, is just back from an 11-month stint in Iraq, and the two are enjoying their four-day "intimacy plan," as recommended by the U.S. military to help returning soldiers reconnect with their spouses. Adrian's parents used to come to the Inn and when he returned from duty, it was his choice for relaxation and reconnection with this wife. Looking out past the manicured lawns at the sailboats dotting the bay, I think it is a fine parental suggestion.

I'm not sure Adrian's folks will recognize the place after a recent \$20 million renovation. Gone is the chintz that bloomed under the ownership of Sir Bernard Ashley, of Laura Ashley fame. Once a working farm, then a riding academy, the small luxury hotel's new owners, The Orient Express Hotels, have designed handsome rooms with soothing cream and tan canvas fabrics, bright white wainscoting, huge marble baths, hardwood floors and Berber carpet, English and American antiques, cleverly hidden TVs with VCRs and DVDs and balconies, the better to observe the goings-on in the bay. The four-poster bed in my third-floor perch (Room 81) was simply delicious with its feather pillows, down comforter and Frette sheets.

“Town” is just a 10-minute stroll away and the yellow-shirted county employees direct traffic to ensure pedestrian safety. Besides the working waterfront, dotted with boats of all sizes and owners of all stripes. Talbot County boasts the longest shoreline in the continental U.S., so just dawdling at the water’s edge is enjoyable. At Justine’s ice cream parlor, I review my options, including chocolate-cherry and minted coffee, before settling on a yummy creamsicle shake. At that night’s ghost tour, I learn the shop is the sight of a former murder; happily, no one had resort to violence while lined up for the cold delights.

You can also explore Easton, a significantly larger burg, with 10,000 residents (St. Michael’s has about 3,000), that’s a 20-minute drive away; although not on the water, the town has a pretty, manicured appeal all its own. Even better, is the ferry that takes you to Oxford, to glimpse a town even smaller and quainter than St. Michael’s, with a gorgeous public park overlooking the water. The state’s capital, Annapolis, is just 30 minutes away and affords a wealth of things to do and see.

I opt for afternoon tea at the Inn. Yes, it’s pricey at \$30, but the fresh peach bellinis are glorious and the selection of tea sandwiches, scones with clotted cream, lemon curd and preserves and chocolate dipped strawberries is luscious. I enjoy the fat, faded hydrangeas in tidy little pitchers on the tables scattered throughout the Inn. I enjoy the homemade Old Bay seasoned potato chips and almonds in the bar. I enjoy chatting with waitress Merci, the implausibly youthful looking mother of four (“I married real young”). Afterward, I nap, then read propped up in my luxurious bed.

Upon awakening, I take a languid sunset cruise and then have dinner at the red-bricked 208 Talbot. I tuck into a glorious gazpacho followed by a smoky grilled quail salad of frisee, bacon, red grapes and toasted almonds and succulent soft shell crabs served with sweet corn and green beans.

The next day is similarly blue-skied and warm. I do nothing more strenuous than contemplate dinner. There are so many restaurants in this burg, it’s hard to choose where to eat. Staffers rave about The Bistro at St. Michael’s, so I set off for it, the smell of fresh cut grass in cool evening air. The place is in a snug, two-story home. I have a piquant salad of local butter pot farm lettuces with bleu cheese, raspberries, candied almonds and a red wine vinaigrette, and a luscious combination plate of sautéed rockfish with summer ratatouille and white cheddar grits and broiled jumbo lump crab cakes with cooling cucumber, lentil and heart of palm in a mustard honey sauce. For dessert it’s the refreshing, whipped frozen key lime pie; I don’t bother to calculate the calories.

The next day, I loll about, first by the pool, then in my plush room; at some point I wander into town and window shop until dinner time. The Inn’s Sherwood Landing is a pretty dining room with a mural of bay on one wall and an expanse of windows open to the sailboat-dotted view of the real thing; there are Asian and Indian touches on award-winning Chef Mark Salter’s acclaimed menu. Best of all, you can order room service and watch a movie from the inn’s library: I chose *Murder on the Orient Express* and a crab spring roll stuffed with pink grapefruit and avocado, fork-tender honey and tarragon-glazed lamb shank and a divine cherry soufflé with pistachio ice cream.

On my last day, I lounge by the water's edge in a white Adirondack chair, happily reading a thriller. For lunch I enjoy an astonishingly complex soup of ginger, carrot and honey puree and a softball-sized crabcake drenched in butter atop a dice of calamata olives, capers. I swipe a forkful of delicate Smoked salmon salad with pea greens and red radish, which tasted of spring. When I express my love for the Old Bay baked almonds, Merci, produces a box for me to take home.

Gently, gently, I am pried out of my chair, into the car to the airport. My heart is beating that slow cadence of a good vacation.