

# Chincoteague Island, Virginia

## simple pleasures at the end of the road

Story & Photos By Kevin F. Cox



An informed left turn off the only highway down the Delmarva Peninsula ends at an overlooked place that those in the know call Chincoteague but think of as paradise.

Virginia's Eastern Shore. A quiet, pristine, strip of barrier islands and green-glowing marshlands dotted with small coastal villages that have for years relied on crabbing and fishing for survival. Most of the big schools of fish are gone now, so the commercial fisheries have moved on and only a few watermen are seen, knee deep in the brine, raking oyster and clam beds and filling their flat-bottomed skiffs

with the bounty that once defined them. It's sad to watch the culture of these places slowly fade, succumbing to the pull of tourist dollars from the bloated urban economies of Washington, Baltimore and the Northeast Corridor. But all is not lost on the Eastern Shore. If you wander a little off the beaten path, away from the boardwalk crowds of under-lotioned sun worshipers to the north or south, you can still find a few special places that big-time developers have overlooked. Perhaps the most magical of them all is Chincoteague Island, Virginia.

The quaint town of Chincoteague is

one of those hidden havens that seems in constant pose for a Norman Rockwell painting. Small-town values and lifestyles persist here, with children walking or riding their bicycles to school, safe in the knowledge that all of their neighbors know them. It's a place where a quick trip to the local market for milk, or the hardware store for nails, can take more than an hour, because of "visiting" when you bump into local friends. A Native American name meaning "beautiful land across the water," Chincoteague Island was used for livestock grazing in the 17th century and by 1800 a few families had

settled there full-time and developed their own Eastern Shore sub-culture, complete with a unique, not-quite-southern accent that's all their own. Quickly recognizing the value of the vast natural resources of oysters, clams, crabs and fish, a seafood industry formed, which fed northern cities like Philadelphia and New York for generations. So much so that, despite Chincoteague being south of the bloody Mason-Dixon Line, the island supported the North in the nation's brutal civil war. A few old-school mainlanders still refuse to talk to Chincoteagueans just across the shallow bay.

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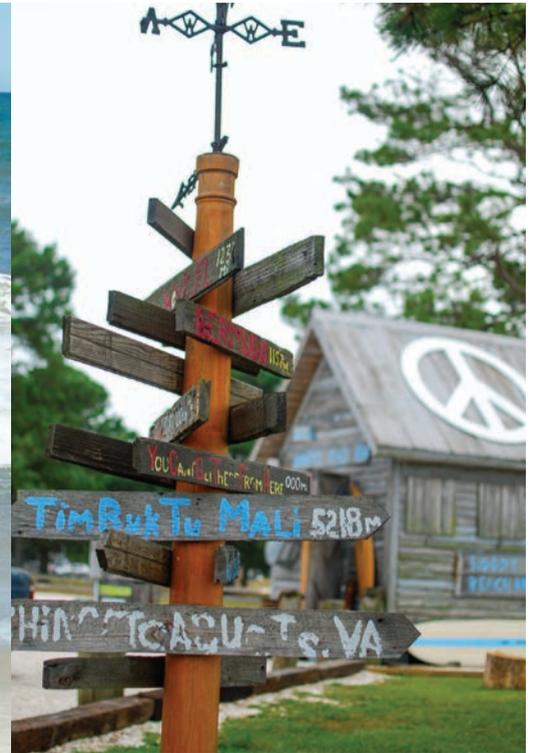
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Today Chincoteague is a quiet fishing village of 4,300 people whose main industry is tourism. But it's tourism with a velvet-lined glove, unlike the brass knuckle, neon lure of better-known enclaves along the coast. Things are on an uncommonly small-town scale here; no big-box shopping or chain-store eateries but rather, independent merchants who have lived here forever, alongside artists, naturalists and poets escaping the madness of the rest of the world. While the handful of small hotels and B&Bs book quickly in the summer season, most visitors prefer to rent village houses and waterfront bungalows dotting the island for their vacation venue. From there, they bike or scooter around the tiny island, sun on the beach and flock to annual favorites like the Oyster or Blueberry festivals.

But even in its constant state of repose, Chincoteague is not a place where you go to watch the paint dry. Family-friendly activities abound, ranging from bumper boats to go-kart racing, from fishing and boating to playing in Memorial Park and even bowling at what might be the world's most family-friendly bowling alley. Once world famous for its superior oysters, Chincoteague still offers remarkably fresh shell fish and finfish, caught daily by the local fisherman and sold only a few hours old. At Woody's

Beach BBQ, lip-smacking pulled pork, smoked ribs and fried chicken draw a constant crowd, all in an open-air setting that Jimmy Buffett would sing about if he knew of this place. Still, those looking for the flash of noisy nightlife should best head elsewhere, because an evening out in Chincoteague involves mostly dining at one of the many casual restaurants, going to whatever is playing at the Island Roxy theater's single screen and getting the finest homemade ice cream you'll find anywhere. And then there is, of course, the beach.

Perhaps what has spared Chincoteague from the brutal onslaught of eastern seaboard development is that this beach town is not actually on the beach but is instead an island gateway to one of the last undeveloped sandy beaches in the eastern United States: Assateague Island. If one were to describe Assateague in only three words, they would be nature, sand and ponies. At 37 miles long, the Assateague National Seashore is a thin strip of land beneath the Atlantic Flyway, the principle flight path for millions of birds migrating annually between Greenland and South America. Every season the desolate, wilderness marshes and salty bays of Assateague undulate with enormous flocks of geese, ducks and countless smaller birds. But Assateague's most famous residents are not waterfowl,

they are wild ponies – whose ancestors swam for it when Spanish ships ran aground offshore – and are regularly seen roaming the many marshlands or running down the beach. They were the subject of Marguerite Henry's legendary book and movie, *Misty Of Chincoteague* and attract thousands of visitors annually. Each July Chincoteague's population swells with up to 40,000 people, crowding the shores and rafting boats together to watch the town's Saltwater Cowboys round up the wild ponies and swim them across the bay from Assateague to Chincoteague, then drive them down the village streets to auction at the old carnival grounds.

With no restaurants, no boardwalk, and no tacky T-shirt shops, the single road onto Assateague leads past a visitors center, miles of hiking and biking trails and the majestic Assateague lighthouse, with its broad, red and white stripes and a constant beacon circling the sky. At the end of the road, sea oats atop sand dunes bend in the wind as the blue-green Atlantic Ocean rolls comfortably onto the sandy shore and dolphins frolic in the swell. There are few natural beaches as pristine and uninhabited as this anywhere on the east coast.

Chincoteague Island and her protective sibling, Assateague, are on that short list of places that many have heard of but few have ever visited. Just three hours'

drive from major cities like Washington DC and Philadelphia, it's a tiny place that has been obscured by the shadow of overdevelopment at other locations just a little more convenient to get to. A place that one does not naturally pass enroute to somewhere else, because the road ends at the sea and they simply don't know what they are missing. Where priorities are old-school: family, food and nature and people still keep their doors unlocked. In other words, it's a place that time has partially overlooked and those who have seen it want to keep it that way.

*Kevin is a freelance food and travel writer for numerous publications in the region. His blog, Foodwalkers, can be followed at <http://foodwalkers.blogspot.com>*



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## Kashmir

Above: Lavender fields in Pabalgam, Below: Street snacks, Old City, Srinagar

### glimpses of paradise

By Abha Dayal Kaul, Photos By Ajai Kaul

Known for its stunning beauty and snowy mountain landscapes, Kashmir has sadly been out of bounds to tourists for almost two decades. Disputed territory, border conflicts, rebels, militants and the army have kept visitors away since the late 1980s but for the past year or two, as peace and stability have crept back to the valley, travelers have begun to return to "Paradise on Earth." Nestled in the majestic Himalayas, "abode of snow" in Sanskrit, the lovely vale of Kashmir, lies in India's northernmost state called Jammu and Kashmir (or "J&K"), flanked by Pakistan and China on either side.

As an Indian, I have a special awe of and love for Kashmir. I have sported a fine Kashmiri family name for half my life, cooked and partaken of delectable Kashmiri cuisine, luxuriated in exquisite Kashmiri pashmina shawls and silk carpets but had only dreamed of visiting the land of my husband's forefathers. Finally, our family got the chance to make it there this past summer.

From New Delhi, we took a comfortable hour-long flight straight into Srinagar, the summer capital of J&K, in the heart of Kashmir Valley. At the airport we were met by three handsome young drivers and our tall, youthful guide Asil, bearing a bouquet of colorful gladioli blooms which he solemnly handed to my

husband, much to the amusement of our own youngsters.

After checking into our hotel set amidst sprawling lawns and imposing chinar trees, once the Maharaja's grand palace overlooking the massive Dal Lake, the first thing we did was go for an obligatory shikara or gondola ride. It was more pleasant and peaceful than anticipated and far from being touristy, it offered us a vision of wonderful, unexpected slices of life on the placid, blue lake from our long, low boats. At an extended string of moored houseboats, a peculiar feature to Srinagar, we stopped by one to sip some local kahwa – a clear green tea, flavored with saffron and almonds – taking in the serenity of the shimmering lake and misty mountains. It got overcast and breezy with the setting sun and we rowed into narrow waterways past lotus fields and busy markets on stilts. Fully enjoying our ride, Venice and Inle Lake came to mind during this quintessential Srinagar activity.

Dinner that night was a rare treat at the home of our friend and carpetwala, Irfan, who spends most of his time in Delhi. His professional chef cousin Waza Hassan cooked us up a waazwaan storm. This is a traditional Kashmiri meal eaten seated on a carpeted floor while being served course by course. It is usually a frightening number of all *continued on page 28*



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