

Smith Island, Maryland

For a Limited Time Only

By Sue Eisenfeld

The horizon line divides the sky from the bay with a few wisps of brown grasses in the distance. This barely-there hunk of land is Smith Island, Maryland, in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. Only when the ferry boat nears shore do you realize there's terra firma ahead. Most of the 8- by 4-mile lowland consists of marshy clusters of black needle rush, cordgrass and other salt marsh plants. A labyrinth of tidal channels and creeks snakes through them.

Few people venture to Smith Island. Basically, Smith Island has three inhabited villages—Ewell (pop. 170) and Rhodes Point (pop. 30), which are connected by a narrow bridge, plus Tylerton (pop. 59), which is separated from the others by Tyler Creek. My husband and I chose to stay in Tylerton, the most remote point, and a true anti-destination.

There are no cars, restaurants, stores, sidewalks, hotels or movie theaters on Tylerton. Nor are there any schools. Maryland's last one-room schoolhouse closed here in 1996 due to dwindling enrollment. In fact, only two commercial businesses operate in Tylerton: the general store, which opens for only



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Above: A view of Tylerton from the approaching ferry.

Below: Maryland's Blue Crab, Smith Island's main industry.

a few hours around mid-day and claims to serve the best crab cakes in the world, and a quaint bed and breakfast. Then, too, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation runs an educational center nearby. But some 20 rustic crab shanties lining the shore and the Smith Island Crab Meat Cooperative provide the community's business lifeblood. The men work the water, and the women pick crabs at the co-op. They are all dedicated to catching, preparing and selling blue crabs. It's a 300-year-old tradition.

Tylerton offers a true cultural experience. You witness the last vestiges of one of the old-time communities that is waning, as the crab population dwindles and young people move to the mainland. The island lost 1,200 acres over the past 100 years to erosion. The Army Corps of Engineers reports that there is speculation that Smith Island will be uninhabitable in 20 to 50 years.

DAY 1

Any trip to Tylerton begins in Crisfield, Maryland, on a 40-minute ferry ride. We take the boat on a Saturday, loaded with

mail and boxes. A few women and their children returning from grocery shopping on the mainland, where their cars are permanently parked, file onto the boat. We are immediately introduced to the famous Tidewater English accent (some call it Elizabethan) that rolls from the tongues of native islanders. It's a remnant of the island's British settlers ("brown" sounds like "brine," "house" sounds like "haise," and "about" sounds like "abayt"). We make friends with some kids and a couple—"foreigners" who own a second home on the island. They invite us over for 10-layer cake, an island specialty. After our host from The Inn of Silent Music meets us at the dock with a pushcart to carry our luggage, we take the boat couple up on their offer.

We saunter through the neighborhood along dirt roads—paths, really—and some paved roads, taking in architectural variety of the homes: farm houses, ranch houses, some apparently built in the antebellum period. Many are surrounded with standard suburban lawns and gardens, and several are graced with memorable bluish-purple hydrangea,

known locally as "snowball bush." Mailboxes seem to sport the same surnames everywhere, as Tyler, Marshall, Smith and Evans are some of the most common names on the island. We see the Methodist church and cemetery, a ball field and a former school house. We stop for lunch at the general store, where my husband devours some crab cakes.

I'd taken a tour of the crab co-op on a previous trip to the island, but this time it's closed. Peering through the windows, we can see the stainless steel tables and countertops and cement floors. It's the hub of the island's crab-picking industry, where women pick hard-shell crab meat by hand from their husbands' catch from June through November.

The way back to the inn is a bit waterlogged, as high-tide has drowned the waterfront streets. Most people's yards have become ponds, despite the seawall erected less than a decade ago. Near the inn, we hop into a canoe and meander through the marsh. Later we return to our room at the inn to enjoy some of the place's namesake "silent music," a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of our normal lives.

Dinner is served on the screened-in porch with two other couples staying at the inn. My husband orders soft-shells, just caught in the waters nearby. One couple is celebrating their anniversary and share their enormous bottle of champagne with all of us. This is the only evening entertainment available, so we milk it to the wee hour of 9:00.

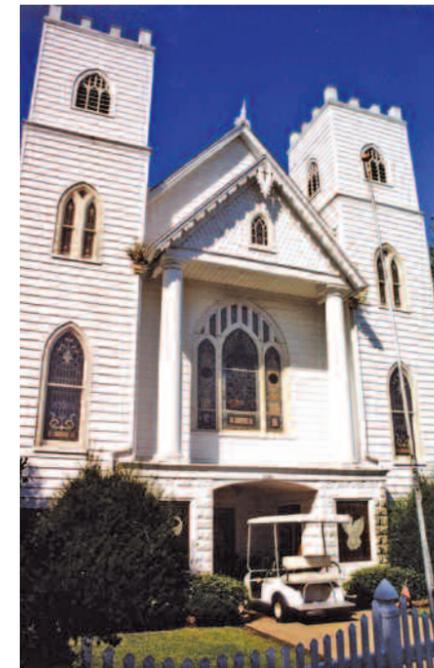
DAY 2

Sunday's a big day in Tylerton. Church is one of the only things to "do" on the island, we—a non-Christian and an atheist—decide to attend as well. Once in the building, the pastor who is visiting from the mainland, walks toward us and shakes our hands. When he ascends the pulpit, he welcomes us by name. During the service, islanders stand and ask for the prayers of the church for upcoming surgeries or weddings. The morning ends

with an 80th birthday party in the church basement.

Then, Sunday ends too soon. The last ferry of the day awaits us. So we place our bags on the cart, and the innkeeper walks us out. As we take off from the island, accompanied by cartons of crab meat, we look behind us at the trees and houses of Tylerton as it slowly disappears. We wonder, "Where have we just been?" A foreign country? A dream? Truly, an island out of time. ❖

Right: Union United Methodist Episcopal Church in Tylerton



IF YOU WANT TO KNOW...

Smith Island is located 12 miles from Crisfield, Maryland, which is about four hours from the Beltway. Ferries and cruise boats are limited. All depart from Crisfield for their 40-minute trip to Smith Island. The fare is approximately \$20 per person roundtrip. Parking is available in Crisfield at the adjacent J.P. Tawes Hardware Store for \$3 per night. For up-to-date information and reservations, call Captain Jason at 410-425-5931 or the Island Belle at 410-968-1118.



Smith Island Center
www.smithisland.org/museum.html
410-425-3351

Exhibits provide information about the history of the island, the daily life of islanders, the role of women and the unique accent and language.

Smith Island Charters
www.smithisland.us/charters.htm
410-425-4220

Go crabbing; charter a boat tour of the Chesapeake, a fishing expedition, or a sunset cruise; and rent bikes or kayaks.

IF YOU WANT TO GO...

Lodging in Tylerton:

The Inn of Silent Music
www.innofsilentmusic.com
410-425-3541