

On the Eastern Shore, a Bench With a (River) View

Sunday, May 28, 2006; P04

THE TRIP: Oxford, Md., a serene waterfront town on the Tred Avon River, where VIP weekenders and retirees commune with nature from their million-dollar porches and yachts. Visitors will fit right in if they enjoy marina life and tucker out early and easily.

MILES FROM THE BELTWAY: 145 miles round trip. Take Route 50 east to Route 322 to Route 333, which becomes Oxford Road.

BEST FOR: Boaters, Adirondack chair sitters, seafood eaters and stressed-out city folk who need vacation intervention.

THE RIDE: On a recent Saturday afternoon, traffic heading out of D.C. flowed smoothly, and we whizzed across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Of course, we were driving during off-peak hours; summer traffic on Friday nights and returning on Sundays can be infuriating. If you get stuck in a knot of cars, duck into any of Kent Island's restaurants at the Kent Narrows bridge. (For options, see <http://www.discoverqueenannes.com/>). Also, find good road-trip snacks at *Mill Creek Farms* (13685 Ocean Gateway, Wye Mills, 410-820-2323). In Oxford, watch out for the 25 mph speed limit.

THE DESTINATION: Where to sit? That was the hardest question we had to tackle all weekend (after "One crab cake or two?"). With only 726 residents, the Colonial port town may have the highest person-to-seat ratio on the Eastern Shore. Every street that runs along the river's edge has a bench, from the grassy knoll overlooking the tiny *Oxford-Bellevue Ferry* (est. 1683) to the dead end of Pleasant Street, the best seat in town to watch the sun drop. In addition, at the *Robert Morris Inn*, the reservationist said we could use the Adirondack chairs at its sister property, *Sandaway*. We quickly learned that when an Oxfordian says sit, you sit . . . and stay.

However, watching sailboats inch by is entertaining for only so long. We needed to move. The palmy town has single-digit diversions -- two dockside restaurants, one ice cream shop, one bike rental place, one museum, etc. -- and it's easy to "do" Oxford in one broad sweep. But unlike other destinations where you just skim the surface, Oxford is all about small-town immersion, an endangered experience.

Leaving behind our chairs, we followed the river's flow. On a sliver of beach strewn with pearly shells, we met a weekender from Northern Virginia who was brushing sand off the grass (he said he was trying to prevent erosion). He confirmed what we'd heard (and read on the lodging's sign), that the Robert Morris Inn has the best crab cakes around. Wishing

him luck with his eco-mission, we headed to *Mears Yacht Haven marina* (502 E. Strand, 410-226-5450; \$2.95 per hour), where we rented bikes the next day, then looped over to the *Cutts & Case Shipyard* on Tilghman Street, whose picture window frames historic wooden models. We then circled back to the inn for crispy crab cakes, but saved dessert for later -- moon pies served during intermission of the community play "The Wake of Jamey Foster" (Tred Avon Players, 410-226-0061, <http://www.tredavonplayers.org/>; \$15). Unfortunately, the sweets were better than the performance.

After the show, Oxford was as still and dark as the night sky. One switch was still on, though, and Oxford Inn proprietor Dan Zimbelman invited us to join him at the Pope's Tavern bar. Before departing, we asked for breakfast suggestions; he said he'd meet us at the *volunteer fire department's pancake-athon* (300 Oxford Rd.; \$6). The monthly event was starred on everyone's calendar.

We missed Zimbelman over flapjacks, but ended up sharing a long table with a local who, in typical village candor, said our breakfast looked like a hangover meal. We weren't hung over, but in Oxford, it's easy to act like you are. With our phantom headaches and full bellies, we plopped down on the dock and waited for the ferry to pull up. The boat had just departed for the opposite shore and we had to wait for it to cross back. But we were too busy sitting to care.

WE'D GO BACK BECAUSE . . . the soothing waterfront setting and mellow pace are more calming than aromatherapy candles.

WE'D STAY HOME BECAUSE . . . eventually, you get tired of sitting.

EATS AND SLEEPS: The *Robert Morris Inn* (314 N. Morris St., 888-823-4012, <http://www.robertmorrisonn.com/>) feels like a period piece, with some rooms dating to the 1700s. The inn also has a restaurant serving those praised crab cakes, among other cuisine. Rooms from \$110, crab cakes \$14-\$30 and dinner entrees in the \$20 range. The *Sandaway* sits on the waterfront, and many rooms have screened-in porches with river views. Rooms from \$220. The *Oxford Inn* (504 S. Morris St., 410-226-5220, <http://www.oxfordinn.net/>; from \$110) decorates its seven bedrooms a la country comfort, but its restaurant is much more city sophisticate. Sample dinner fare includes chicken with lemon caper sauce and sautéed sea bass over crab stuffing; entrees \$22 to \$28. Room rate includes breakfast and use of kayaks.

At *Latitude 38* (26342 Oxford Rd., 410-226-5303), diners can eat inside or out in a garden courtyard. Entrees include honey chipotle grilled mahi-mahi and seafood Caesar salad; from \$23. To be on the water, *Schooner's Landing* (314 Tilghman St., 410-226-0160) has outdoor seating and steamer-style seafood, sandwiches, salads and more; \$7 to \$23. *Highland Creamery* (314 Tilghman, 410-924-6298) scoops out homemade flavors such as Mexican vanilla, tiramisu and Old Bay sorbet; \$2.50-\$5.

ONE COOL DETOUR: Locals describe Oxford as *St. Michaels* a half-century ago. To visit the St. Michaels of today, hop the ferry to Bellevue (27456 Oxford Rd., 410-745-

9023, <http://www.oxfordbellevueferry.com/> ; car and driver \$8), then drive less than 10 miles along Route 33. The main strip is door-to-door shops. You can also rent a bike at St. Michaels Marina (305 Mulberry St., 800-678-8980; \$5 for first hour), visit the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum on Route 33 (410-745-2916, <http://www.cbmm.org/> ; \$10) and sample seafood at any number of restaurants. Info: St. Michaels Business Association, 800-808-7622, <http://www.stmichaelsmd.org/>.

BOTTOM LINE: Life in Oxford is so unhurried and its riverside setting is so flawless, you'll feel relaxed the minute you set the parking brake.

-- *Andrea Sachs*

For more information: Oxford Business Association, 410-745-9023, <http://www.portofoxford.com>. Talbot County Office of Tourism, 410-770-8000, <http://www.tourtalbot.org>.

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