



A VISION FROM ANOTHER TIME

The schooner Virginia offers students and tourists the chance to experience a vital piece of maritime history.

by ERIC J. WALLACE | photography by TODD WRIGHT



Previous page:
Capt. Erik Lohse
Left: First mate
Corey Roy



The morning finds Erik Lohse steering Nauticus's 122-foot-long historic sailboat, the schooner Virginia, toward the confluence of the James and Elizabeth rivers. The 39-year-old captain calls orders to a crew of about 16 volunteers, which are then relayed by the only other paid staffer, first mate Corey Roy.

The goal is to hoist the boat's eight sails up two 120-foot-tall masts before the ship reaches the Chesapeake Bay. Sounds simple, but it is an incredibly arduous task, requiring teamwork and lots of physical labor.

The schooner is a replica of a 1916 wooden vessel; its mission is educational, so the crew has to use period-correct pullies and ropes to do the job. It takes about three hours to raise the massive sails. "There's a reason Popeye had all those muscles," Lohse says, laughing.

In a Sail Nauticus T-shirt and seersucker shorts, he seems a man ready to relax, but in truth Lohse and his crew are preparing to compete in the annual Cape Charles Cup, a prestigious event in which they join 120 sailboats and two other schooners from all over to race across the Chesapeake Bay from the mouth of Little Creek in Virginia Beach to Oyster Farm Marina in Cape Charles.

In 2017, Lohse helped the schooner beat 20 of the best tall-ship sailing vessels in the U.S. with a record-setting win at the 140-plus-mile Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race. But this trip is more about education and celebrating Virginia's maritime heritage and sailing community.

The schooner is the flagship for the Sail Nauticus educational sailing program. Lohse works with about 100 formal volunteers on the boat each year. Some pitch in for a few evenings, while others are weekly staples. They help Lohse and Roy maintain the ship and introduce hundreds of kids to sailing every year.

But race-day spots are reserved for especially devoted volunteers, all of whom come from diverse backgrounds. There's a Norfolk teacher, a caterer and restaurateur based on the Eastern Shore, an engineer from Newport News Shipbuilding, a nuclear physicist from Holland. Most were attracted by the boat's history and the opportunity to learn about sailing; the mission of Sail Nauticus kept them coming back.

Then there's 72-year-old Al Ponessa, a retired Navy submariner who took up sailing in his 20s.

"I have sloops down pat, but this is a different animal," Ponessa says. Smaller boats can be managed alone and react quickly. But the schooner weighs 100 tons, so things take longer. "The captain's giving orders way ahead of time and you're working with 12-20 people to carry them out," says Ponessa. "Sure, the basic physics are the same. But the rigging is so complicated, and the boat is so big, it takes a while to grasp how it all works together."

The Cape Charles event is special for another reason.



Following the race, the crew docks in the town harbor for about a week. They sleep onboard and offer daily public deck tours for free and group sailing experiences – including sunset cruises – for \$50 a person.

Cape Charles’ proximity to the Atlantic and the Eastern Shore’s array of wild barrier islands pair with the schooner for a world-class experience. Sunset trips typically last a few hours. Participants are encouraged to bring their own beverages and picnic dinners – and to lend a hand.

“You don’t have to help out, but we tell anybody that’s curious to jump on in,” Roy says. “I mean, where else can you hang out on a boat like this, learn about sailing firsthand and catch these kinds of views?”

There are just 450 registered historical schooners in the U.S. and Canada. Few are owned privately because the boats are so expensive. The schooner Virginia cost about \$5 million to build, and maintenance and operating costs often run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Most large schooners belong to small museums and preservation organizations, and are sailed only on special occasions.

Lohse was born into the business. His mom, Laura, was a sailing enthusiast and built boat models professionally. His dad, Greg, was an oceanographer and captained tall ships for the Sea Education Association. The family lived on the Eastern Shore, and life revolved around sailing. “I think I was 2 days old the first time they took me out,” Lohse says.

By high school graduation, he’d sailed everywhere from Maine to the Caribbean. Lohse didn’t pursue sailing as a profession, though. Instead, he moved to Chicago and became a woodworker. A change of heart came in 2002 when Laura showed him a model of the schooner Virginia that she made for a nonprofit hoping to rebuild the boat.

“I saw it and said, ‘If they pull this off, I’m gonna be the guy that sails her,’” he says. “The boat was beautiful and, moreover, it was a potent symbol.”

Schooners were an innovation born in colonial America. While ships with square-rigged sails were great for catching trade winds on trans-Atlantic journeys, they fared poorly in coastal conditions. The first true schooners were developed in Massachusetts around 1713 to solve the problem. Their maneuverability, speed and ability to navigate in shallower waters facilitated coastal trade, and they quickly became the continent’s most important ships.

The schooner Virginia has local significance as well. The original boat was commissioned by the Virginia Pilot Association in 1916 and was the organization’s last sailing vessel. Tasked with certifying area pilots, the



The schooner Virginia nears Cape Charles. For a small fee a landlubber can accompany the crew for a sunset cruise. Whether you choose to help hoist the mainsail is up to you.

president of the now 150-year-old organization thought a large racing schooner would be the ultimate tool for training apprentices. And he wanted it to be a flagship that embodied the rich maritime history of Hampton Roads. He subsequently had the Virginia modeled after contemporary America’s Cup competitors – the Vanderbilt family’s 1895 winner, the Defender, in particular.

Lohse returned to Hampton Roads to work on his dad’s newly purchased 105-foot schooner, the Alliance, in 2005 – a year after the completion of the schooner Virginia. He started out as a deckhand on daily tours near Yorktown and helped with occasional offshore cruises. Two years later, he was a certified captain.

“I was doing all this with an eye toward the schooner Virginia,” Lohse says. He began sitting in as a captain in 2008. “They’d ask me to do a couple of weeks here and there. I might sail down to the Bahamas or Charleston, South Carolina, or go up to Portland, Maine. But then it was always back to Yorktown and the Alliance.”

In 2012 Lohse was asked to come onboard full-time. He helped found Sail Nauticus – and integrate the schooner into its programming – when the Nauticus Foundation bought the boat in 2014.

Whether it’s on trips across the Chesapeake Bay or tours around Cape Charles, the schooner is a magnet for other boaters. Sloops, jet skis, speedboats and charter fishing vessels are constantly pulling alongside or lingering just behind the ship. Their passengers admire the beautiful old vessel, waving, shouting questions and snapping photos.

“Tourist duty,” Lohse says to volunteer crewman Hannah Twiddy, nodding at a catamaran from his post at the wheel. “You can’t fault someone for being drawn to the best-looking boat on the water.”

Twiddy laughs and goes skipping to the stern. Leaning over the railing, she talks with the boaters and invites them to the Cape Charles Town Marina for a deck tour. A native of the town, the 20-something grew up sailing and has been volunteering on the schooner for a few years now. Encouraged by Lohse, she launched the Cape Charles Sailing Camp in June.

“The schooner has a special kind of magic,” Twiddy says. “Sailing on her makes you feel like you’re a part of the region’s history. The more time you spend onboard, the more attached you become. She really starts to feel like a second home.” ■



Virginia Beach to Corolla, ***THE HARD WAY***

Kick your weekend getaway into high gear
by taking a fat-bike tour down the coast.





by ERIC J. WALLACE
photography by PATRICK HAYES

Enclosed by a wildlife refuge, a military base and the ocean, Sandbridge Beach is refreshingly isolated. With no hotels, two restaurants, one bar, a tiny supermarket-style grocery, and beachy cottages nestled into dunes brimming with pines and live oaks, the community feels more Hatteras Island than hustle and bustle.

Following Sandpiper Road, my girlfriend steers past a sign advertising a “Luxury RV Park” and a cluster of pastel-colored condominiums. She parks in the lot before the old wooden fishing pier in Little Island Park. I wrestle my rented fat bike from her station wagon and shoulder my backpack. With a kiss, I saddle up and head for the shore.

The day will find me biking some 12 miles down the beach to the southern tip of the 3,884-acre False Cape State Park. With public entry restricted to foot travel, pedal power, boat and shuttle, it is one of the state’s hardest to access and most rarely visited parks. I plan to explore and camp deep in its interior.

Tomorrow, I’ll bike 15 more miles of shoreline and meet my girlfriend in the northern Outer Banks town of Corolla. From there, we’re off to vacation in Buxton.

For me, a downhill mountain biker, the fat bike offers a novel experience. The huge, 4.8-inch tires and 10-speed Shimano drivetrain have me gliding over the wet, low-tide sand as if it’s a manicured greenway. A cluster of elementary schoolers pump their fists as I ride a wheelie down the beach.

A quarter-mile in, the way is blocked by an unexpected barrier. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sign informs me the beach is a sanctuary for breeding sea turtles, coastal birds and other wildlife. It’s closed for 1.1 miles.

“Dude, you gotta go around,” hollers a teen, pushing his bike toward a gap in the dunes.

Having officially entered Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, I follow Sandpiper Road through a lonely stretch of dunes and high scrub brush for about 1.2 miles to the Visitor Contact Station. Hanging a left, I follow a long boardwalk to the beach.

Gazing southward reveals nothing but shoreline, cotton ball clouds and crashing waves. Sandpipers, curlew and plover attack the tide with Lilliputian fervor. A trio of pelicans dive-bomb the water. With the place to myself, I humor the idea of a nude plunge. Instead, I ride on.

Three miles in, I spot a massive bald eagle perched atop an old telephone pole. The image looms over the dunes like a monument. I slow, but keep pedaling. The



Left: As Rob Lindauer, of Surf & Adventure Co., will tell you, there’s plenty of coast, but no coasting when fat-biking. Constant pedaling in sand provides a challenging workout. Above: The trek from False Cape to Corolla provides ample opportunity to scope out wildlife, from fox to wild hogs to horses. This osprey seems just as curious about us as we are of it. Below: Tent sites in False Cape are a relaxing respite along the way.



bird watches the ocean. I trace its gaze to the horizon. The eagle ruffles its feathers, turns its back on the sea, and soars away over the dunes.

Five more miles and the words of Rob Lindauer – a bike enthusiast who owns Surf & Adventure Co. in Sandbridge – slap me like a gong.

“This isn’t like mountain biking,” he said. Without hills, there are no inbuilt rests. Fat bike or no, the sand adds friction. “It’s tough and constant pedaling. You have to take breaks and pace yourself.”

Luckily, just as the quad-burn becomes unbearable, I happen upon a fantastic deposit of seashells. I opt to search for conches for my 8-year-old daughter. Untrammled by humans, the area proves a treasure trove. Within 10 minutes, I locate and return six or seven living specimens to the water and deposit five pristine empty shells of varying size and color into my bag.

Eventually I spot the high mesh fence marking the North Carolina border. The closer I get, the more I appreciate the agencies that have protected the land. Across the border, a small caravan of SUVs, Jeeps and trucks is parked on the beach. Classic rock floods the air. Despite having no paved

roads, about 750 vacation homes pepper the outskirts of the roughly 10-mile-long, 4,392-acre Currituck National Wildlife Refuge. The difference is marked.

I pause to count the big tri-colored herons perched atop the wooden poles of the fence – there are 10 – and then I steer toward a break in the dunes. On the other side lie the wilder territories of False Cape. I turn back into the park and follow a winding, sandy path northwest through thick stands of scrub brush, sugar maples and gnarled pines.

About a half-mile in, the trail veers west to enter what may be the mid-Atlantic's most pristine example of a temperate maritime forest. Sprawling live oaks dominate the landscape and create fantastic tunnel-like corridors. Sunlight falls dappled through trembling leaves. The interior feels warm, benevolent and balmy – like an organism.

The trees are alive with the chatter and play of birds. Situated on the Atlantic Flyway, False Cape and Back Bay are prime migratory stopovers. (The latter's inland impoundments attract tens of thousands of visiting waterfowl and geese each year.) I take a seat in the scooped limbs of a big live oak and wait for the show. Twenty minutes later, the forest transforms into a wilderness aviary.

Fluffy red-winged blackbirds dart through the canopy. So too, camouflaged Carolina wren and brown-headed nuthatch. Neon flashes alert me to a yellow-rumped warbler and a pine warbler, both mature males. Peripheral streaks of blue solidify into multiple indigo buntings.

Later, along the bay, I'll spot 15 to 20 species of waterfowl, ibis and heron. There are large bills, small bills, beaks ranging from short and daggered, to big and arced like a toucan's, to long and saber-like. The array of color and diversity is astounding. It seems almost unfathomable to have this show all to myself.



That evening I watch the day end from the paddle-in boat dock at Tripps Cove. The sun falls through wispy belts of clouds over Back Bay. The water glows like a sea of molten ruby and sapphire.

I camp about a half-mile east, in one of the park's 12 primitive sites. My tent is pitched on a soft, sandy pad beneath a stand of adolescent oaks, their limbs as gangly and rambling as rhododendron. The ocean crashes maybe 600 feet away.

I fire my ultra-light camp stove to heat my Yeti filled with sake. Wind ruffles the trees. The flame casts strange shadows. I half expect a procession of cloaked Druids to come drifting down the trail, lanterns swaying in a vacuum of silence.

Donning my headlamp, I follow a path over the dunes to the beach. To the far north and south, civilization's glow bleeds into the darkness. Here, though, the cosmos takes precedent. I lie on the sand, watching the quarter moon rise above the ocean, surrounded by diamond pinpricks.

I close my eyes. Draw the ocean night deep into my lungs. Tomorrow, there will be four-wheel-drive vehicles, chatter over martinis, gourmet tapas, an evening soak in a jacuzzi. I will pass through the gate along the border and leave this place behind. For now, I am thankful for its sanctity. **||**

Be sure to:

VIRGINIA BEACH

Check with Sandbridge Realty | Sandbridge has no hotels, but like neighborhoods in old Nags Head, it brims with rentable cottages, efficiencies and the like.

Have breakfast at Margie & Ray's | One of the few eateries in Sandbridge, this converted, mid-'60s tackle shop and general store is a local favorite.

Explore the Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge by kayak | Renting a kayak from Sandbridge's Ocean Rentals brings access to isolated interior islands and tidal creeks in Shipps Bay and Sands Bay.

COROLLA

Have dinner at Metropolis | This is the best restaurant in Corolla. Expect a seasonal menu of playful, New American tapas dished out in a small dining room setting with chic urban ambience and a dash of speakeasy cool.

Sip beers at Northern Outer Banks Brewing Co. | Located next door to Metropolis and a wood-fired-pizza parlor, this is the area's lone purveyor of locally crafted alcoholic beverages. It brews a rotating cast of eight beers.

Tour the Whalehead Club | This 21,000-square-foot mansion was built in the early 1920s by outdoorsman and railroad tycoon Edward Collings Knight as a kind of personal vacation hunting lodge. After falling into disuse in the 1980s, the home was purchased by Currituck County in 1992 and has since been restored.





» Outdoors »

Biking Fire Mountain

In Cherokee, N.C., a new bike park is sparking a quiet revolution.

by ERIC J. WALLACE
photography by PATRICK HAYES

Cruising the cultural district of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Reservation feels like taking a time machine to an era before the country became sensitive to flagrantly monetizing images of Native American life.

Passing down Tsali Boulevard I spot the long and lovely Oconaluftee Island Park and its namesake river, a little outdoor amphitheater that hosts “storytelling events and bonfires,” a strip of kitschy Cherokee-themed shops that advertise leather goods, hand-woven baskets, animal sculptures, moccasins and the like.

There’s a museum with a big totem pole out front. Boardwalk platforms feature educational opportunities led by historical interpreters donning drums, headdresses and ceremonial garb. A “Gem Mine” implores visitors to stop in and pan for gold and rubies.

I hang a left onto Drama Road and climb toward the high green peaks of the Smoky Mountains. After passing a theater that specializes in tribal plays and a living history village – complete with campfires, wigwams, garden plots and longhouses – I find myself in a parking lot just beyond the village, where I encounter something unexpected: A group of 25 mountain bikers decked out in their full regalia: compression shorts, racing jerseys, bike shoes, cycling glasses, gloves and helmets – their ensembles color-matched to high-end dual-suspension rigs (the cheapest of which I’d price at about \$2,000).



Though I've come to Cherokee to ride the tribe's first official MTB bike park at Fire Mountain, I admit I expected to practically be alone. "You think *this* is busy?" says 32-year-old Patrick Taylor, who lives in the neighboring town of Sylva and frequents the park. "I'll bet this lot was full by 7 a.m. When I got here at 8, there were like 50 cars."

A few parking spots down, a quartet of 40-somethings sit in lawn chairs before the open hatch of a newish Subaru Forester. Up from Greenville, S.C., they've driven more than 100 miles. Though the system is just 10.5 miles long, and free, they assure me it's worth the haul.

"We've been coming up and camping for the weekend about every six weeks," says Chrissie King, 41. Using Cherokee as a base camp, the foursome explores trails in the Nantahala National Forest as well. "Fire Mountain's a killer ride, people in Cherokee are super friendly, and it's freaking beautiful here," says King's husband, Tom, 45. "I've ridden almost everywhere and, to me, what makes this spot so special is how it balances convenience

with hard-hitting rides."

This kind of enthusiastic response was what the tribe hoped for when, in the spring of 2017, it spent \$250,000 installing the trails at Fire Mountain. They brought in the professional trail-building crew Trail Dynamics and asked it to build a destination-worthy bike park suitable for riders of all ages and skill levels.

Originally the goal was to give locals another option for outdoor recreation and entice Western North Carolina mountain bikers to visit. But the trails have become much more than that.

"We never imagined they'd get so popular so fast," says Chief Richard Sneed. "That parking lot pretty much stays full from April to November. People are coming from all over the Southeast to ride this thing. It's been so successful, we're expediting plans to install a second system that will be at least as big – if not larger than – Fire Mountain."

And that's just the beginning. If Sneed has his way, a decade from now, Cherokee will be the Southeast's top non-resort destination for mountain bikers.

The Cherokee tribe's investment in a bike park two years ago has been an unimagined success, says Chief Richard Sneed, opposite top. More trails are in the works.



"Folks visit with their riding buddies, take a look around and realize how unique this place is. Next thing you know, they're planning a vacation for the entire family."

– *Jeremy Hyatt*

Unlike most officially designated "Bike Parks," Fire Mountain is a do-it-yourself affair. There is no chairlift or shuttle service; reaching the top requires two miles of uphill pedaling and, if you're not in top shape, some occasional pushing.

Luckily, the climb is gorgeous. The winding switchbacks of the Uktena Trail are punctuated by stands of towering oaks, rhododendron thickets, gurgling mountain streams, mossy boulders, nifty wooden bridges and almost omnipresent views of the Smoky Mountains.

With an average 5 percent grade, the ascent is demanding but manageable. Compared to the stuff I'm used to riding in Virginia's Thomas Jefferson National Forest, this is like velvety red carpet. The trails are perfectly manicured with none of the rain-carved ruts that plague so much of Appalachia.

After reaching the 2,927-foot summit, I find the spot where the park's three expert rides converge. Joining a short queue of riders, I wait my turn for a go at Kessel Run, the system's premier black-diamond-level attraction. At 2 miles long, the one-way double-track route features nearly 2,000 feet of vertical descent and grades as steep as 16 percent, well above the 10 percent required to be considered pro level.

Dropping into the smooth wide trail, I pick up a ton of speed and blast down a long quick straightaway toward a tabletop jump. I hit the ramp and glide through the air, landing smoothly on the descent. Careening into the first berm – a high, banked curve scooped out of the mountainside – I surf the dirt curl like a pipeline, whipping the bike low-high-low, going almost horizontal and cannonballing out with nearly as much speed as I came in with. I proceed through a section of tabletops, whoops, wild 10-foot berms carved into sloping ravines, and a huge

wooden corkscrew winding over a lower trail. When I reach the bottom, my adrenaline is roaring.

By the time the rain comes, I've ridden Kessel five times and taken a downhill stab at both Spearfinger (2.2 miles) and Uktena. The latter are exemplary single-track options and a bit more technical – occasional rocky areas to traverse, some quick rhythmic switchbacks, a few creek crossings, and so on. But nothing beats the Kessel's rollercoaster thrills.



Chief Sneed says the bike trail is the biggest thing that's happened in Cherokee since it opened a casino. And its success has shifted how they think about tourism. In fact, Jeremy Hyatt, the tribe's secretary of operations, says Fire Mountain is sparking a kind of quiet economic revolution.

"A new bike shop and outdoor store opened in June of 2018 and just about all of our local businesses have reported seeing a boost," he says. Bikers stay in campgrounds or hotels, dine at local eateries and wander into shops or museums. Better still, they ask about other outdoor activities, like tubing and kayaking on the Oconaluftee River, fishing for trout, horseback riding in the national park, and so on. "Folks visit with their riding buddies, take a look around and realize how unique this place is," Hyatt says. "Next thing you know, they're planning a vacation for the entire family."

Before, tribal leaders regarded ecotourism with skepticism. They worried visitors would trash the area's natural resources. This left much of the river and the tribe's 56,000 acres off limits. But the bikers' etiquette has been a revelation. Namely, that ecotourists tend to respect the land and follow a policy of no-trace-left-behind.

"Suddenly, we're making plans to put in dozens of miles of biking trails and open wilderness areas to hiking and camping," Sneed says. A trout hatchery is in the works, the upper and lower Oconaluftee will soon be opened to kayakers, and there's discussion about an adventure park with ziplines, climbing walls and rope



courses. "Members are seeing ecotourism as a way to build an economy that's in keeping with our tribal values," he adds. "On a basic level, it's inviting people to connect with the land in a way that's meaningful and significant, which is something the Cherokee have been doing for thousands of years." 📌

Be sure to:

Stay at Harrah's Cherokee Casino Resort - This four-star luxury hotel features gorgeous rooms, pools, rooftop views of the surrounding mountains, spa, top-notch musical acts, golf course, bowling alley and old-school arcade. Did we mention gambling at a world-class casino? 777 Casino Drive. 828.497.7777.

Lunch at Sassy Sunflowers Bakery & Cafe - Nestled in the heart of the bustling Cherokee Cultural District, the cafe is a great base camp for checking out the town. Gourmet sandwiches and soups make for an exquisite lunch. Meanwhile, there's a bar stocked with regional wines and craft brews on tap. 1655 Acquoni Road. 828.497.2539.

Visit the Museum of the Cherokee Indian - This small but fantastically curated museum uses objects to tell the story of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and the tribe at large. Tours begin with a video explaining tribal cosmology and proceed through chronologically arranged exhibits to the present day. Expect tragic details, governmental treachery and a solid two hours of immersion. 589 Tsali Blvd. 828.497.3481.

Tour the Oconaluftee Indian Village - A fascinating living history museum. Guided tours usher visitors through an 18th century Cherokee village and into the minutia of daily indigenous life. Inside, actors in traditional garb occupy period-correct dwellings. Highlights include a blowgun tutorial,

basket weaving, pottery making, farming demonstration, and the re-enactment of sacred rituals. 218 Drama Road. 828.497.2111.

Dine at The Bistro at the Everett Hotel - A 10-mile drive delivers you to the best eatery in the area. Situated in a boutique hotel, the small restaurant has a farm-to-table ethos, staff mixologist and a 1920s speak-easy ambience. Chef Neil Ravenna serves up locally adapted New American-style staples like gumbo and trout, and an array of small plates. For adventurous eaters, daily specials showcase Ravenna's creativity and passion for local sourcing. Reservations are recommended. 16 Everett St., Bryson City. 828.488.1934.