



ESCAPE TO THE PENINSULAS

Enthusiasts are discovering the bounty of outdoor activities available on the Virginia peninsulas. Here are three escapes to put on your must-do list.

stories by ERIC J. WALLACE



▶▶▶ MOUNTAIN BIKING

(without the mountain)

How the Eastern Virginia Mountain Bike Association turned Freedom Park into a top Virginia ride.

photography by ERIC LUSHER

Nosing a race-tuned mountain bike onto Trail C at Williamsburg's Freedom Park brings skepticism – 50 miles east of the Fall Line, mountains are conspicuously absent. Can this really be one of Virginia's top non-resort rides? It doesn't take long for the apprehension to ease. The loamy, 4.5-mile trail carries riders deep into 600 acres of maritime forest and makes expert use of elevation changes.

There is nonstop pedaling, but the layout makes it easy to pick up and maintain speed. Quick dips, halfpipe-esque ditches and banked wooden curves transform hills into a physically demanding but grin-inducing roller coaster.

Then come the wooden features. The show starts with bunny hopping onto a rail that's low to the ground. Next are back-to-back jumps that launch riders from heights of about 3 feet over 4-foot gaps onto dirt landing pads. Fifty yards later is another jump with ramp and gap dimensions of 4 and 6 feet, respectively.

The fun continues. Long, decklike platforms jut from hillocks: one spans nearly 100 feet and ends in a 5-foot drop; another rises a nerve-shredding 8 feet. Elsewhere, a series of dipping, twisting, foot-wide platforms culminate in a dirt jump that catapults riders into a giant, wooden curve they surf like a wave.

There are about 30 features in all – more if you count dirt jumps, whoop-te-dos and the

like. Combined, they bring a mountain biking experience as exhilarating as it is uncommon.

"A concentration of high-quality wood features like those found at Freedom Park is rare for the East Coast," says Kyle Lawrence, executive director of Harrisonburg-based Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition, the largest bike club in the Southeast. "For this kind of resource to be located in a public park is essentially unheard of."

The park's trails are sustainable, professionally built and carry riders through a pristine natural area studded with historical landmarks, including one of the nation's first free African American settlements.

"The landscape is gorgeous and culturally interesting," says Lawrence. "But really, the features alone would warrant a trip."

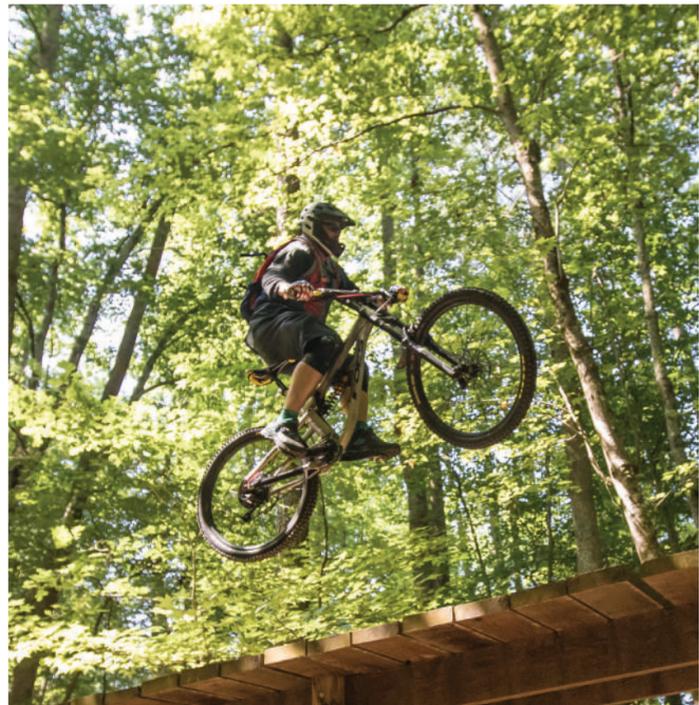
Located along Centerville Road in James City County, Freedom Park has become an attractive destination for visiting mountain-bike enthusiasts and a point of pride for local riders.

Freedom Park's trails are the product of a forward-thinking effort to bring mountain biking to coastal Virginia. This initiative resulted in a 2005 partnership between the Eastern Virginia Mountain Bike Association (EVMA) and James City County's Parks & Recreation department.

EVMA President Mike Benton spearheaded the project.



John Corbett flying high while jumping off the Shotgun ramp.



“Back then there were about 15 miles of legal mountain-biking trails in all of coastal Virginia,” says Benton, 60. Most were in flat, sandy areas. “You could get a workout, but it wasn’t much fun.”

Many public officials considered the activity more akin to motocross than, say, hiking or birdwatching. The EVMA was founded in 1988 to change that perception and secure land permissions.

“The older [outdoor-recreation] folks had this idea of mountain bikers as obnoxious and environmentally destructive,” says Benton. “Of course, nothing was further from the truth.”

The goal at Freedom Park was to create a flagship riding spot for regional enthusiasts that was capable of attracting others to the sport. Trails would shed light on the club’s culture of environmental sustainability and stewardship. Their success would be a major endorsement.

Benton worked closely with park personnel and club founder Kirk Moore to make it happen. “Park managers said, ‘You guys know mountain biking, we trust you to make it interesting,’” says Benton. Aside from submitting trail plans in advance to ensure layouts met preservation guidelines for protected areas, “they basically gave us free reign. They were super supportive and encouraged us to push the envelope and make something exceptional.”

With limited elevation at hand, Benton and Moore had to be savvy. On one hand, they needed trails suitable for beginners and families with young children. On the other, they wanted to make a visit-worthy haven for experts.

“We had some hills to work with, but this isn’t the mountains,” says Benton. Bans on heavy machinery in wooded areas added to their challenges. Trips to resorts like Snowshoe



Mountain and Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia brought new ideas. “I realized we could augment what we had by bringing in dirt for ramps and whoops using ATVs, and by building lots of wooden ramps, curves, platforms, rails and so on.”

Benton drew up plans and pitched a half-dozen features in 2008. Like ski-resort terrain parks, they started simple and got progressively harder. To Benton’s surprise, park management loved the idea. He and Moore worked with core members of the EVMA on installation the following year. They were an instant hit.

“The feedback was great,” says Moore. Most riders had never seen anything like it. Obstacles were challenging and had an inbuilt learning factor. “The features are arranged to let you work on different kinds of skills like jumping or balance. You start out small, get better, and work your way up to the big stuff.”

Word got out and more and more riders started showing up. Many were younger or crossovers from BMX backgrounds. The success led to further plans. Benton got

the OK to install or upgrade three to five new features a year. Funding came from the club, James City County and a grab bag of grants – including a Trail Accelerator grant from the International Mountain Bicycling Association.

The project helped popularize mountain biking in Tidewater. Since 2010, EVMA membership has expanded from fewer than 100 to nearly 1,000. Partnerships with new parks have brought upward of 100 miles of trails.

“Our partnership with EVMA has been incredibly valuable,” says James City County Parks & Recreation Director John Carnifax, adding that it put the county at the center of the regional mountain-biking scene and “enabled us to introduce countless residents to a great new outdoor recreation experience.”

Trails have also attracted new visitors. Lawrence, the Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition executive director, is among them.

“If a member tells me they’re planning to visit Hampton Roads,” says Lawrence, “I say, ‘Be sure to bring your bike and check out Freedom Park.’”

Opposite: Justin Hlavin catches some air. Above (L to R): Mario Ostasz, John Corbett, Anthony Tebbenhoff and Chris Sikes.



KAYAKING THE TRAILS

With more than 90 trails and 500 miles of waterways, Virginia Water Trails has some of the best-kept secrets in kayaking.

photography by PATRICK HAYES

My kids and I arrive early in the morning and ride the outgoing tide down Maundy Creek toward Big Island and Mobjack Bay. Led by Virginia Water Trails director Shannon Alexander, our kayaks glide through the quiet, 200-foot-wide waterway, past cordgrass marshes lined with clusters of muscles and oysters.

Cotton candy clouds drift overhead. Fiddler crabs scuttle along muddy banks near wading birds like snowy egrets and great blue herons. We glimpse blue crabs, rays, needlefish, speckled trout, diamondback terrapins and more swimming among underwater grasses.

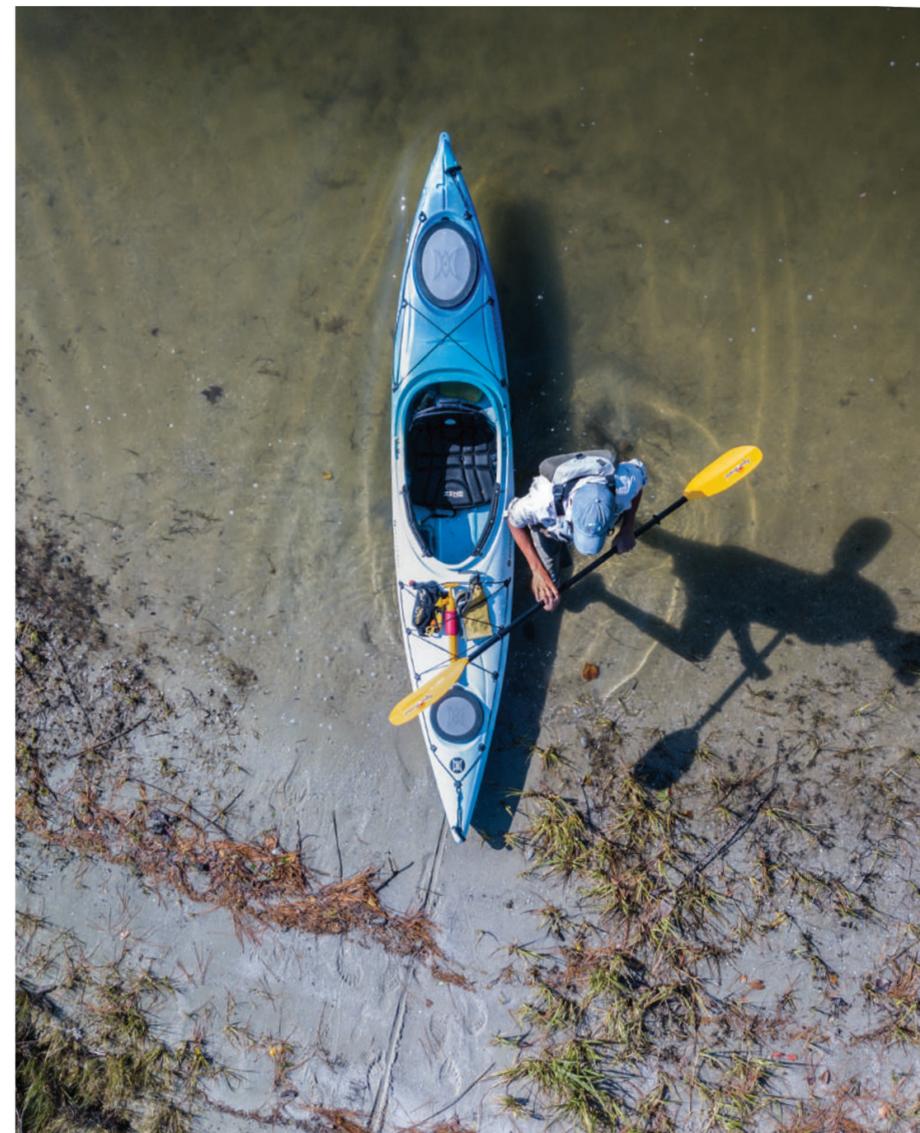
Civilization has been left behind at the muddy put-in on the outskirts of tiny Maryus village. The landscape is gorgeous and the four of us have it to ourselves.

“The Chesapeake Bay area boasts some pretty world-class kayaking spots, and this is one of them,” says Alexander, 37. The paddling enthusiast holds a master’s degree in coastal land management and spent her early-20s kayaking and conducting research in oceanside waterways in North Carolina, Florida, Texas, New Zealand, Thailand and elsewhere.

Taken collectively, says Alexander, rural waterways along the Northern Neck, Middle Peninsula and Eastern Shore offer some of the most ecologically varied kayaking in the U.S.

Protected lands are abundant, development is often sparse, and ecosystems are incredibly diverse. Nearly 350 species of fish and about 200 types of birds visit or call the area home throughout the year. From hidden beaches, marshlands and tidal creeks along the Chesapeake Bay, to major rivers like the York and Rappahannock, to 36.7-mile-long Dragon Run – one of the East Coast’s most immaculate bald cypress swamps – the region is full of paddling treasures, most of which are practically unknown to all but a few local enthusiasts.

Alexander has spent the past nine years developing a kayak-based ecotourism alliance between Tidewater counties, towns, state parks, conservation groups and more. The project birthed a new organization, Virginia Water Trails, in 2019, creating a network of 90 water trails spanning upward of 500 miles. Its website is a one-stop-shop for visiting paddlers and includes interactive maps, information about wildlife and links to eco-certified outfitters, stay spots, restaurants and cultural opportunities.



“To my knowledge, no other region in the country has attempted something this ambitious,” says Dave Burden, who founded Eastern Shore outfitter SouthEast Expeditions in 2000. “It’s a great resource for veterans and beginners alike. It makes it easy to find awesome new spots to paddle.”

We paddle about a mile down Maundy Creek to the northern side of Big Island. Formerly the site of a historic fishing village, it’s now a prominent nesting area for seabirds and mostly owned by The Nature Conservancy. Abandoned white sandy beaches are speckled with sandpiper, cormorant and plover. They offer the perfect sanctuary for snacks and a swim.

A 2.4-mile circumnavigation brings views of the New Point Comfort Lighthouse and Goodwin Islands. We stir up a cownose ray near the southwestern shore. Its head is reminiscent of a bovine snout; it’s olive, kite-shaped body about three feet wide with a tail like a bullwhip. The rays visit the Chesapeake Bay to breed in summer.

“If we’d seen his underside, his pale belly and wide, smiling mouth might’ve reminded you of a certain character from *Finding Nemo*,” Alexander tells my 9-year-old daughter, Zoe. “Can you guess which one?”

She thinks a moment then cries: “The school bus ray!” Alexander laughs.

By the time we get back to the car, my kids are busy planning next visits. Presently, Dragon Run is winning out. According to Alexander, the swamp is located amid more than 21,000 acres of protected lands and requires paddlers to navigate channels ranging from 20 to just a few feet wide. They’re lined with plants like cattails, swamp rose, waterlilies, purple-blossomed pickerel weed, resurrection ferns and more. Twenty-foot-wide bald cypress trees tower overhead. With few human visitors and a recorded 200 avian species, spring and fall birdwatching is phenomenal.

“I think it sounds really cool,” says my son, Kayden, 14, on the ride home. “My vote is, we go and check it out.”

Above (L to R) : Co-founder of Virginia Water Trails and founder of Bay Country Kayaking, Shannon Alexander. Eric Wallace helping his daughter Zoe into the kayak.



SWIM WITH THE FISHES

River snorkeling offers nature-loving families an active and exciting adventure.

photography by PATRICK HAYES

It was early in our snorkeling trip when Kayden approached me underwater, eyes wide with excitement behind his swim mask, and motioned Zoe and me to follow him.

We swam as a trio toward a patch of restored marsh grass. Kayden jabbed a finger toward a hilly mound of oysters and mussels hidden just below the surface. A closer look revealed other creatures sheltering among them.

We saw snails like the Atlantic oyster drill, a small conch-like predator, and marsh periwinkle, which clung to nearby reeds. A tiny, tadpole-esque skillet fish peered from an oyster's open mouth. Speckled, 3-inch-long blennies darted between crevices, their heads topped by feathery tentacles. Slender pipefish looked like elongated seahorses and imitated blades of grass. Gaggles of tiny hermit crabs skittered about, watched by young blue crabs, which lurked among the shellfish and grass. Whorls of silvery shad, alewife and other small fish breezed by like shimmering gusts of wind.

It's altogether fitting that we ended our outdoor Peninsula adventure with snorkeling. To most people, this is the kind of activity reserved for the ocean. But for my family, the underwater world of the Severn River at John's Point Landing in Gloucester County was awe-inspiring.

Located about a mile from Mobjack Bay and 7 miles from the Chesapeake Bay, the area is home to an incredible diversity of aquatic wildlife. My family rarely gets the chance to experience waters east of the Fall Line, so this Tidewater hotspot offered a delightfully

foreign array of sights.

Swimming from the sandy public landing at John's Point to Mobjack Bay, snorkelers could hypothetically spot about 350 types of fish alone. Interesting plants, crustaceans, mollusks, turtles, frogs and mammals like muskrats and beavers put the icing on the cake.

My 14-year-old son's reaction to the experience was a little less academic. "Dude, this is freaking fantastic," he says during a break.

We opted for river snorkeling to curb sibling bickering, while continuing to explore nature and stay active as the weather turns scalding. I don't care for swimming in pools or lakes, and the beach just confuses me — shouldn't I be doing something?

That said, hiking, mountain biking and rock climbing in 90-plus-degree heat is a recipe for kiddie misery. For years, my solution was family canoeing in remote areas. You paddle along scoping the scenery, navigating riffles, checking out birds, swimming as much or as little as you want, and rarely seeing other people.

Things went great until a few years ago. Overnight, trips became a nightmare of brother-sister putdowns, griping, and angry shrieks. Recalling the zen of snorkeling trips in Hawaii and the Caribbean, I wondered if the experience could be adapted to backyard rivers? At worst, snorkel-stuffed mouths are quiet. At best, exploring underwater realms would bring hours of exercise and direct engagement with wildlife and natural ecosystems.

Better still, the activity proved astonishingly affordable. While a quality kayak costs \$500 or



Opposite (L to R): Kayden, Zoe and Eric Wallace enjoying the underwater world of the Severn River



more, a mask and waterproof snorkel set from reputable brands like Cressi run about \$50. Add \$10 for JAWS Quick Spit Antifog spray and you're ready to go. (In areas with motorboaters, we add inner tubes and ankle leashes to ensure visibility.)

The investment has paid off. Afternoon trial runs in Rockbridge County's Goshen Pass trout pools were love at first plunge. A fascinating world of adventure populated by iridescent fish, colorful rocks, weird shadows and the play of current-refracted sunlight waited beneath the surface. When the sun began to set, I essentially had to drag my kids from the water. Hands were pruney, teeth chattered behind blue lips – but they wore massive grins.

Today, my children rarely swim without their gear. Underwater discoveries have led them to research aquatic habitats and learn how to identify many of the fish, invertebrates and plants that call them home. For Kayden and Zoe, summer has become synonymous with “snorkeling season.”

Our swim in the Severn River proved a highlight reel of

novel experiences. High on the list was spotting a group of diamondback terrapins sunning on the submerged branches of a fallen tree near a stand of shoreline pines. We got very still, watching their extended necks bob ever-so-slightly in the current. Then something spooked them – An osprey? A bald eagle? – and they peeled off into the river. We followed the nimble reptiles through the water until they disappeared into a grassy cove too thick for us to enter.

The afternoon was filled with those kinds of moments. We saw a slithery American eel, some long-nosed Atlantic needlefish, a huge largemouth bass and horseshoe, and hermit and mud crabs, to name a few stars of the day.

Though we've swum, kayaked and boated in Chesapeake Bay and surrounding waters before, this was our first area snorkeling adventure.

“It's very different,” Zoe says. “When you get in with your goggles, you're like a fish – you swim around and see all the different kinds of plants and animals that live here, and how they live too.” ■