

An Adventure Made of a Million Simple Pleasures

Road Tripping Through Charles County, Maryland

By: Abby Stewart

Have you ever glanced over the side of a kayak to discover you were floating over a sunken ship? I hadn't either until I visited Charles County, Maryland. My friends and I launched our kayaks into the Potomac River from the shore of Mallows Bay, and as soon as I paddled out, I noticed peculiar wooden remains protruding from the water all around me. Slowly, I looked down below my kayak and gasped when I saw the skeleton of a sunken ship below. My eyes widened and my friends laughed at the shocked look on my face; they had been there before but wanted to keep it a surprise that we would be paddling over and around the remnants of more than 100 World War 1-era wooden steamships and vessels, collectively known as the Ghost Fleet, in its final resting place.

The river remains were decorated with lush green vegetation and aquatic trees growing out of the immersed ships of [Mallows Bay-Potomac River National Marine Sanctuary](#), one of only 13 national marine sanctuaries in the United States. A great blue egret with its full white beard and beautiful blue and gray coat, a familiar sight around the sanctuary, perched himself on a nearby tree, royally observing our group as we navigated among century-old ghost ships.

Creekside Camping Beneath the Stars

It was a road trip I'll never forget; a nearby getaway to reunite with friends through adventurous excursions and over mouthwatering local fare. I drove up from North Carolina to their hometown of Washington, DC, and from there we hit the road for Charles County. Like many people, it was one of their favorite weekend escapes from the city, a hidden gem that they were eager to share with me. The itinerary combined most of their favorite things to do and places to see in Charles County into a medley of enjoyable experiences I wouldn't have discovered on my own.

I've never seen a more charming camping cottage than those at [Smallwood State Park](#). I was thrilled to throw open the door of what looked like a mini log cabin to spend the next 4 days harbored under a canopy of trees on the bank of Mattawoman Creek. Nestled in the forest among walking trails and convenient facilities, we were situated across from a marina and fishing docks, just over a beautiful wooden walking bridge. It was at that quaint cabin, over roasted marshmallows at our personal fire pit and late-night talks at our picnic table under the stars, that I fell in love with camping in Maryland.

A Farm to Table Feast

One of the most indulgent meals I've ever enjoyed was in the wonderful little walking town of [La Plata](#), only 20 minutes from our cabin. We parked our car for the afternoon and began with a farm-to-table foodie fest that was the first of many indications that Charles County had something up

its sleeve. My friends had raved about [The Charles Farm Table and Public House](#) for months, and it didn't take me long to realize why.

Patrons buzzed in and out of the modern farmhouse-feeling dining rooms and the eco-friendly, open-kitchen concept that was filled with laughter and chatter. It was obviously a crowd-pleasing place and there was a short wait to be seated, but it worked out perfectly as it gave us ample time to peruse the gourmet grocery, the [Market at The Charles](#), that was attached to the restaurant. Local Amish pumpkin and apple butter, locally-sourced cheeses, and my favorite, honey from Maryland Bee Supply, made right there in La Plata, filled my shopping bag as they called our name to be seated.

Tender yet crispy Kung Pao Brussels sprouts drizzled in a sweet balsamic glaze and topped with chopped nuts and scallions was an impressively delicious way to commence the meal. The creatively dynamic menu made it hard to decide what to have next, but as the restaurant is locally-sourced by EatWell Natural Farm just down the road, the grass-fed LP Signature Burger made quite an impression with its bacon jam and garlic aioli spreads. And when in Maryland, one must get the Cream of Crab soup, too, right? Plump crab in sweet cream, each bite perfectly balanced by pieces of crisp corn and green onions, the soup was a memorable experience in and of itself. Homemade mango key lime pie completed the unforgettable meal. I leaned back in the booth and laughed at how full I was, just as an affable server walked by. "Welcome to Southern Maryland," she said with a big smile. "Oh, I'll be back," I promised.

A Small Town with Big Personality

La Plata's Charles Street boasted salons in old homes that looked like dollhouses, sheltered beneath magnolia trees behind white picket fences. Everywhere you looked, restored buildings were transformed into curious novelty shops and local artisan pop-ups. Studios and stylish boutiques in renovated historic homes made for an alluring tour of the town's main thoroughfare. We not only left the stores with unique gifts but with shopkeepers' stories and friendly recommendations for the remainder of our trip. It was what I've always imagined a charming small town to be like.

Our noses led us down the street to [Charles Street Bakery](#), an adored local bakeshop where we met the owner, laughed with the regulars, and got afternoon lattes and homemade pastries for breakfast at our cabin in the morning. While I peacefully sipped my latte on the benches in front of the bakery, my friends discovered homemade red velvet ice cream cones at [Landon's Ice Cream](#) next door. After our sweet treats, we headed across the street to explore [The La Plata Train Station Museum](#), where an old red caboose sits parked next to the sole surviving passenger station on the Pope's Creek Line of the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad. We sat there on the steps of the caboose reflecting on the town of La Plata; full of charm and character, just like its people. It was an enjoyable day spent making memories and soaking in simple pleasures.

Biking the Indian Head Rail Trail

An abandoned railroad corridor provides an uncommon opportunity for Charles County visitors to bike along a paved, 13-mile trail known as [The Indian Head Rail Trail](#), which snakes through some of Southern Maryland's most scenic and untouched natural areas. I was happy that we brought our bicycles because I soon discovered that meandering along marshy flatlands, through forests, and over bridges on a bike with my best friends was another unexpected yet uplifting adventure to add to the trip.

Cobb Island Hospitality

A crimson tray of fresh, steaming Maryland crabs covered in Old Bay was placed enticingly before us on a picnic table. My friends saved this quintessential Maryland meal for last, bringing me to Cobb Island to experience one more authentic taste of Charles County before we left. A Southern Maryland staple, [Captain John's Crab House](#), has been family-owned and operated for more than 50 years, and I fell in love with its casual atmosphere right away. On a dock overlooking the water of Neale's Sound, we sat picking the sweet, juicy crabs until the afternoon light turned to gold. Looking over the water, the sun set behind a backdrop of fishing boats, turning the sky to hot pink. We finished our feast and took a stroll over the walking bridge, where we paused to admire the reflection of the brilliant sky below us, surrounding us completely in vibrant color. Cobb Island was as authentic as it gets, with its waterfront lined with beach cottages and bungalows with incredible views. The people of Cobb Island love their way of life, deeply rooted in the rich culture of the waterman, and I felt fortunate to experience it.

The Quintessential Road Trip

Some of the best parts about road tripping are getting to explore Small Town, America up close and personal, and discovering the architecture to see how the locals live, both today and in the past. Driving through unique communities and new landscapes, past historical sites, and stopping to talk to the locals; it's what traveling is all about, experiencing another place authentically, and Charles County gives you the opportunity to do just that.

Winding back roads traversed through farmland and past split rail fences as we drove away from our cabin. Sunlight streamed through the trees, casting zebra stripes across the roadside hills as our souls seemed to soak up the peace this trip had given us like life-giving light. I'll always be grateful to Charles County for sharing its beauty and adventures with us. It's now going to be our yearly retreat; I can't wait to see what memories we will make next time.