

## **MASK, Tillie, (St.) Mike, and Me**

By Neysa Narena

**Saturday: Tilghman Island**--Speeding too fast, jamming to In Excess, a right turn onto Rte. 33 at St. Michael's forced me to downshift into low gear. I turned off the radio to listen to the dawn. The quiet pinks spread over the dark night like peace on a heavy heart unburdening. But it wasn't enough, the Mother was still cleansing her surplus of emotions with winds wild and savage. Alongside the narrow peninsular road, the trees were bent almost double, and beyond them to the right I spotted whitecaps. Large waves churned the creek to the left. I kept going. Two miles down the road I slowed at the Newcomb launch site. No kayakers yet. Back in high gear, my truck sped down the road and past St. Michael's Island for 10 more miles until almost the end of Tilghman Island, where the MASK (Metropolitan Association of Sea Kayakers) and CPA kayakers would be finishing their breakfasts at Harrison's.

Pulling into the gravel parking lot, I noted a drydocked skipjack, then observed numerous kayaks atop 4x4's from only New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. I would be the only one from CPA there. Unlike the dainty and very romantic-looking pink and blue houses and B&B's dotting the islands, Harrison's Chesapeake House restaurant/motel/sports fishing center was white and spread out and somewhat hard to figure. I chose to enter the covered porch, and went through the front office, darkened hallways, and closed bar until I found the dining hall. Pausing at its threshold, I saw that every group looked alike. And I knew no one. I chose the group by the far windows and walked past table after table. Then I centered myself, took a deep breath, and inquired, "Would you be kayakers?" They stopped talking to look at me. Then they smiled and said yes, and through the windows the sun engulfed me in its brightness. I have to say that the MASK group was one of the friendliest and nicest groups of people I have ever had the pleasure to meet. Totally inclusive, they invited me to join them, and then all of them (one-by-one) came over to me, shook my hand, and introduced themselves. Soon my family of 16 new friends and I were surrounding syrup and flapjacks.

Consensus was eventually reached; we would launch from Harrison's landing, rather than from the original launch site at Newcomb, due to strong northwesterly winds. We settled our check and left to get ready. However, once the group left the coziness of Harrison's to stand outside in the 30-knot winds, shopping, visiting a nearby bird sanctuary, or going back to bed seemed more attractive, so half the group peeled off their dry suits to do just that.

Just nine of us paddled on Saturday. We pushed out from the landing and paddled through the tiny marina of fishing boats behind Harrison's to the Choptank. The white-capped waves were around 1.5 feet high. We seemed to have naturally fallen into pairs as we paddled; it was easier to hold a conversation that way. I was partnered with the Captain. After several miles of being tossed like so much lettuce, the Captain asked each of us how we were doing. Ronnie opted to catch up on some Z's on a small beach at the side of the river. Would we remember to pick her up on our return? The rest of us sallied forth.

The winds were stiff like a broom and they swept and swept until nothing remained but clarity. The colors of the sky were amazing. All delicate pinks and blues with gentle streaks of white. I was reminded of a celestial Dreamsicle. I then observed two swans were now ahead of us. While we mortals struggled with strong winds and choppy waters, our new guides paddled their swan-feet without noticeable effort. Graceful soul mates, the pair were strong and white and quiet as they swam smoothly through the Mother's emotional turbulence; like true love gracing windblown hearts.

Passing mile after mile of beautiful shoreline, we saw cliffs hiding an occasional small beach and old mansions with thick, white columns. We seemed to be rewarded for our paddling efforts as each new mile brought more resplendence. As we paddled past mansions and farmhouses, the Captain regaled me with kayaking anecdotes, taught me navigational techniques, and told tales of the 1700's, when Talbot County (where Tilghman and St. Michael's islands are located) was worked by indentured servants and slaves on local tobacco plantations until it became the richest county in America, as well as England.

We eventually beached on some mud flats to eat our lunch. John had a bad scare when he accidentally sunk about a foot. The rest of us became mighty wary after that as to where we placed our neoprene booties--and hesitated to do more than stand by our boats. Henry and the Captain continued to give pointers on how to navigate using a map and compass, then the group was ready to move on. Gerry and Henry decided to branch off to paddle an extra 6 or so miles to St. Michael's. That now left only seven of us to stay on course and eventually complete 15 miles.

Our return paddle was easier with following seas once the Mother relented by slowing her winds to 15 knots. When I looked back to see the others, I saw that John was flying one of his kites from his boat. His kite flying enabled him to not have to use his paddle until the last mile homeward. We also remembered to pick up Ronnie, who was roused from her slumber on the beach by a resounding blast from her mate's Maine foghorn.

Tired, but very satisfied with ourselves, we returned in time for our MASK shopping contingent to ply us generously with beer and munchies in their hotel room before returning to Harrison's for dinner. When our private happy hour was over, we walked across the lawn to Harrison's and found the dining hall crowded with locals as well as guests. After we ate a plain--but sturdy--supper of soup, crab cakes, chicken, stewed tomatoes, whipped potatoes, french fries, and peas, a local duo entertained us, crooning dimly remembered and perhaps best-forgotten ballads. But after a few beers who cares, and soon almost everyone at the table joined in the singing. They were singing Blue Velvet...

**Sunday: St. Michael's Island**--With the exception of a couple of people who had to go home that morning, the full contingent of MASK kayakers and I launched from Claiborne Landing, just off Rte 33 on Rte 451. After much laughter and picture taking--and a couple of blasts on the Maine foghorn--our little flotilla set off for St. Michael's. It looked like the Mother was finally spent, for her winds were only 10 knots. After paddling in 1.5-foot rollers and rounding a point or two, we came to a side of the island where there was barely a ripple of her emotion left. I admit we were grateful, for after yesterday's trip we mortals were spent too.

MASK kayakers, I've found, are excellent conversationalists while they paddle. For part of the way I paired up with Erika, who amused me with stories about New York and kayaking derring-do; with John, who shared his techniques for boat-making; and with Gerry, who discussed the technicalities of hand-rolling. And I can't leave out Laurie--telling jokes, belting out the line to an occasional song, and pulling green toy fishes out of her hat.

We had an easy and beautiful 7.5-mile paddle to St. Michael's. There was a sobering moment, though, when we rounded the last curve to St. Mike's: We saw what looked like the remains of a bright, yellow catamaran that had crashed upon the shore. The couple who owned the property had just discovered it as we rounded the bend. They told us it had to have crashed during yesterday's wind.

Coasting the rest of the way, we gazed upon the vision that was St. Mike's. Directly in front of us the buildings of the maritime museum sparkled, in startling contrast to the duller green of the Miles River and the blue of the sky above. Although there existed more official landing sites, we decided to create a stir by docking on a grassy area to the right of one of the museum building's outside decks, where a wedding reception just happened to be going on. You know how we kayakers love attention from our public... Once on land, we portaged our boats to the nearest parking lot and decided to shuttle back to our trucks and 4x4's, which were still at Claiborne Landing, rather than do a return paddle. It was 3:30 and a few of us needed to return to Rhode Island, New York, and, in my case, the other side of the Chesapeake Bay before Monday. So we loaded our boats, changed into dry clothes, and sauntered off to quickly spend our money at St. Mike's maritime museum gift store. We bought the April edition of *Messing About in Boats* magazine so we could get Gerry David's autograph and I finally acquired my much-coveted nautical charts of the Bay. We then took a leisurely stroll through quaint neighborhoods to look for an official launch site the Captain figured should be in the vicinity. We eventually located two such sites at the end of E. Chew Street. Then, as our meanderings after kayaking all afternoon had worked up an appetite, we had dinner.

Too soon the sun was setting and we had to leave. Back at our vehicles, there were many shared hugs and more laughter. We exchanged a flurry of addresses and phone numbers and made many promises to see each other again soon.

On the road again, as I watched the rosy hues of sunset blend into a deep blue night, it was odd how the Indigo Girls came on the radio...

1. Harrison's Chesapeake House, 410-886-2121, \$30/50 off season, \$85/95 in season; ask for their weekend package rate, which includes meals.
2. Town Dock Restaurant, 125 Mulberry Street, St. Michael's, 800-884-0103.

Note: For more information about MASK, see <http://www.seacano.org>. [Editor's note: Metropolitan Area Sea Kayakers now appear to be defunct.]