

Mystical Magical Assateague

By Neysa Narena

Heaven and Earth. Man and Woman. Kayaking and Camping. What could be more perfect? Well, maybe kayaking and camping on a deserted isle with six wonderful companions (Don Chance, Joe Reiner, Brian Blankinship, Greg Welker, Hans Houke, and John Windish).

Leaving shortly after dawn Saturday, I mused how easy a paddle this was going to be, with the Point Lookout weather site reporting a warm spring day with winds of only 10 knots. I made very good time to the island's ranger station and got out of my truck. Assateague's beauty was so soft and ethereal. But, boy, it sure was windy. Inside the ranger station, I met with the rest of the group waiting for back country camping. 52 degrees. Check. Water temperature-- 50.5 degrees. Check. Wind velocity--30 knots. That's interesting. Let's do that again. Today's date—Saturday, April 5. Check. Air temperature--52 degrees. Check. Water temperature--50.5 degrees. Check. Wind velocity--Over 30 knots. Oh no. As a club beginner, could I do it? I decided that after coming all that way I had to try to least one mile. Soon thereafter we received our permits and regrouped at the launch site. Al Kubeluis jauntily arrived with his whitewater kayak and gave us tips about which landmarks to look for on our way back as he wouldn't be staying with us overnight. As we launched from the beach, the wind spirits had their way with us, pushing and pulling us among the rollers. I thought it was wise of Al to have brought his whitewater boat. But as the water was very shallow, only a foot or two deep, I began to calm down, focusing instead on the flotsam and jetsam caressing the waves. As we paddled farther into the bay, the scenery became more like a dreamscape. Like a vision, we saw ponies scattered on the horizon, noble beacons on the shore, their manes windswept every which way.

I was admiring my companions' strength and paddling skills for several miles when it occurred to me that even though I'm a beginner, my stamina must have really embarrassed them. For I noticed that while the others would have these bursts of speed, they would then have to rest. Not me, though. I've always been able to carry on and just paddle through. I tried to be tactful about it, though, and pretended I didn't notice that whenever I would catch up with them, they would try to hide their fatigue by taking off again. After several miles, Greg Welker paddled out to greet us. He had been camping since the previous day and decided to guide us to our destination (the Jim's Gut campsite). Our group then took its time and had many enjoyable conversations along the way. After we arrived at our destination and set up camp, we decided to explore the island. With fearless hearts, we removed our shoes to ford streams and marshlands until we crossed the island and reached the ocean. Greg told us about the wild ponies and Sitka deer. About the peregrine falcon and the comet.

Then before us soon came the beach that stretched with no ending. The beach transported us to a place of No Time. A march to its end sounds like a good idea, we said. Along the way, we inspected sand dunes and lady bugs and other such things by the ocean. After a few miles, someone asked just how many more miles is it to the end of the island? We didn't care. We just felt the joy of walking against the wind and feeling the sand under our feet. Then Brian, like the star of some pulp sci fi/fantasy movie, pointed to what looked like a hundred jeeps huddled en masse on the horizon. With flags. Is it a secret

militia detail? When they come for us, will it be better to go left and dive into the sea or go right and make a run for it behind the dunes? I was reminded of Revolutionary soldiers, marching stalwartly toward a line of British. We faced the jeeps as they came straight at us, then mercifully passed us by. The first flag came into better view. The weird thing about it was, it actually WAS a British flag. Because they were a Land Rover club... We decided then to turn back. The tire tracks left from the jeeps made waffles in the sand. Big ones. With large pockets of melted butter and syrup, for miles...

Back at camp Brian and Hans sawed wood and started a fire. We decided to eat. Hans opened his Giant gourmet early June peas and Brian exhibited his extraordinary stash of international spices. We were all basically feeling rather pleased with ourselves until Greg--with all the nonchalance of Emily Post and Graham Kerr put together--brought out a miniature cutting board and placed it on the picnic table. Then mounds of vegetables for a stir fry. Then a miniature, 3-inch stir fry paddle. Darkness came quickly and we gathered around the fire. Brian roasted fig newtons (or should I say apple cobbler?) for us on the fire. Soon the physicist in Hans and the astronomer in Don came out and they took us starward, delving deeply into the far reaches of the universe. We heard tell of galaxies, solar systems, and universes. The Beginning and the very face of God. All made of fig neutrino particles.

I awoke at daybreak, grateful for the majestic silence and beauty of the island. After I packed my boat, I did my daily morning practice, then breathed in the essence of the dawn. Eating cake for breakfast, I watched as the others broke camp and packed their boats. Greg got out his marine radio and a general sigh of relief was shared as the group heard that the winds had changed direction and would be at our backs. We would have an easier time of it getting back before the predicted thunderstorm hit. We then embarked in our boats for our return journey.

Out on the bay, the winds whispered to me of the foolishness of thinking we could subdue the elements. Didn't I remember how the grandfathers before us had survived? So I silently offered thanks to the spirits of the wind and the water and the waves and asked for their benevolence upon us on our journey homeward. I asked for their blessings upon our paddles and our boats. The winds pushed us onward and the waves gave us power. I welcomed the help as I was tired from the day before. But I allowed my stamina to take over, and punched and pulled my way through the waves. Punched and pulled. Punched and pulled. And started thinking about the slaves of the Vikings. Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw this wide yellow sail, and Greg goes gliding by, all comfy and serene, not exerting any paddling energy whatsoever, and without a care in the world...

Brian requested that we stop to look at Tingles, another campsite on the island. We disembarked from our crafts and walked under branches and over cacti until we came to a small band of ponies. So peaceful were they that one came up to Hans and allowed him to pet it.

Soon, with an eye on the weather, we left again. Rounding point after point, I was reminded again of Al's prediction, that it would be hard for us to find landmarks for our return. But binoculars came out and proper landfall was found, and we settled in for the home stretch.

Rounding the last point we were greeted by a man with a group of children in kayaks, all laughing and delighted to be out on such a day. And I thought again just how mystical and magical Assateague was for all who encountered her.

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