

Potomac Passagemaker

Touring the Potomac River from the Nation's Capital to the Bay

By Ralph Heimlich

The paddling world is full of water “tribes”: There are sea kayakers and whitewater paddlers, racers, those out for an hour or two (lily dippers), those interested in rolling and rescues (kayatheletes), those with no hip joints (SUPers), those who just want to get close to the fish (kayanglers), those out to change the world (causeyakers), and a small group of us out to see the world from the water (kayak tourers). I’m one of those. As an ideal, I’d like to pack up my kayak with some gear and week’s worth of food and paddle along from one water-side campsite to another until I got hungry, taking in all the wonderful natural and cultural sites along the shore as I passed. I’d like to think that John Smith would, in a different time, be a kayak tourer as well. What would he think of the National Historic Water Trail named after him along the Potomac River?

To find out, I proposed a series of ten paddles for this season that will cover the entire 136 miles from Columbia Island Marina to Point Lookout, MD (see [schedule and map here](#)). Let me tell you about the first two of these.

Columbia Island Marina to Belle Haven Marina and return—Our first leg took place in the heart of the Nation’s Capital, launching at the bustling [Columbia Island Marina](#) and underneath the traffic stalled on the George Washington Memorial Parkway, down past the Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial and the National Capitol, the vast noise of the arrivals and departures from Reagan National Airport. We detoured into the launch ramp at [Daingerfield island](#) for brief stretch break; tangled with the sailing school launching from the Washington Sailing Marina; cut across the touristy Alexandria waterfront; paddled underneath the Wilson Bridge; stroked by the Chesapeake’s shortest lighthouse at Jones Point; and propelled ourselves down to the crowded tip of [Belle Haven Marina’s](#) green-carpeted landing. All that urban scenery was packed into a mere 8.5 miles. To minimize the amount of shuttling, most of us did this paddle with a return up river - timed to make use of the tidal current as much as possible.



Washington DC from Columbia Island Marina
photo by Suzanne Farace

I was joined for the out and back by Suzanne Farace, Bob Shakeshart, Jay Perry, Aht Viraviyda, Lois Wyatt, Bob Maynes, Ed Cooper, Al Larsen, and Marla Aron, and Tom Blount, Madeline Towle, and Kathy and Frank Collins for the down river leg. After a light lunch and a cold watermelon shared with Chip and the other denizens of Belle Haven, we were back on the water. We swung to the Maryland shore for the return, passed close to the Ferris wheel and Oz-like National Harbor, and dodged the wakes of the various power boats and deep-draught tour boats who livened up the paddle by giving us some wakes to surf.

John Smith would have been agog at the sights along this modern, urban riverfront. Worse, he would have had to check into a hotel in Alexandria or National Harbor for a night’s stay if he could have found a limousine (or at least a taxi with a kayak rack) to get there. There are NO accommodations for kayak tourers on this section of the river: given high real-estate prices and lack of public parks, there may never be any. One would think that the most powerful city on the planet could somehow enable us to pursue our primitive journey even in this urban landscape, but the answer would seem to be, “NO.”



Aht and an arrival to Reagan National photo by Bob Shakeshaft

Belle Haven Marina to Leesylvania State Park, VA—Our second leg resembled kayak touring a bit more than the first. Because of the many links in this chain, the corresponding car shuttle was necessarily complex. We endured the Friday morning traffic from Belle Haven down busy Route 1 to leave a couple of cars at the car-top boat launch at Pohick Bay Regional Park, then battled back with the commuters to Belle Haven. Launching, we glided down the Virginia shore alongside the George Washington Parkway to the choke-point on the river where the steep-walled Fort Washington (on the MD shore) stopped the British fleet from sailing up to Washington during the War of 1812. Passing Piscataway Creek and the National Colonial Farm on the MD shore, and Fort Hunt on the VA side, we rounded Mount Vernon’s tour boat dock as one of the large cruisers maneuvered to tie up and coasted to a lunch spot on the beach just downriver from Washington’s home. After lunch, we crossed the mouth of Dogue Creek, rounded Whitestone Point and Fort Belvoir, and paddled up Gunston Cove to the beach at Pohick Bay RP, completing 12.1 more miles of our passage.



On the beach at Mount Vernon (Ed Cooper)
photo by Ralph Heimlich

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[Pohick Bay Regional Park](#) is a wonderful facility for recreation in Northern Virginia and provides nice campsites for many on a summer weekend, including our three. We couldn't help thinking, however, how nice it would have been if a small part of the shoreline of the park just up Gunston Cove from the car-top boat launch were set aside for a paddle-in campsite where we could just haul up the boats and set up camp. Kayak tourers don't need much: a little cleared level ground under some trees, a porta-potty and maybe a fire-ring not too far from the beach. Instead, we loaded up the boats and drove the mile and half to our campsites, set up camp and chilled out. One of our "must sees" on this stop was the Pirate Mural painted for the park by Al Larsen's talented son Ben. We thought the pirate captain looked suspiciously like Al, admittedly with one less leg.



Al Larsen and the Pirate from Ben Larsen's Mural at Pohick Bay RP
Photo by Ralph Heimlich

Our party started out with Ed Cooper, Dick Rock, Greg Welker, Marla Aron, Bob Maynes and Al Larsen. Bob had planned to bail out at Pohick and, due to an unfortunate boat loading accident which left a hole in his hull, Ed had to curtail his trip at Pohick as well. After a restful night, we awoke early, broke camp before nearly anyone else at the camp was awake (what do all those RV "campers" actually DO in camp all day?), left the boats at the landing and shuttled a car down to Leesylvania State Park for the Saturday portion of the trip. We launched and set off into the sun around Mason Neck, catching slack tidal current at Hallowing Point (it can run at over a knot on ebb and flow at this constriction). We pulled into Mason Neck NWR and lunched on the beach at the ruined dock and boathouse before launching for a 2.5 mile crossing of the mouth of Occoquan Creek. South winds of long fetch were aggravated by the wakes of many large power boats making fast time out of the marinas on Occoquan Creek. We left High Point behind us and spent a somewhat anxious time peering over our right shoulders for approaching boat traffic (one nearly nailed Greg before the operator woke up and realized he was bearing down on us) and dealing with some of the steep chop churned up by wind and boats. The biggest wave (something over 2.5 feet) carried us onto the shallows in front of the Leesylvania SP marina, augmented, no doubt, by a passing cruiser. Rounding the marina, we passed into Powell's Creek and beached at the canoe launch at Brushy Point, completing another 13.1 miles of our passage.

[Leesylvania State Park \(VA\)](#), has no "regular" camping, but has a very nice group camp site at Brushy Point right by the canoe launch that they will reserve for adult groups (unusual for group campsites). This would be a perfect setup for kayak touring, but at 25.2 downriver miles from Belle Haven Marina, wasn't very useful for us on this leg. If a paddle-in campsite could be developed at Pohick Bay RP (or across the river at MD's Chapman State Park, or on the National Park Ser-

vice's Piscataway Creek Park near the Marshall Hall boat ramp), a feasible touring run from there to Leesylvania SP could be done. These would then link to [VA's Widewater SP](#) (where a new paddle-in site is scheduled for construction this season), to [VA's Caledon SP](#) paddle-in sites dedicated last year, to the existing paddle-in campsite at MD's Chapel Point, a roughly 70-mile stretch of the Potomac River.

While not strictly speaking part of the Potomac Passagemaker Tour, on Sunday, Marla Aron, Greg Welker and I joined Linda Witkin and Mike Cohn for his paddle from [Marshall Hall](#) to Pomonkey Creek on the Maryland shore of the Potomac. Also paddling were Bill McAllister, Gail Davidson, Jim LaMadrid, Jill Zimmerman, and Larry Schoen. The shoreline was beautiful and Pomonkey Creek is a nearly unspoiled tidal creek leading up into woods and swamps that John Smith would feel right at home exploring. We ventured farther downstream and landed at [MD's Chapman State Park](#), featuring the colonial mansion at [Mount Aventine](#). The commanding views from the ridgetop on which the house was built in 1840 sweep down across a treed meadow that was dotted with native prickly pear cactus in bloom, an exotic sight somewhat unexpected in mid-Atlantic Maryland.

There are seven more legs to this season's [Potomac Passagemaker Tour](#), and I invite you to come along, sample kayak touring, and see some of our great national river as John Smith would have seen it (if he'd only had a kayak).

More photos online [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). ☹



Perfect place for a paddle-in campsite at Pohick Bay RP
photo by Ralph Heimlich



Canoe landing at Bushy Point, Leesylvania SP (VA) with paddle-in campsite in the background

photo by Ralph Heimlich