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Home Plate on the River of Dreams

by Jody Argo Schroath
 photograph Jody Argo Schroath

This story begins with the time I *didn't* go to Pocomoke City, Md. That was the time when Otis Douglass, the Pocomoke River lift-bridge tender, had been asked by two prominent Pocomokians, to keep his eye out for me to come putt-putting up the river in Snipp, my little Swedish sloop. When I did heave into view, Otis was supposed to radio me to bring *Snipp* through the lift bridge and tie up at the town docks next to the flagpole. But--as I may have mentioned--I didn't show up.

At this point, you are thinking, perhaps, that I'm some kind of big celebrity and these folks were going to meet me with the keys to the city or something. Very funny. Keys to the few showers, maybe. The lookout for *Snipp* had been arranged because I had mentioned a few weeks earlier during a phone conversation with John Riggi, operator of the Pocomoke tour boat *Bay Queen*, that I was planning to visit that particular week, and Riggi had mentioned it to Pocomoke city manager Russ Blake, because city hall likes to know *who's* using their docks. I had called Riggi in the first place because I'd heard about the *Bay Queen* and hoped he'd give me a ride on her while I was in town. So Riggi and Blake had put Otis on the qui vive, because he sits looking up and down the river all day anyway.

So, what's my point? Simply to show how enthusiastic the folks in Pocomoke City are about getting more boaters to come the 14 miles up the Pocomoke River to visit their town. Towns that lie significantly upriver have to go that extra mile, so to speak, to attract visitors. While upriver towns like Pocomoke once bustled with marine trade and industry--shipbuilding in Pocomoke's case--they now seem too far away, too much trouble, for today's time-cramped recreational boaters. Sailing out of Annapolis on *Snipp*, for example--and recognizing that there are kayakers who can make better time than she--required two overnights and then, with strict attention to the tides, a long third day before arriving in Pocomoke. That's a commitment of at least a week, not even allowing for bad weather. And that assumes your boat has a shallow enough draft to take the shortcut through Broad Creek from the Little Annessex River near Crisfield, Md., into Pocomoke Sound. The alternative is the long trip south of Tangier Island and then all the way around the bottom of Watts Island before picking up the channel across Pocomoke Sound. Boaters out of the middle and southern Bay could make the trip a lot faster, of course, as could powerboaters from, say, anywhere.

There is not much opportunity for cutting across the upper Pocomoke Sound willy-nilly. There's plenty of depth and elbow room in the lower Sound, but the farther northeast you go, the more you need to stick to the channel--especially in the last bit, known as The Muds, before you reach the Pocomoke River itself. I was on my third day out of Annapolis, doing just that--crossing The Muds--on a still bright morning, about a month after I *hadn't* gone to Pocomoke City. (Hey, weather happens.) Surrounded by miles of thinly disguised mud, I thought of other storied shallow tidal pools, like the Susquehanna Flats, of course, and Britain's Norfolk Broads, the Frisian Islands, made famous in Erskine Childers's spy story *Riddle of the Sands*, where islands and rivers appear and disappear with the tides. I even thought of the upper reaches of the Ruiki River in the Congo, where Humphrey Bogart dragged the *African Queen* through the shallows. I shuddered at that final image. At least there are no leeches in Pocomoke Sound, though it does do a brisk trade in mosquitoes and bitey flies. Determined not to become a fixed target, I redoubled my efforts to keep *Snipp* between the signs, even when the channel improbably went smack up against the shore to cut behind Williams Point instead of entering the Pocomoke River through its broad but shallow front door.

Now as I passed the final marker and entered the river at last I breathed a sigh of relief, but wondered whether the destination would indeed be worth the trip. I still had a long way to go, and it was nearing the turning of the tide, which would further put a thumb on *Snipp's* forward progress. (The Pocomoke has a tidal rise of two to three feet, and the current is often swift.) I passed Shelton, a quiet waterman's settlement, and then Pitts Creek and, close by the river's edge, the colonial mansion Beverly of Worcester, formerly known by the excellent name of Thrum-Capped. As the river continued to twist and narrow, the marshes slowly began to give way to higher banks and the first cypress trees appeared. Before long the river took on its famously black, cypress-root-stained color.

I was beginning to feel comfortable on the river and thought about making a quick stop at the little settlement of Rehobeth, Md., where according to the *Guide to Cruising Chesapeake Bay*, I would find the country's oldest Presbyterian church, built by the denomination's founder Francis Makemie in 1705, and the ruins of an Episcopal church that had been built later in the same century. I slowed down as I neared the tiny parking area and launch ramp, but decided to keep on my way. I still had several miles to go, and besides, my husband Rick--not having a week to spare--was driving down to Pocomoke that day to meet me.

About three miles downriver from Pocomoke City, in the middle of the final horseshoe turn, the tide began its outward flow in earnest. My little outboard soldiered on valiantly, however, and at about two in the afternoon I passed through the open railway bridge and then edged over to the long wooden town docks, which run along the south bank. Otis wasn't looking out for me today, so, short of the lift bridge, I slowed to a standstill against the current until I could wrap a line around a piling. Then, turning the nose into the dock, I took the bow line and

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jumped off to tie it off. Whew, that was certainly better than my usual job of docking in a strong current, I thought smugly. It was only then that Rick appeared, having completely missed my slick parking job, of course.

I had loved the trip up the river, its constant turns and twists, its transition from swamp to old forest. I'd loved its narrow, friendly intimacy, its majestic cypress trees, with their pointy knees poking out of the water around them like so many small children. But what about Pocomoke City, I wondered once again. Would it be worth the trip?

A fellow boater was the first to tackle the question. Ron Walker was tidying up his own small sloop *Falcon* at the town docks as Rick and I strolled by on our way to look around town. Yes, Walker volunteered, waving a varnish rag for emphasis, there was a lot going on these days in Pocomoke--spruced up city docks, a new museum/aquarium/visitor center, a new tour boat, and quite a bit more according to the grapevine. Walker had kept *Falcon* at the town docks for several years, but recently decided that a powerboat was better for someone who lived upriver and across a wide shallow sound. He pointed to a cabin cruiser nearby, which he had just purchased and was planning to rehab. Meanwhile, though, he was sprucing up *Falcon* for her new owner. "See if you can get into the Discovery Center," was his final shot.

Alas, the Discovery Center--housed in a brightly painted 1950s-era filling station and garage adjacent to the town docks--was closed up tight. The museum, with its old Atlantic Arc gas pumps standing out front, was still under construction when Rick and I stopped by but open weekends. This summer the Discovery Center will be open seven days a week and include displays on local history, fishing and industry, as well as a steamboat and wharf you can climb around and a deep-water aquarium that promises to bring visitors eye-to-eye with native fish and aquatic life. Clearly the folks in Pocomoke City are proud of their Discovery Center. *Everyone* brings it up.

Foiled by the Discovery Center, however, Rick and I decided to perambulate up Market Street, lined with old-fashioned brick storefronts, peering into little shops in varying stages of prosperity--dog grooming, fancy dresses, sundries. We came up short beneath the bright yellow and black marquee of the Mar-Va Theater. The 1927 Art Deco theater, restored largely by volunteers, is another of the "happening" things on everybody's lips. A few blocks farther, we passed the Costen House, home of Pocomoke City's first mayor, physician Isaac T. Costen, and then we turned off to visit the Sturgis One Room School Museum, a century-old African-American school that was moved into town to create the museum. It was midweek and they were all closed, but we got the idea.

The sun was hanging low when we returned to the car, which Rick had parked between the docks and the city park, and drove over Otis Douglass's handsome lift bridge, then turned back downriver to look for Friendship Farm Bed & Breakfast, the new enterprise of Denise and Russ Shaner. We could have taken *Snipp* instead of the car--the Shaners have a lovely deep-water dock and welcome boaters--but sometimes you get lazy, and I was definitely feeling lazy. Besides, you can never count on two good dockings in one day.

We found the elegant century-old farmhouse with no problem, and soon afterward, having been given a proper welcome by the Shaners, their two dogs and two cats, we were comfortably settled in a large and bright upstairs room--done up in blue and white, with seashells and a fine view of the river. Later, we sat with the Shaners over a bottle of local wine and talked about their experience as newcomers to Pocomoke City. Although the Shaners had acquired Friendship Farm six years ago, after moving down from Montgomery County, Md., they only opened the B&B in January 2008. In the interim, they restored, decorated, spruced up, gardened and added an owner's wing to the 25-acre estate. The place gleams, and the Shaners--she with an animated face, broad smile and trim white hair, and he with a quiet smile and neat sandy beard--seem to be custom-made for their new occupation. They've been busy since the opening. Many of their customers have been canoe trippers and groups of cyclists.

They love Pocomoke City now, but weren't so sure about it the first time they visited. "We used to come to Chincoteague and noticed the little town off the main highway," Russ said. "And then one day we drove off to have a look." Denise picked up the story: "We were not impressed." But that was 10 years ago, she continued. They decided to take a chance on it anyway. "A lot has changed in Pocomoke now . . . and will change," she concluded. Since they've been in Pocomoke, the Shaners have made a lot of friends and have gotten very much involved in the community. "We're newcomers here, but it doesn't seem to matter to people," Denise concluded.

The next day, we stopped in to see friends of the Shaners, Ray and Barb Nordstrom, who live in a graceful brick home they built 25 years ago on the river, several miles north of Pocomoke City. The Nordstroms are seasoned boaters and owners of a new Kadey-Krogen trawler. I asked them what it's like to keep a large boat so far upriver.

"It's great!" Ray replied as we sat on the patio behind their house. In fact, before buying the trawler, the Nordstroms kept a Mason 48 ketch at the town docks in Pocomoke City for years, using it to cruise the Virginia Eastern Shore and south as far as the Bahamas. That winter they planned to take their trawler, named *Cracker Jack*, down to Stuart, Fla., and perhaps on to the islands.

"It was about two and a half hours until we had the sails up," Nordstrom said. "One hour to motor down the Pocomoke and one hour to reach Watts Island." It takes about the same amount of time in the trawler, he continued. "There are one hundred twenty-nine turns on the autopilot to get down river, counting three to five turns per bend in the river, and there are twenty-five or so bends."

Like the Shaners, the Nordstroms have been involved in making Pocomoke City an attractive destination for visitors. Boaters do make the trip up the river, he said. "I've seen twenty to twenty-five boats at once at the town dock. One year, we had seven boats who cruised to Pocomoke City from North Carolina." When boaters come, they usually stay awhile, he continued, and began ticking the attractions off on his fingers. "It's a half-mile to Walmart and other big box stores on the main highway (U.S. Route 13). Blackwater Cafe in town is very nice, as is Our Place. The Discovery Center is an attraction, too. At the docks there are showers and a pump-out. The library is three or four blocks away. The Laundromat is next to Our Place. And there's Winter Quarters Golf Course right over the bridge. Just follow the nature trail from the park at the docks."

What about fuel? Small boats with portable tanks can get gasoline at the River Market across the lift bridge, Nordstrom suggested, but for larger amounts, the local distributor will deliver it to the docks.

I mentioned the problem of fuel to John Riggi later that day when I met him and his wife Mary Ann at the town docks (having said good-bye to Rick, who was headed back up the road for home). Riggi had his own suggestion. "If boaters need fuel, they can just call me, and I'll see they get it," he said. "Or if they have any other issue, for that matter," he added.

When all is said and done--and setting aside the fine new Discovery Center, the spruced up docks, the Laundromat and the nearby golf course--John and Mary Ann Riggi alone, in my opinion, are worth the trip to Pocomoke City. Don't get me wrong, I loved everyone I met in Pocomoke City, but as I watched John and Mary Ann Riggi move around the *Bay Queen* as if it were an extension of their very selves, I knew I was on to something special. Besides, the Riggis are crazy in love with the water. They love being on it, working on it, vacationing on it. How else do you explain a couple who once set out on a small pontoon boat with a tent to visit all the canals in New York and Canada?

"We would pull up for the night beside the big trawlers in our little open boat and people would

look at us like we were crazy," Mary Ann said, smiling at the memory. "But the people in the towns along the way were very kind to us."

Then they got an 80-pound dog and graduated to sleeping on an air mattress. After they got a second dog, they bought a boat with a cuddy cabin. Then came children and ever bigger boats. By the time they had finished, they had traversed more than 50 locks (they love locks). The couple, originally from Pennsylvania, then bought a workboat marina on Chincoteague Bay, where they worked round the clock, seven days a week, with John supplementing their income by crabbing and clamming in season. Exhausted after a few years of that, they decided it was time to go into the tour boat business. That's when they bought the 42-foot *Bay Queen*, which was built in the Carolinas and operated out of Ocean City, Md., from 1985 to 2000, when it was donated to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. The Riggis fixed her up and then looked around for a place to locate. They were invited to give Pocomoke City a look. Now, like the Shaners and the Nordstroms, they are part of the community, working to make Pocomoke a great place to visit.

They certainly helped to make my visit a great one when they agreed to take me and a couple of other eager tourists for a trip on the river. On the water, the Riggis are practically a vaudeville act. John, with close-cropped graying hair, shades and a baseball cap pulled down tight, takes the wheel and provides continuous commentary, sprinkled with bad jokes, while Mary Ann, long dark hair pulled back, braces her legs against the movement of the boat and provides the animation. "If I fall overboard," John says while Mary Ann pretends to fall overboard, "I suggest you hold an election quickly for a new captain." Mary Ann also provides entertainment to fit the audience when they do tours for groups, like garden clubs and retirement homes. On a trip with a Class of 1948 high school reunion, her piano tunes had them dancing in the aisles.

Down the Pocomoke we went on the *Bay Queen*, John at the wheel, microphone in hand, keeping up his informational patter. He points out a sand and gravel operation in a manmade cut off the river. "Eagles like the quarry because the hammering creates a manmade thermal," he said. Each time we saw an eagle or a great blue heron or a kingfisher, both of them pointed excitedly, as if it were a brand-new experience.

All too soon, we turned and headed back upriver. But before we docked, John had Otis raise the lift bridge so we could go through. Once we were back through the bridge, John crabbed the *Bay Queen* against the swift incoming current to bring her against the dock, and we said good-bye. I walked back up the shoreline to where *Snipp* was tied off--it was nearly time for me to head back home myself. I sat in the cockpit and watched the current, waiting for slack tide. Finally, the movement slowed, then stopped, and I turned *Snipp's* nose around and headed back the way I'd come.

The river seemed a lot more familiar to me now. As I began to take one bend after another, I could still hear John's tour patter in my head. "The telephone poles on the Eastern Shore came out of these forests." "This is where they built ships that went around the world, using the cypress trees in these woods. . . . Here was an old cannery. . . . The tugs change the channel when they get stuck pushing a barge and just power their way out."

Pocomoke City was long gone from sight now, but not from my memory. Was it worth the trip? No question about it. Go ahead, give them a call. They'll probably meet you with the keys to the showers too.

Cruiser's Digest: Pocomoke City, Md.

"The Pocomoke isn't for yachtsmen in a hurry," wrote Fessenden Blanchard 50 years ago in *A Cruising Guide to the Chesapeake*. "If you are going somewhere, don't stop; it is too far out of the way. . . ." On the Pocomoke, he continues, you will find neither comfortable marinas nor the company of fellow boaters. But, he concludes, "the yachtsman who believes in appearances and plans his cruises accordingly will miss a good deal that is fascinating, especially on the Pocomoke--if he hurries by."

Today, happily, little has changed. Ancient trees still crowd the shoreline. Bald eagles, kingfishers, pileated woodpeckers and prothonotary warblers still lark about in the marshes and woods. Yellow and white perch, eel, gar, sunfish, pickerel, bass, herring and many more species are still there to tempt the angler. The only changes yachtsmen are likely to find, in fact, are in Pocomoke City, where they now will find a perfectly comfortable place to dock and a respectable number of things to do and see within easy walking distance.

Pocomoke City Docks is the only transient marina before U.S. Route 13's 35-foot-high fixed bridge, which is just upriver from town. Tie-ups are free for the first two days; visitors need only call city hall at 410-957-1333 or stop by 101 Clarke Street. With registration comes the combination to the showers. (I was just kidding about the shower keys.) Docking is available before and after the lift bridge (say hi to Otis). Cypress Park, adjacent to the docks, has nature trails, a playground and picnic tables. Gas is available in portable amounts at River Market across the lift bridge or delivered in large quantities from Marathon Oil (410-957-2525). For boats with a vertical clearance of less than 35 feet, fuel is also available farther upriver at Shad Landing State Park.

If you want a night off the boat, Pocomoke has two B&Bs: **Friendship Farm Bed & Breakfast** (410-957-1094; www.friendshipbb.com), which is accessible by boat--you can tie up at their deep-water dock; and **Littleton's Bed and Breakfast** (410-957-1645; www.littletonsbanded.com), which is within walking distance of City Docks.

Among the sites to see in Pocomoke City are the **Delmarva Discovery Center** (410-957-1919), **Costen House Museum** (410-957-3110) and **Mar-Va Theater** (410-957-4230), all on Market Street and **Sturgis One Room Museum** (410-957-3110) on nearby Front Street. **Winter Quarters Municipal Golf Course** is just across the lift bridge. For more information about Pocomoke City, see www.cityofpocomoke.com or www.pocomoke.com.

A half-mile hike from the City Docks to U.S. 13 will take you to big-box stores and supermarkets. If you want to roam farther afield--to nearby Chincoteague, Va., for example--you can rent a car from Midway Chevrolet and Toyota (say hi to owner Ray Nordstrom) at 410-957-2222). If you need anything else, take John Riggi up on his offer of help at 410-632-1415.

The Pocomoke remains navigable beyond Pocomoke City, with depths of five feet or more, as far as two fine state parks that straddle the river: **Shad Landing** on the south side and smaller **Milburn Landing** on the north (410-632-2566; www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/easter/pocomokeriver.html). In addition to fuel, Shad Landing has a transient pier. Both have launch ramps, trails, camping, some supplies and boat rentals.