

DESTINATION

TANGIER ISLAND, VA.



Tie up at Parks Marina and visit one of the last waterman communities in the Chesapeake

BY STEPHEN BLAKELY

If you take your own boat to Tangier Island, Va., the first “Tangierman” you’re likely to meet is Milton Parks, owner and dockmaster of the only marina in this small, remote, historic community.

A retired waterman and expert helmsman, Parks is skilled at directing visiting boaters to a safe, if not always graceful, landing. He’s got to be. Through the years, more than a dozen of his pilings have been snapped off by pleasure boaters attempting to reach his dock. Only once, in all my visits to Tangier, has Parks declared me “*daiin-ger-us!*” — as I backed into a slip, and a tidal crosscurrent sent my boat bouncing off his pilings like a pinball.

As long as you don’t “bust the posts,” you will quickly discover the 78-year-old Parks (“Gander” to his fellow islanders) to be one of Tangier’s finest ambassadors. His family roots on this wonderfully secluded island go back centuries, and he loves to regale visitors with stories (mostly true) and jokes (mostly clean), peppered with passages from Shakes-

peare and scripture. They are delivered in Tangier’s distinctive British-sounding “relic dialect,” said to survive more-or-less intact from the Cornish speech of original settlers, flavored through the centuries by American coastal and Southern accents.

You will also notice, as you walk off the dock and start to explore the narrow streets, that Parks lives in the only all-brick home on Tangier. “I didn’t want it to float away,” he explains with a laugh.

However, that’s no joke. The highest point of land here is barely four feet above sea level, and about 9 acres of precious Tangier shoreline erode into the Chesapeake each year. Surge tides from Hurricane Isabel in 2003 and Ernesto in 2006 flooded more than 80 homes, wrecked dozens of the crab shanties in Tangier Harbor and came within inches of Parks’ front door.

A SPECIAL PLACE

Tangier is one of only two island communities of watermen remaining on the Chesapeake — the other is Smith Island, Md., just to the north — and has about 500 permanent residents.

Ferry service is available from both the Western and Eastern shores of the Bay, but if your boat



Tangier Island is located in Virginia’s portion of Chesapeake Bay about 12 miles west of Crisfield, Md.

Where to go, what to see

Tangier is a quiet, communal slice of life as it used to be on the Chesapeake.

GENERAL INFORMATION

- Tangier Island History Museum, www.tangierhistorymuseum.org
- Tangier Island Guide, www.tangierisland-va.com
- Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Port Isobel study center (open to the public for hiking), www.cbf.org (search Port Isobel)

MARINA

Parks Marina is close to the western entrance of the main channel. It's the only marina on the island. It has 25 slips (at least 10 feet at mean low water) and showers, but no pumpout. Docking fees are \$25 per night for boats to 30 feet and \$30 for bigger boats — cash only. Electricity and water are an extra \$5 per night. More information is available at www.tangierisland-va.com/marina.

FERRIES

Ferry service is dependent on weather. Boats are canceled in heavy weather until conditions improve, and it's a good idea to call and reconfirm that the boat is running. Schedules and rate information are available at www.tangierhistorymuseum.org. There are five ferries to Tangier Island, three of which are seasonal.

- Crisfield, Md.: There are two regularly scheduled year-round ferries from Crisfield, about 12 miles to the northeast. The Sharon Kay III, a 46-foot waterman-type workboat, makes the passage in about 45 minutes, leaving Tangier at 4 p.m. and Crisfield at 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and an hour earlier on Saturday and Sunday.

The Courtney Thomas — often referred to as the Mail

RESTAURANTS

Tangier Island is one of the best places on Chesapeake Bay for fresh, local seafood — soft-shell crabs in particular. Most of the crab shanties in Tangier's harbor have "shedding pens," where watermen keep the "busters" (hard-shell crabs that are in the process of shedding) until they have completely lost their shells and become the Bay's famous, delectable and valuable soft-shell crabs. Other specialties include crab cakes, clam or oyster fritters, and finfish such as flounder.

- Perhaps the best local seafood on the island is at Fisherman's Corner Restaurant, which is operated by the wives of local watermen. The watermen supply the kitchen with their daily catch of flounder and crabs. www.fishermanscornerrestaurant.com
- Lorraine's, across from Fisherman's Corner, is the only year-round eatery, serving crab cakes and other seafood, subs, pizza and more. It recently moved to a new and larger location. www.tangierisland-va.com/lorraine_tangierisland
- Hilda Crockett's Chesapeake House serves family-style fare and can cater to large groups. www.chesapeakehousetangier.com/restaurant
- The Waterfront Restaurant, located at the ferry dock, is known for its soft-shell sandwich and crab cakes. It also serves the usual fried-food assortment and sandwiches. www.tangierisland-va.com/waterfront
- Spanky's is an ice cream parlor with 1950s décor; it's open Monday through Saturday in-season.

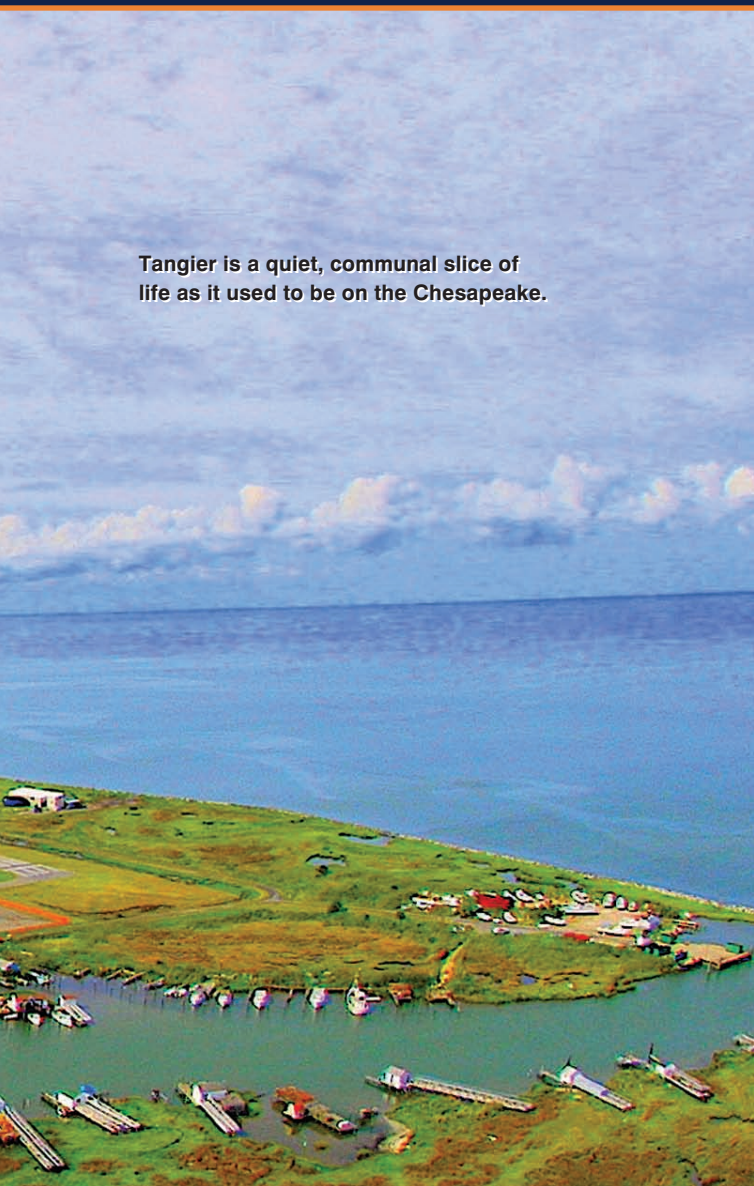
BED-AND-BREAKFASTS

There are three B&Bs on Tangier, and all offer golf-cart pickup and delivery from the ferry dock or marina.

- Hilda Crockett's Chesapeake House, on Main Ridge, has both the restaurant and a separate B&B across the road. Rates are \$90 to \$120 per night. www.chesapeakehousetangier.com/bb
- Shirley's Bay View Inn, on West Ridge, is one of the oldest houses on Tangier, with separate cottages also available. Rates are \$120 to \$195 per night. www.tangierisland.net/home
- Sunset Inn Bed and Breakfast, also on West Ridge, has an apartment and nine smaller cottages, plus a family cottage. Rates are \$115 to \$280 per night. www.tangierislandsunset.com/inn
- Mimosa Cottage can be rented on a weekly basis for up to eight people. Rates are \$150 per night for up to five people and \$25 per additional person. www.auntruthsplace.com

TOURS

- The Tangier Island History Museum has free kayaks and canoes available at the end of its dock. Be sure to pick up the map of "water trails." Paddling options include the main marsh and creek route through town (Orange Trail), east to Port Isobel (Green), north to the Uppards (Pink), offshoots from the main trail to the southern marsh (Blue), and Cod Harbor (Yellow). www.tangierhistorymuseum.org
- Denny Crockett, owner of Hilda Crockett's Chesapeake House, is a licensed captain who offers a variety of tours, such as crabbing, birding, sunset and eco-tours. Customized trips are available on request. www.chesapeakehousetangier.com/tours
- James Eskridge Jr. offers 30- to 45-minute trips to his crab shanty out in Mailboat Harbor. www.fishermanscornerrestaurant.com/baycrabs
- M&S Charters: Mark Haynie, the licensed captain of the Sharon Kay III, offers a variety of tours, such as crabbing, birding, sunset and eco-tours. Customized trips are available on request. www.tangierisland-va.com/tangiercharters



A waterman in Mailboat Harbor.

draws 6 feet or less — the charted channel depth — Tangier presents an easy, beautiful and tasty cruising destination. Local crabs and seafood are abundant, and the island bills itself as the "soft-shell capital of the world." Eco-tourism is growing, since birding and kayaking are wonderful here, and the Tangier beach is the best to be found in the Bay.

Tangier is remote, and its tight-knit, hard-working, religious community seems like a time capsule from a simpler era. There are no traffic lights on the island, no bars, not even an ATM. There's one general store, a handful of restaurants, a few bed-and-breakfasts and gift shops, and a new museum and cultural center. About 80 students, with fewer than 10 per class, attend the Tangier combined K-12 public school. Residents get around the narrow streets by golf cart, bike, scooter or foot; there are almost no cars.

The island was first mapped as part of the "Russell Islands" by Capt. John Smith during his 1608 ex-

Boat — operates Monday through Saturday, departing Tangier at 8 a.m. and arriving in Crisfield at 8:45 a.m. She departs Crisfield at 12:30 p.m. and arrives back at Tangier for the night at 1:15 p.m.

In-season, the Stephen Thomas cruise boat makes one round-trip per day, leaving Crisfield at 12:30 p.m. and departing Tangier at 4 p.m. The crossing takes about 90 minutes.

- Reedville, Va.: There is summer service from the Western Shore of Chesapeake Bay out of Reedville, about 20 miles away. The Chesapeake Breeze cruise boat leaves Reedville at 10 a.m. each day and departs Tangier at 2 p.m. The crossing takes about 90 minutes.
- Onancock, Va.: The Joyce Marie II, a 36-foot lobster boat, makes two round-trips from Tangier Tuesday through Sunday, departing Tangier at 7:30 a.m. and leaving Onancock at 10 a.m. The afternoon run departs Tangier at 3:30 p.m. and then departs Onancock at 5:30 p.m. The crossing takes 45 minutes to an hour.

Tangier is remote, and its tight-knit, hard-working, religious



The setting sun illuminates the view from Parks Marina.

ploration of Chesapeake Bay. It is said to have been settled by John Crockett and his eight sons in 1686, and Crockett, Parks and Pruitt remain among the island's oldest and most common family names. One measure of their heritage is the number of men those families have lost to the Bay: Almost 50 Tangier Island watermen have died working the Bay, including 14 Crocketts, seven Pruitts and five Parks.

Methodism has been a very strong influence on Tangier, stemming from the charismatic preaching and revival camp meetings held there in the early 1800s by Joshua Thomas, the famed "parson of the islands." Because of their ties to the Northern Methodist Church, Tangier residents did not support slavery and refused to join the rest of Virginia in seceding from the Union during the Civil War.

Traditional religious values still dominate in the community, and a local ordinance prohibits the sale of alcohol. The Tangier town council famously blocked Warner Brothers from using the island to film the 1999 Kevin Costner movie "Message in a Bottle," objecting to the script's drinking, profanity and sex.

Because of the island's isolation from the mainland and limited available land, Tangier families buried the deceased in their yards, which is why most homes have family graves out front or in back. Not surprisingly, very few plots remain; burial space is at a premium, and some burials now occur off the island.

ON THE WATER

Weather permitting, there is year-round ferry service to Tangier Island out of Crisfield, Md., on the Eastern Shore. Seasonal ferry service is available from Onancock, Va., to the southeast and Reedville,

Va., to the west. If the Bay freezes over in winter, the island's single airstrip becomes its only lifeline to the outside world.

The first landmarks you'll see approaching Tangier are its blue water tower and the black spire of historic Swain Memorial United Methodist Church. There is only one channel, running west to east in a dogleg across the northern edge of the main part of the island. Skippers should pay close attention to both the tidal range (up to 4 feet) and current, which can be strong, especially on the western side.

Tangier's waterfront is crowded, and its dredged channel is edged by dozens of crab shanties built on pilings in the harbor shallows. No moorings are available in the harbor, and anchoring is discouraged. The only practical anchorage is near the site of the former "Steamboat Wharf" in Cod Harbor off the southeast side of the beach (good holding but exposed to the east).

Parks Marina is about a half-mile from the flashing green "1" western channel entrance marker to starboard before you reach Mailboat Harbor.

It is clearly marked and has 25 slips, along with some bulkhead space. Charges — cash only — are \$25 a night for boats to 30 feet and \$30 for bigger boats. A bit farther, next to where ferry and mail boats tie up, is a fuel dock/hardware store (Tangier Oil Co., known locally as the Dock Store).

If you are passing the western side of the island, pay attention to the 6-mile-wide restricted area, including a smaller prohibited zone, shown on charts immediately to the southwest. The day markers and lighted buoys indicate Navy targets, including a couple of wrecks that are awash at low tide.

The Navy conducted extensive bombing practice here in the early 1900s, and for years afterward local

watermen would occasionally dredge up unexploded ordnance. The most famous target ship in the area is the San Marcos, a pre-World War I battleship (commissioned as the USS Texas) that was anchored eight miles southwest of Tangier Island and blasted beneath the waves in 1911. The remains of the San Marcos became a significant navigational hazard and caused several wrecks until Navy divers blew off its submerged superstructure.

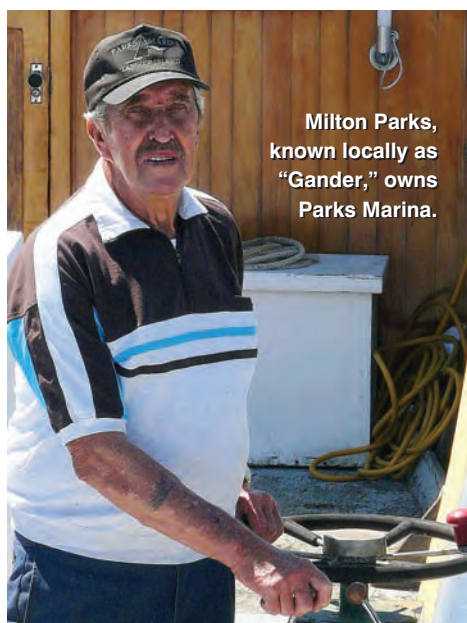
ON LAND

Counting the marshes, Tangier Island amounts to less than 740 acres, but only 83 acres are high enough for habitation. In fact, there is no single "island" of Tangier. Rather, it comprises small islets and three inhabited ridges. Main Ridge is where the bulk of the homes, restaurants and businesses are located. West Ridge is where the island's airstrip, dozens of houses and two bed-and-breakfasts are located. At the southern end of West Ridge is a small bridge that leads to Tangier beach (amounting to a third of the island) and the "Hook" at the far southern tip. Canton is a smaller section of homes on the east side and site of the island's original settlement.

Main Ridge, West Ridge and Canton are connected by small bridges that span the marsh and tidal streams. The marshy islands to the north of town, known as the Uppards, once contained a large settlement that was abandoned due to erosion in 1928. The only other inhabited land is Port Isobel, an island at the eastern end of Tangier channel. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation owns and uses it as a nature preserve and study center.

Port Isobel's scenic hiking trails are open to visitors (bring lots of mosquito repellent). In warm weather, the island often swarms with young students shipped in from the mainland to muck through the shallows as they learn about the Bay's ecology. Chesapeake Bay Foundation students from Port Isobel frequently wander the streets of Tangier, clipboards in hand, politely pestering the locals with assigned questions about island life.

Whether you arrive on your own boat at Parks Marina or on a ferry at the tour boat dock nearby, it's only a few steps to "downtown" Tangier — the north-



Milton Parks, known locally as "Gander," owns Parks Marina.

community seems like a time capsule from a simpler era.

ern end of Main Ridge locally known as “Meat Soup.” (The southern end is called “Black Dye.”) In close proximity are the classic old general store, gift shops and most restaurants. Of particular note is Fisherman’s Corner, run by the wives of local watermen whose daily catch supplies the kitchen. Across the street is Lorraine’s, the only year-round restaurant. Look for the artwork of Ken Castelli, the Tangier History Museum’s first artist-in-residence. He fell in love with the island and decided to become a full-time resident after his three years with the museum ended.

Down the street is Spanky’s, a 1950s-style ice cream parlor; the Double Six, a tiny sandwich shop where local watermen meet at for “smokes and coffee” before heading out on the Bay; Swain Memorial Methodist Church; the Tangier History Museum; and Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House inn and restaurant. (The island’s two other B&Bs — Bay View Inn and Sunset Inn — are on West Ridge.) Main Ridge is also home to the health clinic, school, post office and fire department.

WHAT TO DO

You can rent a golf cart or bicycle, and several islanders offer guided golf-cart tours. But it’s easy to just walk around Tangier Island — there’s not far to go, and hills don’t exist. The slower, quieter pace of life here also extends to electronic communications. One pay phone is available by the post office, and cell phone service is unreliable. An Internet hot spot is available at the Tangier History Museum, where you should start your tour of the island.

Tangier History Museum: The museum doubles as the visitor center, and admission is free. The museum provides an excellent overview of the island and its community, and the historic artifacts on display are on loan or donated by locals. The museum created the historical markers that line Tangier Island’s streets, a “history trail” pointing out notable spots visitors might otherwise miss — for example, the home of legendary town constable Bud Conorton, who shot an island teenager in 1920 for not being in church.

The museum also mapped out self-guided “water trails” around Tangier and surrounding marshes and creeks, and provides free kayaks and canoes from its dock so visitors can explore the trails themselves. One of our most enjoyable days on Tangier was spent kayaking to Port Isobel, the Uppards and through town.

Susan and Neil Kaye, physicians from Delaware, opened the museum in 2008. Neil Kaye, who is also a helicopter pilot, discovered Tangier about a decade ago while logging water time for his helicopter license. They were warmly welcomed by locals, fell in love with the island and its people, and bought a home there, where they commute on weekends.

The fact that the Tangier History Museum has become a thriving community project is still a happy surprise to the Kayes, given its humble origins. It began as a restroom. “It got started because there were no public bathrooms on the island,” says Susan Kaye. “Our first project was to see if we could get public bathrooms. Anything beyond that was gravy.”

The Kayes set up the museum as a non-profit or-

ganization and won a grant as a visitor terminal for the ferryboat system — basically the same as a highway rest stop. Today, the museum — with its two public restrooms and “right of way” (the dock and boardwalk) — is supported by federal and state transportation grants, contributions from visitors and volunteer work from locals.

Tangier beach: Wandering Tangier’s paths past modest wood-frame houses and across the five connecting bridges can be done in a leisurely two or three hours. A longer expedition — easily a half-day or more — is to explore the remote and pristine Tangier beach, accessible from the southern end of West Ridge and stretching almost 1.5 clean, sandy miles to the Hook.

For islanders, this is the favorite spot for swimming, hiking, birding, watching sunsets, and what is locally called “arra-headin’ ” — searching for arrowheads, the only visible sign left that this area was a major seasonal fishing camp for Native Americans.

Several business ventures were attempted on Tangier beach through the years, and every one failed. You’ll see the rusted skeleton of an old menhaden boat in Cod Harbor that was used as an unsuccessful seaweed-processing plant. Near the tip of the Hook, rusty pipes sticking out of the surf are all that’s left of the Taka-Cola cherry soda plant. Its well water became contaminated, and the beverage gave dysentery to unlucky customers.



Dozens of crab shanties dot Mailboat Harbor.

Along the western side, there is no trace of the small grove of trees that once stood where the Rev. Joshua Thomas held his huge revival meetings in the early 1800s. And the rotting foundations of Fort Albion, built by the British navy while occupying Tangier Island during the War of 1812, are now under 10 feet of water off to the southwest.

Eco-tours: Eco-tours are available if you’d rather have a local show you the secrets of Tangier. Denny Crocket, of Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House, is a licensed captain who runs crabbing, birding, sunset and sightseeing trips around Tangier in his converted crab boat. Town mayor James Eskridge Jr. (known locally as “Ooker”) offers tours to his crab shanty out in Mailboat Harbor — a waterman’s “home away from home” where they mend gear, fix crab pots and cull soft-shell crabs from the shedding floats.

Most Tangier visitors are day trippers who return to the mainland on the afternoon ferry. But staying overnight and spending a few days is essential if you want to fully explore the area, experience its

natural beauty and wildlife, and get a real flavor for the culture. Just don’t expect a late night. Watermen get up around 3 a.m., and the island’s restaurants and shops close early in the evening.

If you want alcohol, bring your own and be discrete about it. If there isn’t a church function being held, the main event each evening is the island’s after-dinner promenade, when children, teenagers, housewives and watermen “cruise” the island’s narrow streets to socialize.

THE ISLAND’S CHALLENGES

Making a living from the water has always taken hard work and deep faith, but this generation of Tangiermen faces challenges their forebears did not, starting with the fact that Tangier Island is disappearing into the Bay. The island has lost two-thirds of its land mass since its discovery, and the population is also decreasing. The last time so few people lived on Tangier Island was in 1880.

The island’s economic foundation is equally threatened. As reflected by the collapse of the oyster trade in the 1980s, followed by the near-collapse of rockfish in the 1990s and crabs more recently, the Chesapeake Bay’s ecology is being pushed beyond its limits. The causes cited are urban development and pollution from the six states that drain into the Bay — problems the watermen did not create and cannot control, yet for which they are forced to pay a brutal regulatory price.

State and federal restrictions seem to rise faster than the sea level: ever-lower catch limits and expanding sanctuary zones throughout the Bay, designed to protect the remaining crab stock; a freeze of commercial crabbing licenses; and burdensome paperwork. The result is that watermen who earn a living off the Bay — especially on Tangier Island — see themselves as facing extinction.

“Most people know the main problem with the Bay is pollution. It’s a combination of problems,” says Eskridge. “But it seems like the waterman is the thing to come after.”

These troubles come at a time when islanders also are being hit by the economic recession, higher fuel costs and fierce competition from imported crabmeat. If the menu says “Maryland-style” crab cake, the meat probably arrived frozen from South America or Asia.

Inevitably, young people look elsewhere to make a living. Many men are “going on the tug”— shipping out as captains or crew for tugboats plying the coast between Norfolk, Va., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New

York, and even as far as Louisiana and Puerto Rico.

"This is a tugboater's island now," says Kent Eskridge, a former waterman and the mayor's nephew. "It used to be 95 percent watermen, but it's maybe 60 percent tugboaters now. We've only got about 40 watermen now, out of total population of over 500."

Like many of the men on Tangier, Kent Eskridge served in the Navy after high school, but he returned to the island to work the water, dredging for oysters and crabbing. He gave up being a waterman eight years ago and now makes his living as a carpenter and general contractor, a transition he is somewhat wistful about.

"I saw the handwriting on the wall and got out early," he says. "I miss being a waterman."

The effects of regulatory changes, such as a crabbing ban and moratoriums on new or transferred crabbing licenses, are especially apparent at Tangier's K-12 school. In 2008, in an ominous and historic break with island tradition, not one of the graduating boys was able to follow their fathers at working the water. The current generation of watermen looks to be the island's last.

Despite their naturally optimistic outlook, folks on Tangier now question their ability to sustain this unique island community that has survived for more than 400 years. Several islanders are featured in a traveling photo exhibit called "An Endangered Species: Watermen of the Chesapeake Bay," which opens in September at the Mariners Museum in Newport News, Va. It will come to Tangier's museum next year.



There are almost no cars on the island, so residents get around the narrow streets by bike, golf cart, scooter or foot.

THE FUTURE

Tangier residents know their island community is irreplaceable, and life on the mainland holds little appeal for them. Family roots run very deep here, and few want to leave. The islanders have a reputation for tenacity, hard work and strong faith, and they look to the future with hope.

With help from the federal and state governments, many island homes most vulnerable to flooding are being raised, with new foundations that lift the structures a couple of feet higher. A stone jetty built along the western shore several years ago is slowing

the rate of erosion from the prevailing wind and waves. A new \$1.3 million health clinic opened earlier this year, providing a vastly improved facility for both the islanders and Dr. David Nichols, the visiting physician who flies out to Tangier by helicopter at least once a week.

There is also talk of closing the western channel entrance to block the tidal currents that scour away the remaining land or even "rebuilding the habitat" with dredge spoil, just as the government is currently doing at the Poplar Island wildlife refuge to the north. A grant has been submitted to build electrical wind turbines to supply Tangier Island, which, if successful, could lead to a larger wind energy farm south of Tangier Island. Such a project would represent a major investment in Tangier and a new source of income for residents.

For now, with crabbing in decline, tourism is the island's second economy, and many residents are working hard to build it up. This makes Tangier Island an ideal cruising destination — one of the last authentic waterman communities in the Chesapeake. It is distinct from the mainland in history and culture, close enough to reach by small boat, and yet remote enough to be a place apart. It's a beautiful and still bountiful outpost of nature, with a character and setting all its own.

Whatever the future holds, this is a special place worth visiting now. ■

Freelance writer Stephen Blakely sails a 26-foot Island Packet, Bearboat, out of Galesville, Md.

STEPHEN BLAKELY

The New Ranger Tugs R-27

The Trailerable Tug

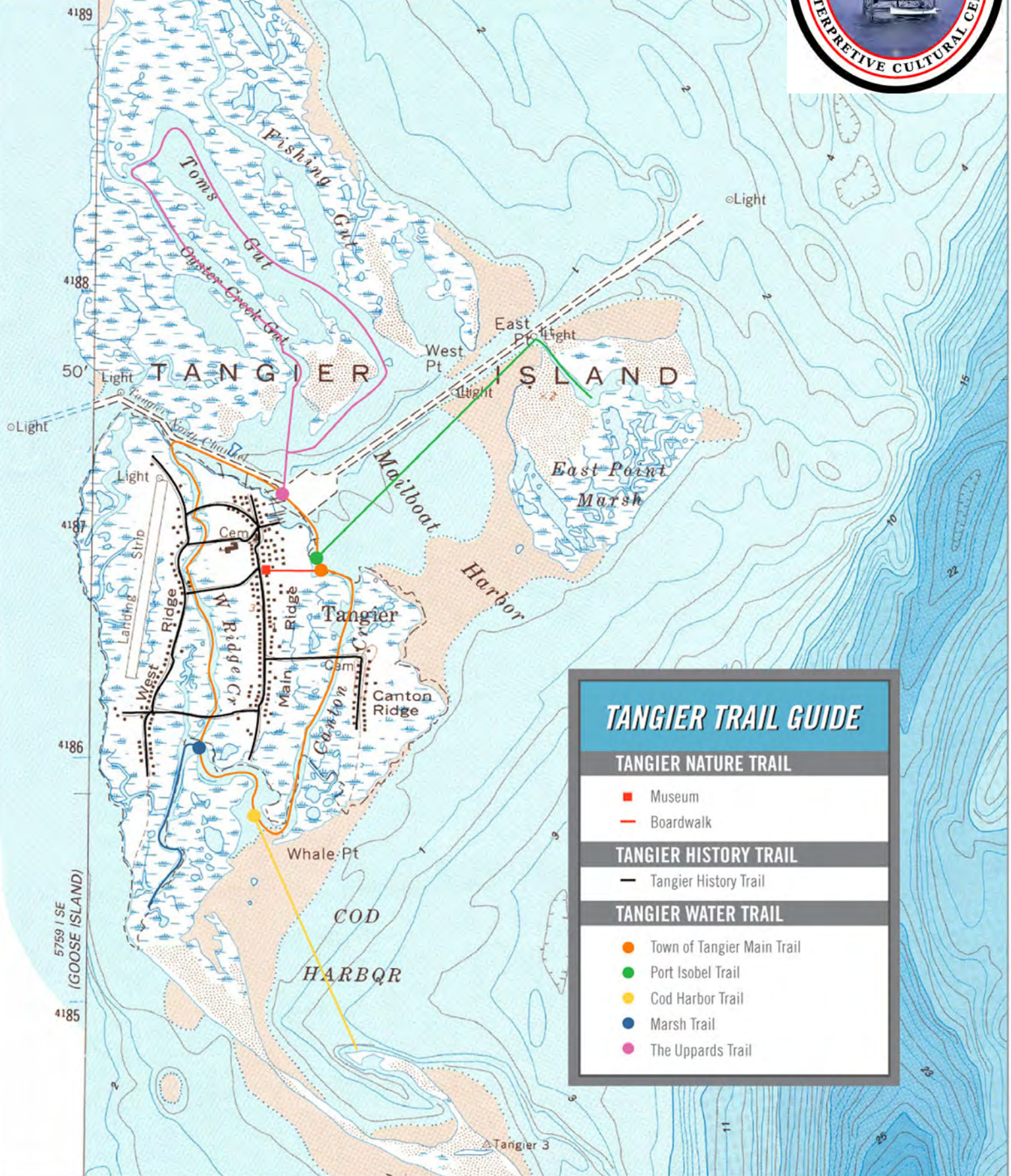
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TANGIER TRAIL GUIDE



TANGIER TRAIL GUIDE

TANGIER NATURE TRAIL

- Museum
- Boardwalk

TANGIER HISTORY TRAIL

- Tangier History Trail

TANGIER WATER TRAIL

- Town of Tangier Main Trail
- Port Isobel Trail
- Cod Harbor Trail
- Marsh Trail
- The Uppards Trail