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St. Michaels, Maryland

Hidden Gem on the Chesapeake Bay

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The Hooper Strait Lighthouse is a favorite of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Photo courtesy of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

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Though the Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland is home to all variety of quaint coastal villages, St. Michaels is a true find. Tiny and loaded with charm, it boasts a rich maritime heritage, eclectic boutiques, historic inns, antique shops, art galleries, spas and all manner of eateries. There is even a local brewery and winery. However, it is the magnificent harbor-front locale of the surrounding Miles River that will captivate you. Whether you are sailing, yachting, kayaking, fishing or planted on terra firma and feasting on plenty of fresh blue claw crab, historic St. Michaels is a seaside delight.

Located on the eastern shores of the Chesapeake about 10 miles from Easton, Maryland, St. Michaels (about 4hrs south of Manhattan by car) is known as “The town that fooled the British.” It is said that late one night during the War of 1812, residents placed lit lanterns high up in the trees and on ship masts so the cannons of the invading Brits ended up overshooting the town. That inventive spirit survives today. St. Michaels’ proud maritime history includes shipbuilding, oystering and crabbing, all of which are beautifully represented at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum (cbmm.org). Featuring 15 buildings full

of interactive exhibits spread across 18 pristine waterfront acres, the museum celebrates the area's rich history and culture—and don't miss exploring the 1879 Hooper Strait Lighthouse. The museum will also host the Chesapeake Folk Festival July 23rd, 2011.

Talbot Street is the main drag through St. Michaels and features dozens of beautiful Victorian and Colonial storefronts. You will not find a Starbucks here but you can visit Ava's Pizzeria for her wood-fired gourmet pizzas; Big Al's Market & Seafood for steamed crabs (eat in/take out); Rupert's London Bar & Tea Rooms for its famous crab soup; 208 Talbot Restaurant & Wine Bar for New American cuisine (try their new 208 Burger for a more casual vibe) or the Carpenter Street Saloon for the "coldest draft in town."

If you plan to travel in April, the shops along Talbot Street throw open their doors for the annual St. Michaels "WineFest" celebration featuring local vintages, gourmet goodies and more. This year's festive fun runs from April 29th through May 1st.

For your traditional crab feast, make haste to the harbor where waterfront dining is de rigueur during the warm weather. Bob Pascal's St. Michaels Harbour Inn, Marina & Spa offers dynamic indoor/outdoor views. If you don't care for crab, do not let on; just order the chef's English fish & chips—a massive portion fried to perfection. Other harbor favorites include the Crab Claw Restaurant, Crab & Steak House and Town Dock Restaurant. Come hungry and don't spare the Old Bay seasoning.

For shoppers, there are all sorts of specialty boutiques with names as quirky as their inventories, like A Wish Called Wanda, Fine Old Posters and Flying Fred's Gifts for Pets. Antiquing and art enthusiasts also have a number of galleries and shops to choose from.

There is no shortage of accommodations in St. Michaels. The Inn at Perry Cabin (perrycabin.com) is consistently rated as a top luxury hotel, which it shows in everything from staff to services. Designed in the Colonial style and loaded with amenities, it expertly blends modern and period décor with classic nautical motifs. Also on the grounds is the award-winning Linden Spa.

The Five Gables Inn and Spa (fivegables.com) is located right in town and is steeped in charm while the aforementioned Bob Pascal's St. Michaels Harbour Inn, Marina & Spa (harbourinn.com) is a full-service resort with 46 waterfront suites and 52 slips at its marina. Golfing enthusiasts might want to stay just north of town at the spacious Harbortowne Golf Resort (harbourtowne.com), which features an 18-hole Pete Dye designed course.

St. Michaels is well known as a yachting destination—you'll see sailing vessels of every shape and size fill the harbor and the Miles River. If you are a true boating enthusiast, time your visit for the Antique & Classic Boat Festival, June 17th-19th 2011, at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum—it's the largest in the Mid-Atlantic region. Meanwhile jet skis, kayaks, sail boats, power boats and tip-toe fishing gear are all available for rental. If you prefer to kick back and let someone else be the captain, there are sailing tours, paddle boat tours or you might take a cruise aboard the Patriot—a St. Michaels institution for over 40 years.

No matter what you plan for your St. Michaels visit, it will be easy to kick back and relax. For more information visit the Talbot County Tourist Board, tourtalbot.org.