

Stella Maris' Voyage
Docking in the Chesapeake

by
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Insanity: Doing the same thing over again expecting different results

Albert Einstein



Those of us, who cruise the waters of the Great Lakes, and never intend to leave their fresh water confines, couldn't care less about docking in the Chesapeake. But then there are those, who do have the desire to venture past these confines and travel the routes our forebearers have carved into the landscape of our continent: the canals, waterways that take us to the big tub, the Atlantic Ocean – and from there you can go anywhere.

When you are cruising the North Channel and decide to explore Georgian Bay, because in years of cruising the North Channel the most you got to know of Georgian Bay is Colins Inlet and Killarney, ON along your way from Killarney to Little Current and then on to Tobermory, ON, situated at the northern tip of the remote Bruce peninsula that separates Georgian Bay from Lake Huron, possibly stopping over for the night at Club Island – so you decide to explore Georgian Bay, because that is one item on your bucket list, but taking your boat to the ocean may be another one, rather than making the long trip back via Lake Huron, the St. Clair river, Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River, and Lake Erie ending in Tonawanda, NY, where the Erie canal drains

into the Niagara river – of course, you could also choose to travel the Welland canal out of Lake Erie into Lake Ontario and make your way to Oswego, NY - which, it turns out, would be your destination if, located in Georgian Bay, you opted to enter the Trent – Severn Waterway by Port Severn at the South East end of Georgian Bay, ending in Port Trenton on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario, and then crossed the 60 NM of Lake Ontario to Oswego, NY- are you still following me? Oswego, NY it won't surprise you, is situated on the banks of the Oswego river that, via a ditch that generations before us dug out, connects to the Erie canal that drains into the Hudson river, which happens to flow by the statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, where our ancestors stopped by on their way across the, you guessed it right, Atlantic Ocean to their final destinations in the Northwest Territories – or elsewhere in the emerging nation, you name it.

Now – having made the voyage from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean and having either anchored out or docked in non-tidal waters, it wasn't before I got to Madison Bay on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake off of the Little Choptank river, maybe 20 NM or so south of Annapolis, MD that I came to realize, that docking in the Chesapeake follows a different set of rules than it does in the Great Lakes, rules that are dictated by, would you believe it, the moon.

In the Chesapeake, you know, the moon, roughly every six hours, makes waters either flow from the ocean into the Chesapeake, or the other way around, and the peak of the inflow the folks there call high tide, and low tide they call the bottom of the outflow. Now, because the rhythm between high and low tide is not exactly six hours, it so happens that these high and low tides shift over the course of a 24-hour period so that you may have high tide at 0827 h – for the land lubbers: 8:27 AM) or 1345 h (1:45 pm). That's one thing. The other thing is that high tide and low tide are not always the same – there can be really high high tides and not as quite as high high tides, and same thing with low tides, just the other way around. To cope with such caprioles

of nature, well, for one, people have measured and tracked these phenomena over a long time and made records of it; and I think we got to give Isaac Newton credit here for helping uncover the natural laws that these phenomena follow. This, collectively, helps contemporary tidal gurus calculate and predict tides for a long time ahead – and guess what, you can download tidal calendars onto your smart phone – or tablet; some gadget where it’s easily accessible, when you are out on the water – or when you navigate the shallows of the Chesapeake, of which there are plenty – I haven’t mentioned those yet, have I? So, you can download the tidal calendar together with the predictions for the strengths of currents that accompany the tides, measured at numerous points in tidal waterways and then transferred into formulas that help predict future current strength – then it’s a tide-and-currents calendar. You notice, the more you delve into a matter, like navigating the Chesapeake, the more complicated it may become. You need to know this for docking in the Chesapeake.

Of course, people, who have lived here all their lives – or maybe just long enough – they do know all this and they don’t really think of it; they literally go with the flow. Like Kitty, who has lived in Madison, MD by the Little Choptank river on the Chesapeake for the 71 years of her life. With Sam, who gave her a ride home from the movies 56 years ago and they have been together ever since, raising three kids. Kitty is the dockmaster at Madison Bay Marina and Campground. And Kitty answered the phone again, when I called the marina to inquire about a well for the night.

What had made me call the marina was that when I arrived in the Chesapeake on my way from Lake St. Clair to Brunswick, GA, the “hurricane hole”, and dropped anchor in the Spa creek by Annapolis, MD, there was much talk among the cruising boaters moored or anchored in the creek about hurricane Dorian and the potential dangers of traveling south via the Atlantic

Intracoastal Waterway close to the ocean during hurricane season. I learned that September until mid-October is the time during hurricane season that cautious cruisers avoid traveling south – they stay tucked into a creek or marina in the Chesapeake north of the Potomac, the Patuxent river for example, one river over – there is just so many of them - to the north of the Potomac on the western shore of the Chesapeake.

So, when life threw this lemon of a wake-up call at me, what did I do? Made lemonade – you got that right. Which applied to my situation was: navigate the Chesapeake in September – north of the Patuxent river -, tuck the boat away in a marina at a safe latitude for the month of October while traveling abroad, and return beginning of November to continue the voyage south. After all, the average temperature in Norfolk, VA in November is 61 °F – compare that to the 59°F for Detroit, MI in April mind you; by the time I will get to Beaufort, NC the average will be 65°F, and by the time I'll make it to Charleston, SC it will be a balmy 70 °F; you notice, I am doing my homework.

What all of this has to do with docking in the Chesapeake, you ask? Just wait – I am getting there. We are right at the point where I called Kitty, the dockmaster at Madison Bay Marina and Campground to request a slip for the night. Actually, this was the second time I called her. The first time I had inquired about the possibility of docking my boat at the marina for the month of October and after taking note of length and beam and draft of my boat the answer had been “affirmative”. That’s the cool lingo the mariner typically uses communicating by VHF radio (Very High Frequency). Like when you start a conversation on channel 16 and the Coast Guard interrupts, reminds you that channel 16 is for emergency communication only, and kindly asks you to switch to a different channel, then you may respond: affirmative; even though it would not be a violation of radio communication protocol if you simply said: yes, or O.K.

The first time I had talked to Kitty she had provided a lot, too much, information on the approach to the marina, which had piqued my curiosity to the point that I thought: I may want to go there beforehand and get an actual idea of the lay of the land. After all, had I not decided to cruise the Chesapeake? Why not go up the Little Choptank river, leave the shoals of Susquehanna Point and Woolford Neck on starboard and tippy-toe my way into shallow Madison Bay? So now I am approaching the marina, call Kitty, who, during a conversation may call you “honey” or “darling”, and Kitty answers and says: What time do you think you will arrive at the marina? I’ll meet you at the dock, honey. Remember, this is not the first time I am having a conversation with Kitty, so we had that kind of conversational comfort zone established Not that I would have called her “honey” or “darling” – a dockmaster is a dockmaster. So, I give her my estimated time of arrival, “ETA” in jargon, and by-passing the fact that a boat cannot only go bow-in but potentially stern-in into a well, I jump right to: Is it going to be a port or a starboard tie-up?

Only those skippers, whose boats are equipped with more than one engine or a bow-thruster, which helps them maneuvering their vessels in tight quarters, may advise the dockmaster that they want to go stern-in, but among sail boat captains that in my estimation is the exception – on the Great Lakes anyway. At any rate, personally, I always bow-in into a well, which is why I had gone straight to asking: is it a port or starboard tie-up? For a moment there was silence on Kitty’s end, the kind of silence that tells you they heard you, but their brains are momentarily frozen. At the same time, I am asking myself what could be wrong with my question. Because, on the Great Lakes, what is the next thing you do, when you got your “affirmative” to your request for a slip from the dockmaster? You probably ask what I asked: Is it a port or a starboard tie-up? You ask that question, because you got to engage in preparations

for docking: Getting the bow and stern lines ready, and the fenders. Oh, yes, and first and foremost the spring lines – there is the occasional dock hand, who understands the concept of spring lines, and that then would be a blessing, especially when the wind blows you away from the dock.

Kitty, having lived all her life in Madison, MD by the Chesapeake with its ebb and flow was probably cognizant, too, of the importance of depth of water for sailboats, which, after all, are boats that are being kept upright by virtue of having a weight attached to their bottoms that can reach deep enough such as to interfere with the tides, low tides that is. She eventually processed my question regarding “tie-up” accordingly: there will be “high-tide” when you arrive, she said, just keep close to the red marks, the channel is somewhat narrow. That was valuable information but did not exactly answer my question. O.K., I said, will do - and will it be a port or a starboard tie-up? Kitty’s brain seemed to be caught in the tides loop, because she answered: at “low tide” it may become a little iffy, and she continued, her voice becoming cheerfully referring to other locals with the competence to pass that judgment: they say in the marina you should be fine - darling. Now my brain froze. What I could think: Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Well then, I had no inclination to potentially humiliate either of us, neither Kitty, the dockmaster of Madison Bay Marina and Campground on the Little Choptank river, nor myself, captain of the Stella Maris, by asking the same question a third time. To get out of this communicational dilemma a good question to ask I thought would be: is it fixed or floating docks? Not that I thought it would really matter.

The question was kind of O.K., because while it produced a straight answer: fixed, Kitty said, there was no honey or darling, instead she sounded somewhat apologetic. Obviously, not only in tidal waters, but wherever there are changes in water levels, for example with changes in

wind direction, think of the Great Lakes and particularly western Lake Erie, floating docks are more convenient than fixed docks – in my humble opinion anyway. For the most part, it’s easier to get on and off the boat, but then, also, you don’t have to worry about your lines. Anyway, I ended the conversation trying to convey assurance: O.K., great, Kitty, I’ll be there in - whatever time frame I gave her. Alright, she said, I’ll be waiting at the dock, honey.



Keeping close to the red marks I eventually spotted Kitty standing by a slip, hand signaling me: this is the one I want you to go in. Fixed dock, alright, I thought, but four tall big pilings nicely arranged in a 14 foot by 40 foot rectangle, the tops low and behold protected with copper plates, crusted with dry layers of various thickness of white bird poop, instead of black plastic caps to prevent untimely rotting and a dock finger too short to reach my port - and what for are the tiny cleats only at the bow on the dock itself? From a captain it is expected, especially when facing a challenge, like this one, to eventually make a decision. Worse than a wrong decision is indecisiveness. I went bow-in, which would pose a significant obstacle for getting off the boat as I would come to realize; instinctively looped my lines around the poles and cleated them on my own boat, excellent choice – for all practical purposes, there was no other – as I would learn over the time span of a tide. Kitty expressed her admiration how I did this all by myself; she doesn’t understand much about docking boats, she said.

During an extended cocktail hour, watching the setting sun bathing in its rays the little white church across the bay, the gathering point of a parish of eight, yes, eight, noticing Stella Maris rise and drop with the influx and outflow of the waters, watching my lines looped around

the pilings slipping nicely up and down, realizing it being at low tide much easier to climb on and off the boat than at high tide, and had I gone in stern-in it would not been a challenge at all, plus it would have avoided getting the hands stained with powdered bird poop while leaning on a piling – how about that -, it all came together and it all became clear: this is the way of docking in the Chesapeake.