



Baer and Layla next to "Promises" at The Tides Inn.

# A Grand Family Adventure in the Chesapeake Bay

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While fishing near Annapolis, building sand castles in Cape Charles, roasting marshmallows in Irvington, and watching knock-out sunrises over the bay, one clan discovers why Maryland and Virginia have some of the best cruising grounds around.



Missy and Charlie enjoying a beautiful summer day.

Every summer my wife, Missy, and I take our two kids—Layla, age 8, and Baer, age 6—on a Chesapeake Bay trip aboard our 42-foot Grand Banks Promises. It's proven to be a fantastic way to spend time together as a family, and last year's journey was no exception.

For a family jaunt, the 2008 itinerary was ambitious: 385 miles in nine days, from our homeport of Baltimore to just past Virginia Beach. But with the aid of Marinalife, who helped us plan our entire trip—including some last-minute rerouting for a service yard!—the cruise was flawless. Below are excerpts from our log. Enjoy!

#### **LEG 1: BALTIMORE, MD TO ANNAPOLIS, MD**

##### **27.3 NM/2 HOURS AND 40 MINUTES CRUISE TIME AT 10 KNOTS**

My friend Gil and his two boys joined us for the first day's short run to Annapolis. We did a quick boat-safety overview for everyone and then headed to Hackett Point Shoal to take advantage of the fishing grounds, which are fantastic. The kids were landing fish almost as soon as their lines hit the water. Baer's favorite part? Playing with the bloodworms.

After a few hours I noticed the clouds beginning to darken, often a sign that one of the Chesapeake Bay's late-afternoon summer thunderstorms is about to descend. We wasted no time getting the tender in the water and the engines started. Once we'd tied up at our mooring along Annapolis's "Ego Alley," we took the kids ashore for some much needed ice cream. While wandering around downtown we ran into friends who invited us for a swim at their yacht club's pool. We'd barely had time for a dip before the heavens opened up. Back aboard the boat we tracked the storm on Sirius Satellite weather. After some ferocious rain and wind and a few bolts of lightning, the sky cleared and there was a beautiful rainbow.

#### **LEG 2: ANNAPOLIS, MD TO SOLOMON'S ISLAND, MD**

##### **45.5 NM/4 HOURS AND 40 MINUTES CRUISE TIME AT 10 KNOTS**

We said goodbye to Gil and his boys in Annapolis, then fired up the twin Cat 3208's and set out at 8:30 a.m. sharp. Layla, Baer, and Missy joined me on the fly bridge to enjoy the sunshine and 10-knot breeze. The kids alternated between reading, coloring, and helping me drive the boat. As we passed Herring Bay and the cliffs of Calvert Beach, I remembered a friend telling me that this would be a great place to stop once the kids got a little older. Apparently there's phenomenal fossil hunting along the waterline—how cool!

It was 12:45 p.m. when we rounded Drum Point on our way up the Patuxent River. I was thankful that the folks at Marinalife had ensured us a T-head starboard tie at our stop for the night, Zahniser's Yachting Center. This type of set-up is a huge plus for me, as I tend to depart by 5:00 a.m. while my three crewmembers are still sound asleep. I try to take advantage of calm early morning weather and shorten the time we're underway as much as I can. When planning a trip, I take pains to plot out runs that will be less than six hours each—much longer than that, and I hear grumblings of mutiny in the ranks. It's difficult to see the navigational buoys and day markers when it's still dark out, but that's also part of the excitement. The trick is to go very slowly, dim the chart-plotter screen, rely a bit on the radar, and study the charts before you're underway. I absolutely love this time of day, when I can concentrate on running my boat and watching the bay come to life.

About a half mile from Zahniser's, I hailed the office on the VHF for our slip assignment. Within 20 minutes we had the boat tied up and the kids in the pool.

#### **LEG 3: SOLOMON'S ISLAND, MD TO CAPE CHARLES, VA**

##### **80 NM/7 HOURS AND 30 MINUTES CRUISE TIME AT 13 KNOTS**

The night before we left Solomon's Island, Layla and Baer asked me to wake them up the next morning so that they could see the sunrise. I had my doubts about whether or not they'd actually want to get out of bed that early, but much to my surprise they both wandered up onto the fly bridge and tugged on their life jackets just as I was pulling the boat away from the dock. This would be their first sunrise with Dad! I was so excited to experience this with them, and we had great fun leaving in the pitch dark. About 25 minutes later, we witnessed a gorgeous sunrise. Baer yelled out, "It looks like a rainbow with one color!" This is precisely why I cruise: family experiences that create great memories. Soon both kids were curled up in a blanket and snoozing on the floor beside my feet.

As we reached the southern part of the bay, the brackish waters of Baltimore turned greener and warmer. Porpoises and large rays skimmed the surface. Making our way through Old Plantation Flats, about an hour and a half from Cape Charles, the kids and I played a game: who can spot the



Promises , a Grand Banks 42 Classic, at Bay Creek Marina.

most fish jumping? Unbeknownst to them, they were also helping me locate and avoid crab pots.

Our destination for the night was the marina at Cape Charles's Bay Creek Resort & Club, on Kings Creek. The day beacons along this creek require a very steady hand at the wheel and careful attention. The channel is regularly dredged because of strong currents and constant shoaling. What makes it even trickier is that this channel is not on any recent navigational charts, so it's easy to stray off course—which would not be fun, as the water quickly drops to a depth of about two feet. Luckily the staff at Marinalife had given me a heads up about this and I was able to call ahead to the dock office for special instructions about the best way through. We had a great run but this leg was a long one, and by the time we were pulling in to our slip I was very ready for a swim, a cold beer, and some food, in no particular order.

The boating facilities at Bay Creek are just about the nicest I've ever seen, and were designed to handle large craft—the roomy slips are twice as wide as those in my Baltimore

homeport. What's more, the community of Cape Charles is a really neat spot to explore. There are interesting shops, restaurants, and B&B's, and the vibe was friendly and relaxed. The marina rents out golf carts so that if you're staying there you can zip around town. We loved the beachfront park—it's a great place to make sand castles with the kids and unwind at the end of the day.

**LEG 4: CAPE CHARLES, VA TO VIRGINIA BEACH, VA  
34.7 NM/3 HOURS AND 30 MINUTES CRUISE TIME AT 10 KNOTS**

After several long legs, this run across the bay was a cakewalk, and the weather could not have been better: a six-knot breeze, calm waters, plenty of sunshine.

After passing Cape Henry on our starboard side, we soon approached the entrance to Rudee Inlet, on the southern end of Virginia Beach. Cayson Barco, the owner of Rudee's Inlet Station Marina, where we stayed, was incredibly welcoming and helpful. He gave us a map of the area and pointed us toward the boardwalk, where all summer the



Layla at the helm.



Baer and Gil fishing near Annapolis.



Baer and Layla enjoying the bonfires and marshmallows at Tides Inn Marina.

sidewalks along Atlantic Avenue are jammed with musicians, puppet shows, jugglers, and musicians. Live concerts and larger theatrical productions are often taking place in the various oceanfront stages. Needless to say, we all had a blast. Turns out that Cayson knows the secret to successful family travel, because let's face it, if the kids have fun, the parents have fun.

**LEG 5: VIRGINIA BEACH, VA TO IRVINGTON, VA  
60.8 MILES/6 HOURS AND 5 MINUTES CRUISE TIME AT 10 KNOTS**

We were sad to leave the carnival-like atmosphere of Virginia Beach and the hospitality of Rudee's Inlet Station, but we knew we were in for a treat because our next stop would be the Tides Inn. I'd read about this place over the years, but I kept hearing from Marinalife how perfect it is for families, so on this trip we decided we'd check it out.

The day began with my usual crack-of-dawn exit strategy, though this time there was no bright, beautiful sunrise, just a nasty all-day storm. By 6:30 a.m. we were in six-foot

seas and the winds were howling. I spent the whole journey alone on the fly bridge, manning the boat. Meanwhile the kids munched Pop Tarts and watched movies on the VHS tapes my wife keeps stashed for such occasions (the old technology won't skip or scratch in bad weather!).

After a soggy 7.5-hour run we finally arrived at the resort, and were immediately impressed. The four restaurants range from poolside casual to high-end, and there are tons of activities: crabbing, nightly bonfires with marshmallows for roasting, kids' scavenger hunts, family nature programs that focus on the bay's wildlife. We didn't come close to exploring it all, and decided that we'd just have to come back.

Which seems to happen to us every time we go cruising in the Chesapeake Bay. Each year we find intriguing new spots we want to explore, and add more favorites to our list of places to which we hope to return. ❖