

The Washington Post

TRAVEL

THE REGIONAL ISSUE



JESUS ESCUDERO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

PASSING THE ROAD TEST

A colorful array of timeless destinations, all reachable on four wheels from a District hub

NORTH CAROLINA Many happy returns to Chapel Hill. **F3** **MARYLAND** Baltimore's newest bauble. **F5** **PENNSYLVANIA** Hunting down history in York. **F6**

THE REGIONAL ISSUE



ZONAR GMBH/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

An aged guide holds up well in the pages of time

Tackling the 1977 'AAA Mid-Atlantic TourBook' — with 2017 additions

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Of all my family vacation memories from the late 1970s, those from inside our wood-paneled station wagon are among the most vivid. In the back, my little sister's legs stuck straight out and predictably kicked the back of the driver's seat. I sat next to her, and if I crossed the imaginary line between us, I made sure to do so when my parents weren't looking. My father usually drove the speed limit or below, doing a poor job of ignoring the kicking behind him. And my mother, with time to kill and a family to entertain, pulled out the "AAA Mid-Atlantic TourBook" and began to read.

The majority of our vacations were close to home. I don't know how much of my mother's commentary we absorbed, but I do know that when she read, the car was quiet. We must have had a sense of the gravity of the information: The state flower of Maryland is the black-eyed Susan; Spruce Knob is the highest point in West Virginia; Henry Hudson sailed up the Mid-Atlantic coast in 1609.

This summer, I tracked down a "Mid-Atlantic TourBook" from 1977 and read it on a road trip, enjoying the smell of its old pages. I was curious about which attractions had stood the test of time. Forty years ago, AAA was the main source of travel information, cars with electric windows were a luxury, and the legal age for drinking beer was 18. The "Virginia is for Lovers" campaign was eight years old, and the AAA book listed tours of cigarette factories as family entertainment.

The Mid-Atlantic guide covered four states and the District. Maryland, the book read, "exhibits a variety of terrain surprising in a state of its relatively small size." In Virginia, Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown and Yorktown "embody the kernel of American Independence." West Virginia "is a shunpiker's dream, where country roads lead to such places as Left Hand, Cutlips and Peel Tree." And Delaware, where "antiquing could almost be considered the state sport," is described as "neither too large — the most distant towns are only about 110 highway miles apart — or so small that it precludes variety."

I scanned the listings to discover the GM Chevette factory tour in Delaware, the National



AMERICA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Tobacco Festival in Richmond, "hunt country" in Leesburg, Middleburg and Warrenton, Va., and events celebrating the state sport of jousting in Maryland.

The writers of the book had a sense of humor befitting that era. "The Easter parade at Rehoboth Beach," they wrote, "often reveals that Delaware's lovely gardens have gone to the ladies' heads." Woodsy Owl told readers "Give a hoot! Don't pollute" in one ad. Another promoted a dolphin show at a theater near Washington's L'Enfant Plaza.

But of course, the best of the Mid-Atlantic — the parts that existed long before guidebooks — has changed little through the decades: brilliant colors in the fall, fresh powder in the winter, a rainbow of wildflowers in the spring and an Atlantic coast filled with long, sun-kissed summer days.

"One of the unique and most appealing things about the Mid-Atlantic region is that no matter where you are, you're no more than four hours from mountains, ocean and bay," said Rich Francisco, an auto-travel specialist for AAA since the '70s. "The area is also rich in history, from the beginning of our country and before."

With AAA books and TripTiks as our muse, my family checked off the important historic desti-



KAMILINDOT/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



GEORGE SHELDON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

FROM TOP: A majestic early fall morning along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia, which remains packed with scenic overlooks that would have wowed visitors in 1977. That same year, West Virginia celebrated the opening of the New River Gorge Bridge. The river below is beloved by whitewater kayakers. In Luray Caverns, ancient and still-growing stalactites are reflected in a lake. In the land where time stopped, an Amish woman drives her buggy past the Lime Valley Covered Bridge in Lancaster County, Pa.

nations that remain the most popular attractions of the region, and I've revisited most of them as an adult: Gettysburg National Military Park, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, Baltimore's Fort McHenry and Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. The West Virginia town of the latter also is home to the headquarters of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

During the country's bicentennial, we visited Philadelphia and saw the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall and Betsy Ross's house, where my parents bought matching Colonial bonnets for my sister and me. We went to Williamsburg and Jamestown to see costumed interpreters and replicas of settlement ships. Combined with Busch Gardens, the amusement park that opened in 1975, this area has consistently been one of the top attractions in the nation.

The Mid-Atlantic beaches are some of the most accessible in the country, and each has its own personality. Consider the state campgrounds of Lewes, Del., the horses of Chincoteague, Va., and the three-mile boardwalk of Virginia Beach. My family visited Bethany and Dewey beaches in Delaware, and took day trips to nearby Rehoboth Beach, where Funland has been operating since the 1960s; even today, rides

start at 35 cents. It wasn't until I was older that I came to appreciate the eastern and western shores of the Chesapeake Bay for swimming, boating and paddling. The Oxford-Bellevue Ferry, just south of St. Michaels, Md. — which began oar-propelled service before the American Revolution — is still operating today.

In 1977, AAA noted, "Recreation is West Virginia's newest industry and it is booming." That same year, the state celebrated the opening of the New River Gorge Bridge, the longest single-arch span in the Western Hemisphere. Inspired by my grandparents, who went white-water rafting well into their senior years, my family followed suit on the New River. While neighboring states to the east promoted history above all else, the Mountain State became a playground for skiers, white-water enthusiasts and hikers — as well as those who appreciated luxury. In the age of roadside motels, the Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs and Homestead in Hot Springs were "big to-dos — places you booked far in advance," Francisco said.

A favorite family hiking and picnic spot was Sugarloaf Mountain, just south of Frederick, Md., which the AAA guide described as a "public oasis on a private estate." We also loved Luray Caverns in Virginia, where we'd gaze in awe at a stalactite formation called the Cathedral, with a "Stalactipe Organ."

King's Dominion, near Ashland, Va., was a frequent destination, but I only remember the rides. It wasn't until I read the AAA book that I discovered the amusement park was also home — in the '70s — to a wildlife preserve with giraffes, elephants and a white rhino.

We visited Amish country in Lancaster, Pa., and ate pretzels. We presumably ate too much chocolate at nearby Hersheypark. In the early 1980s, we went to Baltimore's pioneering, newly developed inner-harbor market, Harborplace. We saw sea life at the National Aquarium and ate seafood at Phillip's.

Reading the TourBook was a reminder of how fundamentally the food scene has changed in 40 years. Francisco joked that back then, variety meant listings of multiple Stouffer's Restaurant locations. But the book's authors were thoughtful enough to understand mindful eating: "Mealtime, when you're traveling, should be more than just an opportunity to nourish the body. It's a chance to rest, to relax and to enjoy your favorite food — or to sample some of the area's

ROAD TRIP CONTINUED ON F5

AAA's 40-year-old assortment of attractions is worth another look

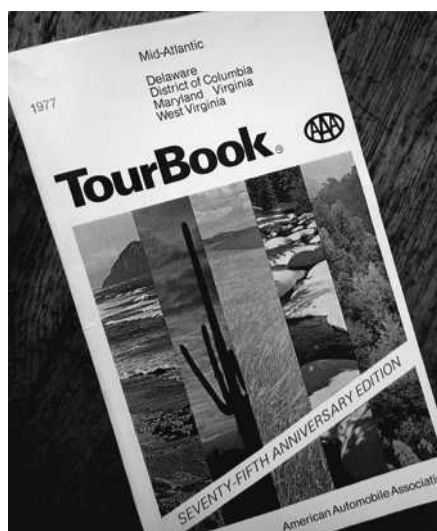
ROAD TRIP FROM F4

special or unique cuisine.”

The common thread for nearly all our travel is that it happened on four wheels. From Washington, you can cover a lot of ground in just a couple of days; the region beckons weekend road trippers. But perhaps the most spectacular drives in the Mid-Atlantic — exquisite year-round and downright breathtaking in the fall — are Virginia's 105-mile Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway, which begins just to its south. In this part of the country, I never tire of driving windy roads and pulling over for scenic overlooks. From time to time, I even tap the brakes and match my father's speed.

Earlier this year, after traveling to a dry, brown part of the country, I returned to the East Coast. But rather than sitting in my preferred seat — the driver's — I was in the window seat of an airplane. For a moment, as the plane descended, I took in the view — strikingly large expanses of dark green interrupted by abundant, sparkling water — as a newcomer might. This was the same land I've now seen for decades through car windows, yet it looked wholly unfamiliar, a place longing to be explored.

Then I got my bearings. We began



MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

The tome that started a trip.

following the contours of the Potomac River, and an enormous surge of happiness overcame me. This, I remembered, is home.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer based in the District. Her website is melaniedgkaplan.com. Find her on Twitter: @melaniedgkaplan.

10 regional attractions that have withstood the test of time

Skyline Drive

3655 U.S. Highway 211 East, Luray, Va.

540-999-3500

nps.gov/shen/planyourvisit/driving-skyline-drive.htm

The only public road in Shenandoah National Park, spectacular Skyline Drive stretches 105 miles through the Blue Ridge Mountains from Front Royal to the southern end of the park, where the Blue Ridge Parkway begins. You can take a Sunday drive on Skyline any day of the week, but doing so when the fall colors are peaking should be on your bucket list. The speed limit is 35 mph, which allows you to pause and enjoy the hills and views while keeping an eye out for black bear. And if you've been training all summer: Swap your motor vehicle for a road bike.

Harpers Ferry

485 Fillmore St., Harpers Ferry, W.Va.

304-535-6029

nps.gov/hafe/index.htm

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is one of the best walking and hiking parks in the country, from easy riverside strolls to hikes across Civil War battlefields to mountaintop climbs. The historic town, site of John Brown's pre-Civil War raid, is across a footbridge from the C&O Canal, a popular cycling and walking route. Harpers Ferry encompasses nearly 4,000 acres in West Virginia, Maryland and Virginia, and the Appalachian Trail passes right through town. Visit Jefferson Rock for exquisite views of the surrounding mountains and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.

Colonial Williamsburg

101 Visitor Center Dr., Williamsburg, Va.

855-756-9516

history.org

Get your Colonial on at this living history museum, where you can tour, eat, sing and ride with folks in 18th-century costumes. In addition to seeing historic buildings such as the George Wythe House, you can watch blacksmiths hammer iron into tools and weapons, learn about Colonial-era medicine, tour the horse stables and fire reproduction 18th-century firearms. Petticoats and knee-length britches aside, Williamsburg is the most popular destination in the region for teaching kids of all ages about America's beginnings.

Liberty Bell

143 S. Third St., Philadelphia

215-965-2305

nps.gov/inde/index.htm

Originally called the State House bell, the bell that symbolizes liberty in Philadelphia and around the world is located across from Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were both debated and signed. Also within Independence National Historical Park are Congress Hall, where Congress met from 1790-1800, Declaration House, where Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, and the Free Quaker Meeting House. Entrance to all is free.

New River Gorge Bridge

104 Main St., Glen Jean, W.Va.

304-465-0508

nps.gov/neri/planyourvisit/nrgbridge.htm

Forty years old this year, the New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia (maybe you've seen it on the back of a quarter) is the longest steel span in the Western Hemisphere and the third highest in the United States. The third Saturday of October is Bridge Day, a festival that attracts thousands to the bridge, and an extreme sports event for hundreds of daredevils who leap off it. That's the only time the bridge is open to pedestrians, but

BridgeWalk has daily tours on the catwalk below it.

Luray Caverns

101 Cave Hill Rd., Luray, Va.

540-743-6551

luraycaverns.com

A cool underground retreat in the summer — but supercool geology any time of year — Luray Caverns is a cave system filled with colorful, otherworldly stalactites, stalagmites, stone columns and mirrored pools. Visitors stroll along walkways, through “rooms” with 10-foot ceilings and towering formations. Among the most popular spots: the Stalacpipe Organ, which makes sounds like those from a xylophone. Nearby is the Luray Valley Museum, where you can learn about the Shenandoah Valley's history.

Rehoboth Beach

229 Rehoboth Ave., Rehoboth Beach, Del.

302-227-6181

cityofrehoboth.com

There's nothing that says summer quite like Thrasher's french fries and Candy Kitchen saltwater taffy. Both are staples at Rehoboth Beach, a family favorite beach destination for generations. The boardwalk was built in 1873, and beachgoers of that era wouldn't recognize it today, with outlet shopping, brewpubs and arcades. But at Funland, largely untouched since it opened in the 1960s, tickets still start at 35 cents. For what it's worth, the fries and taffy are worth every nickel.

Assateague Island

7206 National Seashore Ln., Berlin, Md.

410-641-1441

nps.gov/asis/index.htm/index.htm

An undeveloped barrier island off the coast of Maryland and Virginia, Assateague is a fairy tale of sand beaches, salt marshes and celebrated wild horses. Visitors can camp on the Maryland side of Assateague Island National Seashore as well as in the state park, and horses on the Maryland side roam freely. Cycling is a great way to see the island; a paved path stretches from Assateague to Chincoteague. Other activities include canoeing, kayaking, horseback riding, hiking, swimming and birding.

Oxford Bellevue Ferry

27456 Oxford Rd., Oxford, Md.

410-745-9023

oxfordbellevueferry.com

What this attraction lacks in size or pizzazz, it makes up for in old-fashioned charm. The ferry, which crosses the Tred Avon River between Oxford and Bellevue on Maryland's picturesque Eastern Shore, is thought to be the oldest privately operated ferry service in the nation, dating back to 1683. It operates April through November and can accommodate up to nine cars and countless people and bikes. Before you board, pick up a scoop at Scottish Highland Creamery or loop the ferry into a bike ride around Talbot County.

Kings Dominion

16000 Theme Park Way, Doswell, Va.

804-876-5000

kingsdominion.com

Once a showcase for exotic animals, today this theme park is all about thrilling rides and funnel cake. Start out slow with bumper cars or the Eiffel Tower, an original park ride (one-third replica of the real tower) that offers 18-mile views from the observation deck. Then graduate to the fearsome Anaconda, a looping roller coaster that drops 144 feet and features an underwater tunnel; or Flight of Fear, which catapults riders to 54 mph in four seconds. Maybe save the funnel cake till later.