

Great Day Trips from Baltimore Along Neighboring State Waterways

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With travel options significantly limited during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's nice to know that there are lots of scenic destinations in Maryland, all the way from the mountains in the west to the Eastern Shore that make for safe and enjoyable day trips. However, if you are looking for new travel experiences, especially along beautiful waterways, there are also great places to visit in our neighboring states, all within a 90-minute drive from Baltimore. My wife Frona and I enjoy walking and hiking and have recently gone on three exceptional walks along waterways in Virginia, West Virginia and Delaware.

Chesapeake and Delaware Canal: Located 65 miles north of Baltimore is the 14-mile long and 450-foot wide Chesapeake and Delaware (C&D) canal connecting the Chesapeake Bay to the Delaware River. First started in 1829, and widened and deepened over the years, the canal cuts 300 miles off the trip from Philadelphia and Wilmington to Baltimore and now carries 40% of all ship traffic in and out of the port of Baltimore. It is one of only two sea-level lockless canals in the U.S. The canal is easily accessible from Chesapeake City on the Maryland side or Delaware City on the Delaware side. There is convenient parking in Chesapeake City at the Trailhead of the 1.8 mile- long Ben Cardin recreational trail which runs to the Delaware line and links up with the 12.4 mile- long Michael Castle trail running along the north bank of the canal. The entire trail is paved asphalt and makes for a lovely walking or biking experience along the waterway. There are picnic areas along the trail but bathroom facilities are very limited. Depending on ship traffic, you may find yourself accompanied by large ocean-going cargo ships. There is a C&D Canal Museum in South Chesapeake City which traces the history of the canal, but because of COVID-19 it is currently closed.

Harpers Ferry and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal: Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, an easy 80-minute drive north of Baltimore via route 70 West, sits at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The town is a picturesque and well preserved mid-19th century jewel. It is here that the abolitionist John Brown struck a blow against slavery with his famous raid against the U.S. Armory. Many of the historic sites, including John Brown's Fort, the U.S. Armory site, Arsenal Square and lower town 19th century shops have been carefully preserved, and along with the John Brown Museum are open for visits. A real treat is to walk to the top of town along part of the Appalachian Trail to Jefferson Rock for a stunning view of the water gap where the two rivers converge. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic." Fortunately, for us it is only a short drive from Baltimore.



Old Town Harpers Ferry



View from Jefferson Rock

Another attraction in the area is a portion of the 185-mile long Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) canal operated from 1831 until 1924 along the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. to Cumberland, Maryland. It is a short walk from town across a pedestrian footbridge to access the C&O towpath. Walking (or biking) on the mostly level towpath offers great views along the Potomac River.

There is limited parking at the old train station in Harpers Ferry and ample parking at the National Park Visitor Center with shuttle service to town. Dining options, picnic spots and public bathroom facilities are readily available throughout town. There is a \$20 per car entrance fee to National Park sites but an America the Beautiful National Parks Pass will work. The area is well worth a visit.

Great Falls Park: Located just 14 miles upstream from D.C. is the spectacular Great Falls Park operated by the National Park Service. There are two park locations along the Potomac, one in Maryland and one in Northern Virginia but without access from one side to the other. Both sides offer multiple locations for great views of the river and the Falls. The Maryland side of the Falls is part of the C&O National Historical Park while the Virginia side is located in the 800- acre Great Falls Park in McClean, Virginia. For our trip we decided to visit the Virginia side, about an 80- minute drive from Baltimore. The Park is a real gem. In this location the Potomac builds up force and speed as it falls 75 feet over a series of steep jagged rocks and flows through the impressive Mather Gorge and its surrounding cliffs. Just a short 10- minute walk from the Visitor Center there are three overlooks, two of which are handicap accessible for closeup views and photos of the Falls.

There are 15 miles of hiking trails in the Park through hilly wooded areas and along the river. There is a nice 3-mile walk along the Potomac from the Visitor Center past Seneca Falls to Riverbend Park. The trail is mostly level with a few short rocky sections. There is also the opportunity to visit the remains of the original Patowmack Canal and the ruins of the abandoned town of Matildaville. For the more adventurous there is rock climbing and kayaking but be advised that the river is very dangerous in the area of the Falls with several drownings reported every year.

Being close to D.C., the Park fills up quickly on weekend days and holidays, and although there is ample parking there may be long entry delays. Arriving at the Park close to opening time is advisable. There is a \$20 per car entrance fee, but an America the Beautiful National Parks Pass will work. Because of COVID, the Visitor Center is closed, but there are picnic tables and bathroom facilities available at the Center. There may be schedule changes related to COVID, so it is a good idea to check the Park website before visiting.



View of the Potomac

Contributors Beryl Rosenstein and wife Frona Brown



AT Trail in Harpers Ferry



Great Falls



Start of Ben Cardin Trail at the C&D Canal



C&O Canal