

# VIRGINIA *is for* HISTORY LOVERS

By DAVID KAISER

Whether your family shares our family's love for history, or you are homeschoolers wanting to make history come alive for your children and have fun in the process, it would be hard to find a better travel destination than Virginia's Historic Triangle. Located southeast of Richmond on the peninsula between the James and York Rivers and jutting out into Chesapeake Bay, the Historic Triangle consists of Williamsburg, the colonial capital of Virginia; Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America; and Yorktown, site of the famous battle that ended the Revolutionary War.

Williamsburg is the apex of the triangle, centrally located just 11 miles from Jamestown and less than 20 miles from Yorktown. It is the crown jewel of the area, a lovely yet thriving community with tree-lined streets, shops of all kinds, and plenty of fun diversions. It is also home to the College of William and Mary, America's second oldest institution of higher education, and Colonial Williamsburg, a 300-acre living history community that re-creates the 18th-century capital of Virginia.

Our family spent a few hours of our first day in Williamsburg on a private walking tour led by John Sutton, proprietor of Colonial Tours. He allowed us to join a Christian school group touring this community that shaped the lives of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, James Madison and others who led America to independence.

We were blessed by Mr. Sutton's gift in making the drama of colonial days come to life by involving

group members in role-playing and activities. When we toured the College of William and Mary's Wren Building, Mr. Sutton involved several students in our group in the engaging stories he told about famous men who attended the school. Later, Mr. Sutton gave us clues



to the identity of one colonist who received a military commission in Williamsburg and, in carrying out his commission, was implicated in the murder of a French diplomat, which resulted in the start of the French and Indian War. As our group consisted primarily of 10th graders and their teachers, I was, of course, proud when my 10-year old son Max was able to identify the colonist as George Washington well

before even the history teacher in charge of the school group.

After our tour with Mr. Sutton, our family spent many more hours in Colonial Williamsburg on our own. There was much to see, as we had passes that allowed us to go through the various buildings and interact



with costumed interpreters. Among the highlights was talking to a printer in his shop as he produced a pamphlet in the 18th-century manner. My children were eager to visit the town jail (or "gaol," as was the colonial spelling), which was the setting for a book they had read about a boy whose family lived there. All of us were awed by the displays of hundreds of mounted weapons that were used to

decorate the foyer of the Governor's Palace and served to impress visitors of the strength of the royal colonial government.

Although visitors may freely walk the streets of

Colonial Williamsburg, we recommend two-day or five-day passes to get the most out of the experience. To make this more affordable, homeschoolers will want to consider visiting during one of the special “Home Educator Weeks” held each fall and spring. Attendees are treated to substantially discounted rates on lodging and passes, as well as specially scheduled educational activities and programs. Call the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation at 1-800-228-8878 for details.

To save on gas, families visiting the Historic Triangle between the months of March and October will want to consider taking advantage of shuttle services from the Colonial Williamsburg Visitor Center to and around the Jamestown and Yorktown areas. There is no charge for bus passes, although a ticket for one of the destinations is required to board.

Another highlight of our trip was our stay at the Crowne Plaza Williamsburg at Fort Magruder, which set the tone for our entire trip. It is located on an actual Civil War battleground, complete with authentic Confederate earthworks, and provided us with convenient access to the popular historical sights of the area. The lobby of the Crowne Plaza Williamsburg at Fort Magruder is a picture of Southern elegance, with beautiful furnishings and Civil War displays and paintings. Our five-member family found that our spacious suite was a great place to kick back after very active days and enjoy a quiet night’s sleep so we could begin anew each morning.

Two places of new beginnings for our country were Jamestown and Yorktown, the two other points in the Historic Triangle. The birthplace of America, Jamestown became our mother England’s first permanent settlement on this continent in 1607. After hearing so much about Jamestown during the recent 400th anniversary of the colony’s founding, it was exciting to see the place that was marked by the lives of Captain John Smith, Pocahontas, and the brave colonists who risked everything to live there. Historic Jamestowne is the actual location of the original James Fort. Here our family witnessed ongoing archaeological excavations

of the site and participated in informative ranger-led walking tours. The new Archaearium exhibition facility provided a fascinating look at the rediscovery process of archaeology and what those discoveries teach us about the life of Jamestown colonists.

Next door is Jamestown Settlement, a living history museum of 17th-century Virginia. Indoors, visitors will learn about the history of the settlement through exhibits in huge new galleries. Outdoors, they will encounter full scale re-creations of James Fort, a Powhatan Indian village and the ships that served Jamestown settlers.



Yorktown was the place where the independence of the United States was fully realized as the British army’s surrender there marked the de facto end of the American Revolution. The Yorktown Victory Center is a living-history museum, where galleries and open-air exhibits

examine the events leading up to the War, the Siege at Yorktown, the affect of the Revolution on the lives of a representative group of people, and the aftermath of the Revolution and its impact on the rest of the world. Historical interpreters at the Yorktown Victory Center demonstrate daily life in the years surrounding the War in a re-created Continental Army encampment and a late 18th-century farm.



All of this prepared us to fully appreciate the significance of the actual Yorktown Battlefield and Visitor Center, which we visited later the same day. Much there was exciting to see: the earthworks that the allied American and French forces made as they zigzagged up to the British lines; replicas of the cannons with which they relentlessly bombarded the British; 18th-century homes and buildings in the town of Yorktown with cannon balls lodged in their walls; and key British redoubts nine and ten, which, when captured by the allies, enabled them to envelop the British and force their surrender. It was

also thrilling to be able to step into the genuine field tent used by George Washington at Yorktown and to look across Surrender Field, where the army led by British Commander Lord Cornwallis laid down their arms.

One joy of our entire trip was a talk given by a young park ranger who had immigrated to the U.S from Russia just three months prior. We were impressed by her grasp of English and her knowledge of the siege. Even more impressive was her acknowledgement of the role Providence played in deciding the battle which led to American independence—first, through a series of events that allowed the French fleet to outmaneuver the superior British fleet, which was thus prevented from relieving Cornwallis; second, through the heavy rains that softened the ground, enabling the allies to dig the siege line more easily while preventing Cornwallis from making a successful sortie against them; and, third, through a sudden change in weather that prevented the bulk of the British army from escaping across the York River. Our guide concluded the story by pointing to Heaven and saying, “That sounds like the hand of God to me!”

In addition to the key attractions I have described so far, there is plenty more in the Historic Triangle to round out a full week or more of vacation—or to justify making repeated trips there:

**Great Wolf Lodge**—This log-sided resort features 405 hotel guest suites and a 79,000 square-foot indoor water park. After walking through historic sites all day, this was a great place for my wife and me to reinvigorate ourselves for the evening and was a thrilling treat for the children. The boys and I loved racing down the nine water slides and trying out the FlowRider surf ride, while my wife and daughter were content tubing in a huge wave pool and on a lazy river.

**Busch Gardens Europe**—Voted the world’s “most beautiful” theme park for the past 17 years, the cultures of France, Ireland, England, Scotland, Italy and Germany are celebrated with dozens of thrilling rides and attractions, ten main stage shows, and a wide variety of authentic foods and shops.

**Dolls of Diane**—Featuring three galleries of more than 1,000 collectible dolls from around the world and from different eras. Just five minutes from Jamestown Settlement, Dolls of Diane made for a delightful side trip and is owned and operated by a charming couple who enjoy giving personal tours of their vast collection.

**Captain George’s Seafood Restaurant**—The world famous “all-you-can-eat” seafood buffet, with over

70 delicious items, in a setting that features a 12-foot waterfall and 300-foot stream. A fun and memorable experience in its own right.

**Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier**—Anyone with any interest in the American Civil War would love this place, as did we! “The Breakthrough” battle that took place here ended a nine-month-long military stalemate between the armies of Grant and Lee and was followed just one week later by Lee’s surrender and the War’s conclusion. An expert



guide led us along original Confederate earthworks to the exact point where Lee’s line was first broken and pointed out the topographical features that enabled the Union to launch a successful pre-dawn attack. The site also includes a military encampment, reconstructed fortifications, three antebellum homes, slave quarters, and two museums. Through costumed interpreters, film, interactive maps, artifacts and other exhibits, we learned about the siege and of the daily lives of soldiers, civilians and slaves before and during the war. We were enthralled as each family member selected his own soldier “comrade” and, listening to a personal digital player, followed him through The National Museum of the Civil War Soldier’s galleries and a simulated Civil War battle. For a more complete immersion experience, Pamplin Historical Park offers daytime and overnight Civil War Adventure Camps.

**James River Plantations**—On the way to Petersburg, colonial and antebellum plantations provide a glimpse into the lives of several elite and famous families of Virginia. Berkeley is the ancestral home of the Harrison Household, which included two U.S. presidents and a Signer of the Declaration of Independence. The beautiful main house at Shirley Plantation was the setting for the marriage of Anne Hill Carter and Revolutionary War hero “Light Horse” Harry Lee, the parents of General Robert E. Lee.



*David Kaiser and his wife, Linda, keep busy homeschooling their three lively children.*

