Travel and Adventure: This is a great year to visit the place where America began

by Robert Selwitz

JAMESTOWN, Va. - It takes at least a full day - and comfortably two - to fully appreciate and experience Jamestown, the first permanent North American English colony, now celebrating its 400th anniversary.

HISTORIC JAMESTOWNE - The Archaerarium at Historic Jamestowne showcases the discoveries unearthed from James Fort and the surrounding landscape. The exhibit features arms, armor, medical instruments, ceramics, tools, coins, musical instruments and interactive virtual views overlooking actual sites. CNS Photo by Robert Selwitz.

ALL ABOARD - The re-constructed replica of the Godspeed, one of the three vessels that transported the first settlers from England to Virginia, docked at Jamestown Settlement. CNS Photo by Robert Selwitz. On Dec. 26, 1606, starting from a dock not far from what today is London's Canary Wharf, three vessels bearing 105 passengers set off for the New World. Sponsored by an optimistic group of venture capitalists, some passengers expected to find gold in Virginia, just like the Spanish in South America. Others hoped to discover a westward sea passage, straight through the new continent to the riches and trade opportunities in China and India.

Unfortunately, after a four-and-a-half-month sailing, most voyage survivors endured experiences that few anticipated. They came with little farming or settlement-building skills, and Christopher Newport, the expedition's leader, along with many others succumbed to disease soon after arriving.

Today's visitors face no such challenges and should definitely visit two locations: the actual Jamestown archaeological site, primarily operated by the National Park Service, and the nearby Jamestown Settlement, which re-creates the original settlement and the ships that brought the first colonists here.

Start at Historic Jamestowne, where foundation stones and remnants indicate the shape and size of everything from homes and shops to the critical defensive stockade. Standing within the area of the triangular Jamestown fort - complete with new palisade walls - you'll experience a space Capt. John Smith and Pocahontas likely knew well.

To the east lies the new town where settlers lived after they outgrew the fort. Here the actual city of

Jamestown developed and periodically thrived. It was also where the first Statehouse was erected.

The recently opened Archaerarium - established by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, which oversees land that abuts that of the National Park Service - is a perfect complement to outdoor exploring. Showcasing the discoveries unearthed from James Fort and the surrounding landscape, it features arms, armor medical instruments, ceramics, 17th century wine bottles stamped with the governor of Virginia's seal, tools, coins, musical instruments, games and even centuries-old food remains. There are also interactive virtual views overlooking actual sites, overlays that transport visitors back in time to pinpoint where objects on display were found.

Also here are videos showing the remains of buildings, wells and various articles, just where they were found. There's a three-dimensional representation of a 1620s-era well. It's mostly full of armor and dozens of other objects suspended in place, just as they were discovered.

Equally impressive is the downward view. Since the museum was built over the remains of the last Jamestown Statehouse, you can see portions of that excavated ruin through sections of glass flooring. An outline of the Statehouse foundation is indicated in the museum's carpeting.

Also on-site are a modern reconstruction of a 1608 glass house and an exhibit of industries the early settlers tried to establish. Today, modern glassblowers in period garb staff it. They continually create glass bottles, candlesticks, pitchers and paperweights that are available for purchase.

Before you leave, don't miss the 3- or 5-mile Jamestown Island loop drive. Traversing forest and swamps, you get a real feel for the terrain settlers had to cope with and conquer.

Often spotted by sharp-eyed visitors are eagles, a variety of other birds, turtles, deer and numerous wildflowers.

Just down the road lies the Jamestown Settlement, operated by the commonwealth of Virginia. It features a recently revamped museum and introductory film, a reconstruction of the fort as it would have appeared between 1610 and 1614, a Powhatan Indian village and full-sized replicas of the Susan Constant, Discovery and Godspeed, the three vessels that transported the first settlers to Virginia from England.

Museum highlights include more than 500 17th century artifacts, including documents, portraits, tools and weapons, diaries, exhibits exploring European trade and colonization. It particularly zeros in on the economic goals of those who saw Jamestown as a logical overseas investment, and what led to the choice of tobacco, the crop that proved to be the colony's fiscal salvation.

Galleries also cover the interactions between English colonists and Native Americans, the role slavery played in the colony's growth and reconstructions of Powhatan, slave and planter homes.

The outdoor Powhatan Indian village features Indian homes made of sapling frames covered with reed mats. On hand are historical interpreters who discuss and demonstrate the ways Indians grew and prepared food, and made their tools and pottery.

From here, a short walk leads to the berths of the three re-created ships. Each can be boarded and explored, and each is manned by costumed interpreters who readily explain the challenges facing colonists, most of whom spent more than four months below deck in extraordinarily tight spaces with very little fresh air or natural light.

Then there's the re-created, triangular James Fort. Within its walls are reconstructed wattle and daub dwellings, a church, storehouses and a governor's house. Here, too, interpreters in period garb explain all manner of life and gladly provide interested visitors a glimpse onto the lives of those who frequently had to worry about starvation, disease and attack. Indeed, the interpreter's stories describe the plight of settlers whose dreams were often dashed by harsh realities.

Both Jamestown sites are a 10-minute ride from Williamsburg, the famously restored town that is the closest place to find a good mix of lodging and dining choices. In fact, Williamsburg is also a perfect complement to any Jamestown visit. Admission to the many crafts shops, homes and government buildings requires a passport purchased in advance or at the visitors center. However, you can wander the streets of Virginia's second capital (it moved here from Jamestown in 1699) for free.

Also note that the commercial district nearest the College of William and Mary has the best selection of restaurants.

Another major nearby attraction is the Yorktown battle site (Yorktown was where, in 1781, the Colonists won the victory that assured their independence). And everything is quite easily reached via flights to Newport News, Va. Service here includes flights from Air Tran, one of the nation's better bargain airlines. Newport News is also home to the famous and fascinating Mariner's Museum. Highlights include rare figureheads, handcrafted ship models, Civil War ironclad USS Monitor artifacts, paintings and a variety of international small craft. IF YOU GO

Jamestown Colonial National Historical Park, 757-898-2410 or www.nps.gov/colo/home.htm. Admission, actually a seven-day pass, costs $8 for adults, children under 16 are free. For $10 you can get a seven-day pass that includes admission to the Yorktown battlefield site.

Jamestown Settlement, 888-593-4682 or www.historyisfun.org. Admission is $13.50 for adults, $6.25 for children 15 and older.

Williamsburg, 800-368-6511 or www.visitwilliamsburg.com.

Mariners Museum, www.marinersmuseum.org.

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