

Assateague Island National Seashore: Where the Wild Ponies Are

by Sue Kulick, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Off the southern shore of Maryland lies a small barrier island known as Assateague Island. This island is famous for its beautiful seashores, abundant camping, hiking and biking trails, and most of all, the wild horses that roam freely through the island.

As a little girl, I read the story of "Misty," Marguerite Henry's children's classic about two children and their adopted Assateague Island pony, Misty. The children were Maureen and Paul Beebe, two real children of the Island, and Misty was indeed a real horse! The story was wonderful and fascinating to a horse-loving young girl like me. And when it came time to think about a vacation, where else to choose but to go see the wild ponies of Assateague Island?

Assateague Island is divided, with half belonging to Maryland and half to Virginia. The Maryland portion is called the Assateague National Seashore, and the Virginia portion is known as the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. Assateague is National Park Service property, and Chincoteague is Fish and Game Commission property, but they both have pony herds. The ponies of Assateague Island are divided between the two states, and they are separated by a mostly unseen fence.

The ponies in Maryland are owned and managed by the National Park Service in conjunction with the State of Maryland. They are managed quite differently than the Virginia ponies. The Maryland ponies roam freely throughout the island, and receive very little vet care or human interaction. Their numbers however, are controlled by birth control methods within the herds, administered by vaccine by veterinarians. This keeps the population manageable and ensures the herd's good health, as they are not outsourcing the food staples.

The Virginia herd is owned and managed by the Chincoteague Island fire company. These ponies also roam free, but they receive a fair amount of veterinary care, although they are still considered wild animals. Every July, the pony penning occurs. This is a fire company sponsored event. The ponies swim over to Chincoteague from Assateague Island under the direction of the pony cowboys. The foals are then rounded up and sold at auction to become domesticated. After the sale, the adults swim back over to the island to await next year's swim. Not all the foals are sold, and this keeps the population on the island healthy. The fire company auctions off about 60 foals, and the

proceeds not only help the all-volunteer fire company, but pays for the upkeep of the ponies year after year. The fire company has never lost a horse on the swim, and they have been doing this for many, many, years!

To see the ponies, you need to be patient, lucky and intrepid! When you access Assateague Island from the Virginia side, you will enter the Wildlife Refuge and drive a short distance to the visitor's center. The visitor's center provides information about the ponies as well as the other wildlife in the area. You can start out there and drive over paved roads until you reach the end of the road, known as Tom's Cove. From there, you need an off-road vehicle to continue. Another way around the island is on foot or bike. There are many trails leading out from the visitor's center to all points of the island. There are also parking areas in other parts of the island that you can hike from.

When you access Assateague Island from the Maryland side, you will come first to the visitor's center and then cross a long bridge to enter the park. On the other end of that bridge, a left turn gets you into the Assateague State Park, and a right turn takes you to the Assateague National Seashore. You can drive the length of the highway and turn off at any one of the smaller side roads. There are hiking trails available, and, as with Virginia, when you get to the end of the road, you need an off-road vehicle to continue.

Our first day was spent on the Virginia side, where we only saw a few ponies from a distance. We did see the "buyback" ponies, which are the ponies that are repurchased by the fire company. The rules are pretty strict...if for any reason, an owner cannot keep one of the ponies sold at auction, they are to be sold back to the fire company. If the reason for the return is that they cannot be domesticated, they are returned to the island, kept in a holding pen while they are acclimated, and then turned back to the wild. These ponies were wonderful, but not exactly what we were in search of.

Our second day was spent on the Maryland side. The drive was about 40 miles and took us a little over 50 minutes. We stopped at the visitor's center, crossed the bridge, made the right and came face to face with a herd of four wild ponies! It was a small herd, a stallion, two mares and a foal who I judged to be about 10 months old. They were contentedly grazing on the side of the road, completely oblivious to the fuss they were causing. Now, this was the Assateague I had come in search of! Although they appeared to be very used to human companionship, they are still wild animals, and there are signs all over advising the tourists of that. You must respect their lives as well as their environment.

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We saw several other herds of ponies that day on the Maryland side, making for many more photo ops, several pairs of muddy sneakers, and a lifetime of memories.

Assateague Island is a wonderful place, where the balance of nature still rules. If you ever have the chance to go, it is a place I thoroughly recommend. For more information, visit the National Park Service website: [NPS Assateague Island](http://www.nps.gov/assateague/)

About The Author: Sue Kulick is a resident of the Pocono Mountains and an avid Disney fan. She and her husband, Steve, live in a log home with their Golden Retrievers, Cody and Belle and their cat Tigger.

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