



Destination Alexandria

Written & photographed by
King Montgomery

The Alexandria waterfront on the tidal Potomac River

The City of Alexandria abounds in history, from its occupation by Native Virginians millennia ago; through the explorations of Captain John Smith along the Potomac River in the early 1600s; through the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the American Civil War; to the present where Alexandria takes its place as a cultural and historical leader in Northern Virginia.

Alexandria is situated on the west bank of the Potomac River about six miles below Washington, DC, and nine miles north of George Washington's home at Mount Vernon. The land originally was part of a crown grant to a sea captain, who, after less than a month of ownership, sold it to John Alexander of Stafford County for 6,000 pounds of tobacco. When the city

was incorporated, it took Alexander's name.

At the time of the Revolutionary War, Alexandria was a major trading center and port. George Washington used the port to ship comestibles and tobacco from his farm at Mount Vernon. He had a townhouse in Alexandria, was a city trustee, purchased a pew at Christ Church (which is still in service), and was a Master of the Alexandria Masonic Lodge.

In 1789 it and a portion of Fairfax County were ceded by the Commonwealth of Virginia to the federal government to become, along with a part of Maryland, the new 10-square-mile District of Columbia. When Virginia wanted the land back, Alexandria was returned in 1847. In 1852, Alexandria received a new charter and again acquired city status.



Andy Williams, a longtime resident of Alexandria

A Local View

Andy and Laurie Williams moved to Alexandria from Richmond in 1967, the first year I visited the city. They quickly took to their new home and now, some 40 years later, I asked Andy about his adopted town. "It's a great place to raise a family," he says. The Williams family enjoys good food, fine wine and a strong sense of



Huntley Meadows Park, a 1,500-acre wetland preserve in Fairfax County south of Alexandria, harbors wildlife of all sorts. Hundreds of yards of boardwalk traverse the marsh so all can visit, including those in wheelchairs.

history. All of these can be found in Alexandria with its eclectic mix of fine restaurants in historic settings. Andy and Laurie are partial to Restaurant Eve, whose executive chef, owner Cathal Armstrong (the “t” is silent), was named one of America’s 10 best new chefs by *Food & Wine Magazine*. Andy recalls a restaurant or two and a few sandwich shops in the late sixties, but now there are hundreds of establishments catering to every taste.

Andy is an avid fly angler, and the nearby Potomac River provides good opportunities for bass, striped bass, shad and sunfishes. He is also an upland game and waterfowl hunter who plies his hunting skills throughout Virginia and on the Eastern Shore. He’s a regular customer at one of Old Town’s premier retail stores, The Trophy Room.

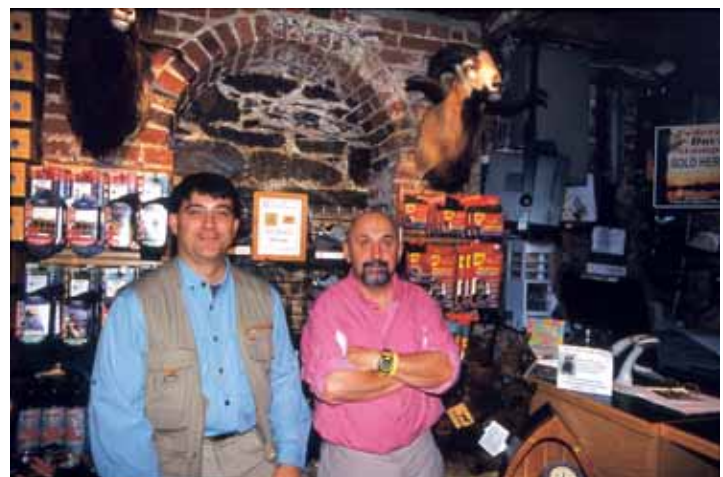
The Trophy Room

The Trophy Room sits right in the middle—actually under—the hustle and bustle of Old Town Alexandria. As you walk past the City Hall down King Street toward the Potomac River, it’s to the right, under a skylight built into the sidewalk. Outside looks are deceiving, because once you take

the stairs down to the shop, The Trophy Room is instant eye candy to the avid hunter, shooter and fly angler.

Proprietor Mike Zarlenga is the hunter/shooter who also fly fishes some, and his longtime friend and associate Gary Rothrock is an accomplished fly angler who can also shoot and hunt—a perfect

Proprietors Michael Zarlenga (left) and Gary Rothrock (right), both longtime Alexandria residents, in The Trophy Room, a one-stop shop for hunting, shooting and fly fishing needs



combination in a store full of high-end rifles, shotguns, pistols, fly fishing gear, sporting clothing and other good stuff. The store is a full-service Orvis shop for the fishing side, and the gun side is represented by products from such luminaries as Weatherby, Browning, Beretta, Smith and Wesson and H & K. They also carry Swarovski Optics, Zeiss Optics and Orvis, Ex-Officio, and Barbour clothing and outdoor gear.

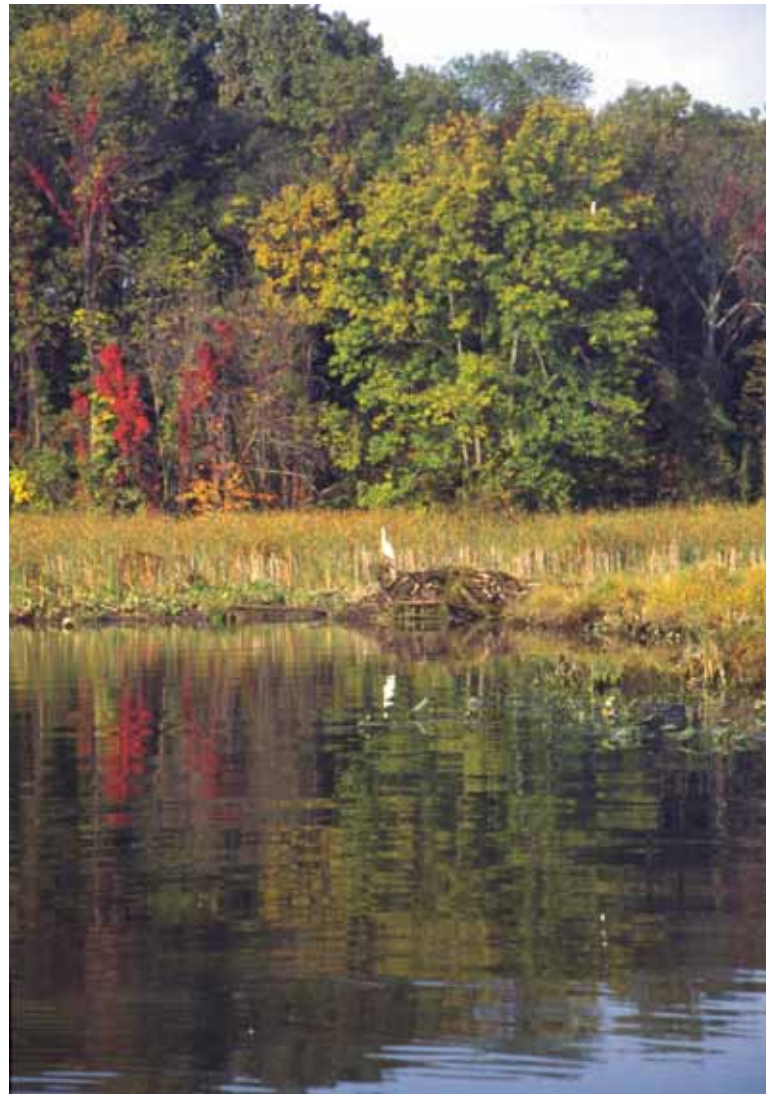
Mike and Gary can recommend a number of nearby places for sporting clays and target practice, and they work with several guides who fish in Virginia, DC, and Maryland waters. In addition, The Trophy Room offers destination services for fly fishing trips to British Columbia and New Zealand and a lineup of exotic hunting adventures to such places as Canada, Europe and Africa.

Local waters include Cook Lake, Four Mile Run, Holmes Run, Cameron Run, and the tidal Potomac River. Cook Lake and the runs are stocked with trout and access is fairly easy. The Potomac River is one of the nation's premier bass fishing rivers, and it is best fished from a boat, although some shore fishing and wading is possible at Belle Haven Marina/Dyke Marsh area. It provides most of Alexandria's angling action as it has for centuries.

The Nation's River

In 1608, on a journey up the Potomac from the Chesapeake Bay, Captain John Smith wrote of seeing more fish in one place that he had ever seen before. The Indians along the river relied on fish for food and barter. When European settlers established a foothold in the New World, sturgeon were plentiful enough to support a major fishery. George Washington pulled almost 40 percent of his annual earnings from the river by catching sturgeon, herring, shad and striped bass and selling them salted in barrels as far away as Europe.

Dyke Marsh is a near pristine wetland area just south of Alexandria next to Belle Haven Marina.



There are over 60 species of fish in the tidal Potomac River. In the Alexandria reaches of the river the largemouth black bass reigns supreme. The bigmouth is joined by lesser numbers of its smallmouth cousin and a resident population of juvenile striped bass. The stripers are born in the river and await their time, usually three to five years, to become sexually active and head downriver to the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

In the late winter and in spring, other anadromous species such as herring, hickory and American shad, yellow perch, white perch, and the large stripers move up into Alexandria and DC waters to spawn. Factor in the sunfishes--primarily bluegill, rock bass, and crappie--and huge carp and channel and blue catfish, and you will see

why you never know what you will catch when you fish these waters.

Tides are very important in the lives of all tidal riverine creatures, but particularly to the fish. In each 25 hours, the tide will rise and fall twice, with an average change in depth of about 18-24 inches. All fish, from the smallest minnows to the largest striped bass, are most active and apt to be caught during moving water, either in or out. The creatures at all links of the food chain are stimulated by the water movement, and an increase in feeding levels usually results as the tide pulls. The fish face into the current and, like trout in a stream, are usually on the downcurrent side of structure waiting for food to float or swim by, so present your fly or lure accordingly.



Washington Sailing Marina (Photo by Hay Hardy)

Other Outdoor Activities

Sailing is also a big part of the Alexandria waterway. The Belle Haven Marina, just south of the city on the George Washington Memorial Parkway, has a launch ramp for sailing and power boats, and sailing schools are also offered to the public. The Washington Sailing Marina sits just south of Reagan Washington National Airport, and its slips hold some beautiful specimens of the sailing art. Lessons are offered.

The nature buff, birder, and outdoor photographer can find many willing subjects at the Dyke Marsh Refuge at Belle Haven, the popular bike/walking path along the Potomac River all the way to Mount Vernon, and the wonderful Huntley Meadows Park run by the Fairfax County Park Authority. Huntley Meadows, almost 1,500 acres of wetland marsh and forest, is crisscrossed with a boardwalk trail over the large pond formed by beavers that dam the nearby creeks. Wildlife abounds: On a typical day one can see waterfowl, herons, egrets, eagles, osprey, beavers, muskrats, song birds, deer, butterflies and numerous other creatures. This is a great place for kids to learn about nature, and the wooden path is wheelchair and stroller friendly.

Alexandria is a great place to live and to visit. It is home to fine restaurants, world-class shopping, parks, and many pockets of history. It is also a fine place to boat, sail, fish or just visit with nature in some very pretty places.

Alexandria Information

The City of Alexandria

www.alexandriava.gov

Fairfax County

www.fairfaxcounty.gov

The Trophy Room

www.trophyroomonline.com

(703) 837-8215

Eastern Trophies Fly Fishing—William Heresniak. Float and wade trips in Virginia and Maryland.

www.easterntrophies.com

(571) 213-2570

Rapid Ana Outfitters—Paul Livelli and Leslie Hall. Light tackle and fly fishing in VA and MD.

www.rapidanaoutfitters.com

(410) 935-3829

Ken Penrod's Life Outdoors Unlimited Guide Service—fishes VA, DC, MD and PA waters. A top guide on the Potomac River. www.penrodsguides.com

(301) 937-0010

National Bass Guide Service—Steve Chaconas. Knows the Potomac River well.
www.nationalbass.com

(703) 360-3472

Belle Haven Marina & Sailing School

www.saildc.com

(703) 768-0018

Washington Sailing Marina

www.washingtonsailingmarina.com

(703) 548-9027

Huntley Meadows Park

www.fairfax.gov/parks/Huntley

(703) 768-2525

Restaurant Eve

www.restauranteve.com

(703) 706-0450

King Montgomery is an award-winning, nationally known outdoor & travel writer/photographer who writes for a number of publications. He is a retired US Army officer, and is a former light-tackle/fly fishing guide on the Potomac River.



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