

Cruising Down Route 5

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“That there is no city in [Charles City](#)” is common knowledge to locals, but don’t let this bit of trivia keep you away from taking a day or two—or more—to explore this part of Virginia, located along Route 5 from Richmond to Yorktown. Dotted with historical markers, the area is rich with centuries of our nation’s history. My children and I headed out one clear, blue morning after breakfast with the goal of visiting several of the plantations that pepper the countryside and are open to visitors. I packed a picnic, loaded up on water bottles, and stopped to fill the tank with gas, knowing that service stations, grocery stores, and places to eat are not abundant in the region.

Berkeley Plantation

[Berkeley Plantation](#), a National Historic Landmark, was our first stop. A family friend had been encouraging my husband and me for years to take our children to the annual observance of the First English-Speaking Thanksgiving which Berkeley holds on the first Sunday in November. The event commemorates the settlers who came upon Berkeley’s shores in 1619 and gave prayers of thanks upon arriving in the New World. We’ve never been able to make the yearly event, but I still wanted to visit this place that claims the “official” First Thanksgiving as one of their many historical attributes. I didn’t realize, however, that Berkeley was the scene for much more—an Indian attack in 1622 which ended the original settlement; the ancestral home of a signer of the Declaration of Independence—Benjamin Harrison V; as well as the home of two Presidents—William Henry Harrison and Benjamin Harrison. Furthermore, during the Civil War, Berkeley was occupied by General George B. McClellan with his Union troops, whom Abraham Lincoln visited on two occasions.

The property is well-marked with signage for visitors to find their way. After purchasing tickets in the gift shop for admission to the house and grounds, we received an overview via a ten-minute video and then toured the first floor of the house. One of the memorable details of the tour was seeing the arches which had been installed after a visit from Thomas Jefferson, during which he remarked to the Harrison family that the room would have more light and air if the doorways were converted into arches. It made me wish Mr. Jefferson might swing by my house the next time he was in the area with a few renovation tips for my sweet abode. Once the house tour was completed, my children and I ventured onto the grounds and made our way down to the James River. The estate is quite large, and some of our party became weary from the walking. Thankfully a kind-hearted brother offered his little sister a piggy-back ride for the last bit up the gravel path back to the house. When we finally returned to the gift shop and carriage area, one of my sons retrieved our cooler packed with fruit, nuts, sandwiches, and cookies and met us in the picnic area set aside for visitors. The two-and-a-half hours we spent at this Georgian mansion passed quickly; I imagine we could have stayed longer, but there were a few more stops I wanted us to make before returning to our home in Goochland.

Westover Plantation

[Westover Plantation](#) is not far down the river from Berkeley, and it is beautiful. The closest to the James River of any of the plantation houses, the lush, green landscape offers a wide, sweeping vista of the James that is special. The main house is still inhabited and closed to visitors. But visitors can enjoy a tour of the grounds that is worth the stop for two reasons—the view of the river and the tunnel that is said to have been constructed and used during the Indian uprising in 1622. Although the underground passageway has been closed off due to flooding, you can descend a ladder into a dry well which legend says served as the tunnel’s entrance. One note of caution—a large, black snake was resting contentedly on the rim of the well when my tribe descended, providing an unanticipated bit of excitement. I would imagine it would be a popular spot for a reptile siesta—cool and dark. When you arrive at Westover, a gate marks the entrance for visitors; at this same spot you will also locate information about the grounds, a brochure for your perusal, and a place to deposit your admission fee.

Lawrence Lewis, Jr. Park

My wish lists tend to be longer than is practical. There were other places in the area I wanted to rest my eyes upon and explore, but one day would not allow time for every experience. When we left Westover and her golden-hued soybean fields almost ready for harvest, I decided to drive just a few more miles down Route 5 towards Charles City to visit [Lawrence Lewis, Jr. Park](#). The park is a stop on the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Tour that an area naturalist had indicated was not to be missed. With 24 acres situated directly on the James, a fishing pier, picnic tables, a number of trails, and an historical exhibit, you could have your fill of sight-seeing right here if you love the outdoors. But since our time was not in abundance, we took a stroll down the pier to check out the day's catch and then quickly found our way onto a trail that allowed us to investigate the river's edge. I understand there are two entrances to the park which lead to separate areas, but we only had time for one. I'll have to put that second entrance on my list for another time.

Harrison Lake National Fish Hatchery and Shirley Plantation

In this same area is [Harrison Lake National Fish Hatchery](#). We visited the hatchery several years ago with another family, so it wasn't a must-do this time; but, should you plan to visit the vicinity, be sure to make an appointment to learn about restocking Virginia's waterways. Another place we didn't include in this trip was [Shirley Plantation](#). The house and grounds are open for visitors, and it is the first of the plantations you reach as you head east along Route 5.

Our outing complete, with weary travelers in tow, I headed back to Richmond—grateful that we had water to drink, enough gas to get us home, and snacks to enjoy as we discussed black snakes, catfish, power lines, and the beautiful bike path that is being built in preparation for the [Cap2Cap Bike Ride](#). If you and your family enjoy biking, these trails are wide, smooth, and picturesque.

I found myself thinking a great deal of my mother as we explored the countryside that day. Now in her eighties, my mother is cautious about walking outdoors, but she would savor every bit of the drive down Route 5. I've made a note on my calendar to return to the area the next time she visits.

I hope you are inspired to make a note or two on your calendar, as well. Keep in mind that [Colonial Williamsburg](#) and [Yorktown](#) are down the road as you head east. Maybe you could squeeze in one plantation or stop-off at the park the next time you head to the Tidewater area. As you plan your visit, check the prices and opening hours of your destinations; both might catch you by surprise.

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