

# Beach Refuge

*Reconnect with Nature on Chincoteague Island*

BILL CRABTREE, JR. VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION

**C**hincoteague Island on the Eastern Shore is best known for its herd of wild horses and the pony swim and sale that happens every July. But how did the ponies get there to begin with?

Nobody is really sure! One theory is that they swam ashore when a Spanish galleon was shipwrecked in the 18th century. Another theory is that local farmers used the island as a natural corral, and some horses were left behind. But

whatever the reason, they have decided to stay—and who could blame them?

"I find a lot of people have an experience like falling in love when they come here," says Donna Leonard, whose family has lived and worked on Chincoteague for five generations. "People come back year after year, until one day they're bringing their grandchildren."

Fourteen thousand acres of wildlife preserve and more than 40,000 acres of

national seashore may be two reasons why people—and ponies—fall in love with this destination.

## Two Islands for the Price of One

Chincoteague Island's famous herd of wild horses actually lives on neighboring Assateague Island. The islands are so close that you can bike or walk between the two, and the lives of both islands are inextricably bound together.



JUMPING ROCKS



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The entirety of Assateague is a wildlife preserve and national seashore, home to wild ponies, white-tailed deer, snowy egrets, great blue herons and oystercatchers—a bird with an orange bill, orange feet and orange eyes. There are no houses or hotels on Assateague, so visitors stay on Chincoteague.

The closest hotel to Assateague is the aptly named Refuge Inn. This hotel is the gateway to the treasures of Assateague, and this family-run establishment does its best to make it easy for guests to enjoy all the natural beauty of this special place.

The Refuge Inn even has its very own Chincoteague ponies in an adjacent paddock so that guests can have an up-close-and-personal experience. The ponies, whose numbers usually include a foal or two, come right up to the fence and allow guests to feed and pet them.

At The Bike Depot next door, guests can rent bikes, sand chairs, beach umbrellas, boogie boards and other beach necessities. This allows you to simplify your vacation planning and take advantage of some of the best spots on Assateague.

“Even on the busiest days on Assateague, the bike-access beach stays quiet and restful,” says Leonard, who owns both The Refuge Inn and The Bike Depot. The Leonards are one of the oldest families on Chincoteague, and they are dedicated to making sure guests get a chance to see the islands the way they are meant to be seen.

### **Don't Miss the Boat**

As you might expect on an island, boating is a major form of transportation, recreation and exploration.

“Most people never get a chance to see the ponies in their natural habitat,” says Sandy Stewart, aka “Captain Sandy” of Island Cruises. “The beach and wildlife trails can only access a small part of Assateague. When you take a sunset cruise, or any of the different boat tours, you see so much more and get so much closer.”

Island Cruises cater to whatever type of experience guests desire, whether this is a small-group experience in a luxury pontoon boat or a ride to your own private island in Captain Carlton's Sandbar Bus.

The Sandbar is a spot of sand off the coast of Chincoteague that has been steadily growing in the past few years,



COURTESY OF CHINCOTEAGUE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

becoming a popular hangout for locals and people in the know. Captain Carlton runs a 32-seat shuttle out to The Sandbar every hour from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily during the season, but he also takes special requests.

“As long as you have six people who want to go somewhere, give my cell phone a call,” says Captain Carlton, who also happens to be Donna Leonard’s

brother. “If you don’t have six people, still give me a call and we’ll pair you up with somebody else.”

### **Pony Up**

Chincoteague is a great vacation destination year-round (the town even hosts a Christmas by the Sea Festival), but by far the most popular time is the week of Pony Penning when more than 40,000 people

come for the historic proceedings that include the famous Chincoteague Island Pony Swim. This July marks its 87th anniversary.

“My favorite part of Pony Penning is on the Sunday before,” says Leonard. “The Saltwater Cowboys start to round up the herd and drive them down to the corral where they stay until the swim. There’s this moment when you see maybe 60 to

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70 wild horses emerge from the tree line. It's unforgettable, and it's something most people never get a chance to see."

The horses are actually owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company, and for the week of Pony Penning, these firemen are known as the Saltwater Cowboys. They round up the ponies during the beginning of the week, and on Wednesday morning during slack tide they drive the ponies across the inlet to Chincoteague.

"The ponies hit the water at a run," says Captain Sandy. "They have to or it would make the swim harder. They always swim at slack tide when there's no current so that it's easy for the foals."


Most visitors watch the swim from Veteran's Memorial Park, but there are other ways to see action.

"Obviously, the best way to see the swim is from a boat," says Captain Carlton. "I usually get booked up about six months in advance, but I keep a waiting list."

The first foal to set hoof on dry land is raffled off at the carnival the next day. Once they are all on Chincoteague, the ponies are given an hour to rest before they are driven down Main Street to the carnival grounds.

"It's our version of a parade," laughs Leonard. "The ponies seem to know where to go. They never stray."

The next day, every foal is sold at auction. The sale's primary purpose is to keep the numbers of the herd down, and to raise money for their care and the preservation of Assateague. Prices average around \$1,500 per foal, but some ponies have sold for more than \$10,000.

After the sale of the foals, the adult ponies return to Assateague, and Chincoteague returns to its normal schedule of boating, biking and beach pursuits. The ponies may be the only ones who are allowed to live on Assateague, but anyone can visit. 



DIANE GINSBERG

## If You Go

July 20–22 Blueberry Festival

July 23–28 Pony Penning Week

July 25 Pony Swim

Oct. 6 Oyster Festival

### For more information

[www.refugeinn.com](http://www.refugeinn.com)

[www.refugebikes.com](http://www.refugebikes.com)

[www.captaincarlton.com](http://www.captaincarlton.com)

<http://chincoteaguechamber.com>

[www.nps.gov/asis/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/asis/index.htm)

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