

Travel the World's Largest Bridge Tunnel

By Mitch Willard

Traveling the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel (CBBT) is indeed a visual experience, an experience that could easily be straight out of a Hollywood movie. Imagine being on vacation, on your first trip across Hampton Roads. You are driving across a bridge and off in the distance you see the road disappear into the water.

Travel from the Eastern Shore of Virginia to the busy Hampton Roads area was hectic before 1964. The area was served by the Little Creek Ferry. Getting to or from the shore was dependent on coastal storms, hurricanes and the unpredictable currents of the Atlantic Ocean, not to mention the heavy traffic hurrying to catch the Little Creek Ferry.

The Little Creek Ferry began serving the Hampton Roads area in the early 1930's. In the mid 50's the ferry system had almost outgrown its usefulness, and alternatives to the ferry were needed. In 1956 the Ferry



“You are driving across a bridge and off in the distance you see the road disappear into the water. It really does disappear.”

Commission was authorized by the Virginia General Assembly to study the feasibility of a bridge between the Eastern Shore and Hampton Roads. The study concluded that the crossing should be a series of bridges and tunnels connecting the two points.

The stage was set for the 17.6 mile Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel, later to be named the Lucious J. Kellam Jr. Bridge-Tunnel. Late in 1960 construction began. Four years later, after sometimes terrible weather conditions and seven worker deaths, the work was finished and the bridge-tunnel open to traffic, saving motorists and truckers time,

money and mileage. In fact, on a trip from Wilmington Delaware to the Norfolk/ Virginia Beach area, the average savings is one and a half hours and some 95 miles.

The vast majority of the world's largest bridge-tunnel is bridge and is supported by more than 5000 pilings. Because the Hampton Roads area is such an important shipping area, two one-mile tunnels lay deep beneath the bay. Four artificial islands, or man made islands of roughly five acres each, are located at each end of the tunnels. At least 90 million vehicles have used the CBBT.

In 1995, at a cost of almost \$200 million, work began to increase the capacity of the above-water portion on trestles and bridges to four lanes which opened in 1999.

Between North Channel and Fisherman Inlet, the facility crosses over Fisherman Island, a barrier island. On this barrier island is the Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge which is under the guidance of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Toll collection stations are located at each end of the bridge-tunnel. Tolls are \$12 paid each way for cars without





a trailer. However if the return trip is made within 24 hours of the initial crossing the toll is only \$5. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel is the most expensive toll in the United States. There is currently no toll collection that is electronic such as Smart Tag or EZ Pass. However by late Fall of 2007 this is planned to be in place to make travel across the facility more convenient for frequent travelers.

A restaurant, gift shop, and a 625-foot fishing pier are located on the southernmost of the four man-made islands. According to Paige Addison, marketing director for the CBBT, this is the only island along the bridge-tunnel that is open to the public. This island provides the traveling public the opportunity to stop, stretch their legs, grab a quick bite to eat, do a little fishing, bird watch, or just take in the natural beauty of the surroundings.

The gift shop sells souvenirs of all sorts, from seashells to tee shirts. Of course the most popular souvenir is anything that has the CBBT logo or any memorabilia that reminds the traveler of their trip across the bridge-tunnel. This is true especially if it is the traveler's first time crossing the facility.

Along the pier is a great fishing opportunity, especially for someone who does not have access to a boat, to fish 3.5 miles out in the ocean/bay. Here is a chance to do some excellent fishing, catching everything from croaker

and flounder to rock fish, cobia, and drum. The large rocks at the island and the pilings of the bridge attract these fish as it serves as a reef for them.

Travel across the bridge-tunnel is restricted during times when weather makes travel dangerous or impossible. The toll collectors are faced with many questions about these restrictions when they do occur.

Most often asked is "When is the wind going to stop?" Crystal balls are not provided to the toll operators, so this question is somewhat hard to answer. Safety to the travelers is the utmost importance.

Although structural bridge work is complete, work on the bridge is never finished. In addition to the punishment on the bridge from cars and trucks, the salt air and wind also take a toll. Maintenance and service are mandatory and take about five years to complete from start to finish. Thus as soon as maintenance is finished, it is time to start over and begin the process again.

Engineering feats completed during the last 50 years are sometimes taken for granted, when some were mind boggling in their time.

The Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel is a man made wonder seldom recognized as a big deal. However a trip across it one showcases the marvel of structure and the work it took to make travel along the Atlantic coast easier and safer. ■