



Family fun in the streets of Williamsburg

A LIVING HISTORY

BY KATIE K. BELL

My 3-year-old girl beams with joy as we clip-clop in our open-air carriage down the cobbled streets of Colonial Williamsburg. She has been asking to take a carriage ride since the day we arrived, and I am grateful that my husband had the sense to be first in line (at 8:45 a.m.) to purchase tickets. By 10 a.m., the rides were sold out for the day. Our driver shares interesting tidbits about the town, while we wave at the various colonists: tradesmen, gentlemen and women who wander the streets in colonial garb. This is, after all, a living history museum dedicated to accurately portraying the life of the vibrant and exciting 18th century in America.

Williamsburg is one of America's first communities (long before the gated golf concept, there was the planned community of Williamsburg, Va.) From 1699 to 1780, it was the capital of England's most prosperous colony. The 300-acre community is comprised of various museums with more than 88 original buildings, including the gaol (jail), courthouse, 55 period rooms and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art collection. In addition, tradesmen (in full costume) work at jobs, recreating the era of revolutionary America in 1776.

The blacksmith works only by daylight, hammering nails for part of a building reconstruction. The printer sets type for the next "Gazette," and the brick maker pours clay mush into brick molds. All the while, visitors gawk and ask questions, touch and feel the tools and nod in grave appreciation of the hard work it took to live in colonial America.

While waiting your turn to observe the silversmith, you might overhear a street debate about government and politics. Costumed performers reenact scenes (such as deciding who should be tarred and feathered for taking the British side), often engaging the crowd in the discussion. This is *intense* learning. It's also our first foray into the interactive experience that defines Colonial Williamsburg. We soon discover that there are lessons to keep in mind before you arrive.

RESERVE, RESERVE, RESERVE

Lesson No. 1: Reservations are critical. The best dining, the most interesting attractions, tours and hands-on activities are limited in scale. Activities such as Bits and Bridles (a walking tour of the stable and carriage facilities and introductions to the horses), ghost tours, the Capitol Ball (dancing and music) or a mock witch trial sell out quickly, so make tracks for the ticket counter upon arrival. Better yet, call ahead and reserve your spot in advance.

Grab a full schedule of events at the visitor's center, and take note of the hours of various buildings, or you'll miss out. The Wythe House, for example, is only open until 1 p.m. The 15- or 30-minute carriage rides are marvelous (you can select from six different carriages), but they sell out quickly, so get cracking early in the morning. However, if you do procrastinate and miss out, don't despair. The sheer volume of information, museums and street theater will be more than enough to keep you busy.

STAY CLOSE BY

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation offers commuter bus rides, but the ideal arrangement is to be a mere block or two away from the main drag. Traveling with the whole family inevitably means that someone

Brush up on your knowledge of 18th-century America in Colonial Williamsburg

forgets something, needs a nap or just wants to go back and swim while the others tour. The village may seem small and quaint, but it covers 301 acres and the town is a mile long and half-mile wide. Being a mere block or two away makes for smooth changes in planning activities and a lot less walking.

Not only is the local lodging convenient, the hotels are simply lovely. Our room at the Williamsburg Lodge (renovated in early 2007) is decorated with period furnishing. Colonial folk prints, bed quilts and pottery pair nicely with the luxurious bathroom and free Wi-Fi access. The hardwood floors in our rooms are a nice touch, but ask for a top-floor room, as I'm sure they can be squeaky to those below. Those on a tighter budget will enjoy the Woodlands Hotel with simple guest suites and free breakfast each morning. The Williamsburg Inn is a member of the Leading Small Hotels of the Worlds and a standard bearer in luxurious accommodations—perfect for the romantic winter escape.

EAT HERE

Back to that lesson on reservations: Make them, or you'll be trying vainly to keep your tired, crabby troops from grazing the salad bar while you all wait 20 to 30 minutes for a table. If you spend the entire day in the village, you must elbow your way into the small number of restaurants for meals—because everyone else is in the same boat. We, however, just strolled up the street and straight into our Lodge dining room. Indeed, our best meals were at the Williamsburg Lodge, which is not on everyone's radar, so the waits are minimal. Quality ingredients, great wines and very reasonable prices made this an easy choice for our family. If you prefer a more colonial experience, eat lunch at Shields Tavern and dinner at Christina Campbell's. But call days ahead—or even weeks in advance; preparation is the soul of a good visit here. **SP**

IF YOU GO

Getting there

Multiple carriers, including Delta, offer flights from Atlanta to Richmond, Va. Williamsburg is about a 40-minute drive from there, two hours from Washington, D.C.

Where to stay

Williamsburg Lodge
1-800-HISTORY
www.colonialwilliamsburg.com/visit/stay/withus

When to go

Spring Break (March, April) and December are peak travel times; expect very large crowds.

For general information

www.colonialwilliamsburg.com
1-800-HISTORY

Get in touch with old-school trades



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NOT TO BE MISSED

- **Fife and Drums March:** Typically in the afternoon, boys and girls from the local community dress in period costumed and perform in the historic area. A George Washington impersonator appears on the courthouse steps to make an impassioned speech about fighting Lord Cornwallis and the British troops trapped at Yorktown.
- **Secrets of the Chocolate Maker:** Learn about the laborious process involved in crafting 18th-century chocolate (a wildly popular treat in CW).
- **Legends, Myths, Mysteries and Ghosts:** A walking tour with three hosts who share mysterious stories of the day.
- **Bits and Bridles:** Hands-on activity for children only. Learn about the care of 18th-century animals and how they were used for work.
- **Pleasures of the Playhouse:** Enjoy the variety of entertainment options that would have been found during the colonial times.
- **The Wythe House Museum:** Owned by George Wythe, mentor to Thomas Jefferson, the original home is open for walk-throughs. Imagine the conversations that changed America forever.