

A NIGHT ON THE GREAT EGG HARBOR RIVER

If there was ever a reason to cruise the Great Egg Harbor River it is the Inn at Sugar Hill. Like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the Inn at Sugar Hill stands sentinel at the headwaters in Mays Landing.

As part of the wild and Scenic Rivers System, the Great Egg River is navigable for 12 miles, its total of 50 miles (along with 17 tributaries) making up the largest canoeing area in the Pine Barrens. Locals refer to it as simply Great Egg.

According to the National Park Service, "The National Park Service manages the designated river in partnership with the State of NJ, four counties, and twelve municipalities to protect the corridor's valuable natural and cultural values for present and future generations to appreciate and enjoy."

Privateers once sailed their schooners up this river, hiding among its tributaries and sheltered coves from the hated British soldiers with their confiscated goods. Docking at the Wheaton Shipyard, these privateers then sold their confiscated cargo. One such entrepreneur was Captain Snell, "The Hero of Sugar Hill," who was the undoing of 29 British ships trying to take over Mays Landing.

Cannonballs were made in the area during the Revolutionary War from the native bog iron rock along the Great Egg. Blast furnaces were numerous from the late 1700's for a hundred years. Bricks and tile were made along the banks.

Each spring and fall waterfowl are numerous, making stops north and South during their migration. The Great Egg is a perfect spot for resting, feeding, and nesting. Striped bass and alewife herring come up the river to spawn annually.

Cruising the dark tea-colored, cedar water Great Egg today it is easy to think back a century and a half ago. Old pilings may have held landings for saw mills, lumber waiting to be shipped along the Atlantic Ocean to the cities. Ribs from an old boat are visible along with the remains of an old barge. Fragments of docks lead absolutely nowhere. Little coves are now blocked and filled in with phragmites, a sure sign of change along the Great Egg. What stories these remains could tell.

The first five miles of the Great Egg is protected marsh without a structure in sight. Further up we begin to see homes and a few marinas at Jeffers Landing and English Creek. Very few turn-of-the-century homes remain. Many one-story cottages date back to the 1950's with louvered windows and asbestos siding. "Upgrading" is the name of the game along the river with million dollar homes. Each is meticulously landscaped; most have pools. Docks contain powerboats in the 20 – 30' range. Canoes line the sandy banks. There were just a few sailboats in spite of just one overhead powerline measuring 65'. Depth along the Great Egg ranges from 5 – 15'.

We approached the docks at the Inn at Sugar Hill and tied up. A number of boats were moored in the harbor at the headwaters, but we did not have a dinghy and intended to walk around Mays Landing. A congenial maintenance man gave us permission to tie up for the night. "October is a good time of year here," he said while dismantling two white tents and cleaning grills and refrigeration equipment. Luckily we had just missed the summer crowd that ties up at the Inn at Sugar Hill for drinks and dinner, then anchors out for the evening, swimming in the cool water, and rafting up to no doubt party some more.

An Inn at Sugar Hill brochure best describes the history of our location:

"The grassy knoll, located along the north-eastern banks of the Great Egg Harbor River in Mays Landing acquired the name "Sugar Hill" during the late 1700's. During these years, the sugar, molasses and rum that came by tall ships from the far east were stored on the site awaiting shipment by horse and carriage to the Philadelphia markets.

On this grassy knoll the private mansion of William Moore was built, circa 1846. One of Mays Landing's most prominent residents, Mr. Moore was not only a State Senator, but also a prosperous entrepreneur. He built and managed a fleet of sailing vessels which were engaged in commerce along the entire Eastern seaboard."

Today the Boylan family has restored the Moore mansion into an exquisite restaurant and bed and breakfast. Since 1986 the Inn at Sugar Hill has been known for its fine dining, elegant Victorian bar, and antiques. Most of the rooms (all with private bathrooms) have water views, fire places, old-timey wallpaper, and air conditioning. A colonial herb garden is located on the hill while a brick pathway leads down to the docks. Out buildings have also been restored and native bog iron lines flower gardens.

Dinner was an absolutely delicious candlelight affair in a small diningroom off the Victorian Bar, once part of a long porch overlooking the river. Commuter traffic that had seemed noisy around 6pm (a few roads converge near the Inn at Sugar Hill) quieted down and we spent a comfortable night aboard. Blatantly missing was any water movement the whole night. We had never tied up at quiet headwaters of a river where there were no passing boats or even a small chop.

Walking the historic district of Mays Landing the following morning gave us a chance to work off our big dinner. Antique shops, another bed and breakfast, the historical society, remains of a textile plant, and many restored homes caught our interest. Yet other places seemed sadly neglected. Now with a population of 2,300, Mays Landing has shopping centers, golf courses, senior citizen homes, and new developments. Typical of old towns, they are located outside of town.

Before heading back down the Great Egg we gassed up at the Mays Landing Marina. Congenial owner Jay Seigfried greeted us and told us a little about the area. He pointed to an area where two eagles roost in the trees and fish out of the harbor. "Gas prices have fluctuated so much in the past six months that I no longer change the price on the pumps," he laughed as we winced at the cost. Life at the popular Mays Landing Marina was slowing down for the fall. Boats were being pulled and ready for winter storage.

A reflection of leaves turning fall colors looked up at us as we proceeded along the Great Egg at idle speed, headed for Great Egg Harbor Bay and beyond. The highlights of our trip were docking at the Inn at Sugar Hill, enjoying a superb dinner, and touring old Mays Landing. Everyone we met was friendly and informative. A return visit is a must for us during the off season without the summer crowd.