



This year *Cooperative Living* is taking a road trip along Route 360 as it crosses Virginia from the Chesapeake Bay to North Carolina. Each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way.

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Hitting the Road at Top Speed ...

As Route 360 wends its way from South Boston to Danville, succulent eats, serene accommodations, and super-fast fun are all part of the deal.

Barbara Cage grew up in South Boston. Like many kids who come of age in small towns, all she could think about in high school was getting out. “I went to college at James Madison University and didn’t intend to come home,” she says. In fact, she moved to Florida after college and spent 18 years on Sanibel Island.

Today this loquacious native with her contagious smile is a co-owner of Bistro 1888 on South Boston’s Main Street. How did this happen?

Well, it happened like most of these stories do — small-town girl grows up, moves away, and then realizes just how nice it can be to live someplace where everybody knows your name.

Did I mention I’m dining on beef medallions and portabella tossed with Roquefort cheese and homemade demi glace while Cage is telling me all this? I’ve already cleaned up my first course of a nontraditional Caesar salad featuring



Main Street, South Boston is quintessential small-town America.

blue cheese. Bistro 1888 is, as Cage points out, the first and only restaurant serving upscale cuisine in South Boston. The bistro also has an extensive list of local wines and craft brews.

Cage isn’t in this venture alone, however. Her business partner, Executive Chef Margaret Moore, is responsible for many of the menu’s unique

dishes. Moore, like Cage, grew up in South Boston. The two were a couple of years apart in high school.

“Margaret grew up making biscuits with her mom,” Cage notes. “We were both working at Berry Hill Resort & Conference Center and decided to try our own thing.”

Cage says she and Moore try to buy local as much as possible, including sourcing much of their produce from area farms. They also serve all-natural, antibiotic-free beef. “Our menu is pretty big for an upscale restaurant,” Cage remarks. “There’s a doggone lot of inventory back there in the kitchen.”

Cage and Moore aren't the only natives I encounter who ran away from home only to come back again. Mary Craddock, who operates Oak Grove Bed and Breakfast with her husband Mike, also has roots here. The lodgings she now operates are in an 1820 house that has been in her family since it was built in 1820.

The rambling house reeks of history. The piano in the parlor was Craddock's step-grandmother's, and the room where I spend the night (appropriately enough for me, it's lined with full bookcases) was added to the home in 1900 as her grandfather's office. The home also features a lot of the handiwork of freedman Thomas Day. From the 1820s into the 1860s, he crafted everything from dressers to stairway banisters for houses all over south-central Virginia and north-central North Carolina. He crafted the mantel in one of the house's upstairs bedrooms as well as the window trim.

Craddock spent most of her childhood in this house, moving here at the age of 2 and not leaving until it was time to attend college. Her grandfather farmed the surrounding acreage, raising livestock and tobacco while also working as a shoe salesman.

But not everything here is historic. Behind the house is a 16-panel solar array that provides 25 percent of the bed-and-breakfast's electricity. Craddock says the solar panels helped her earn Virginia Green certification for the lodging, which she has operated since 1988. She and Mike, a former journalist, still maintain a home in the metro D.C. area, but spend their summers here with poodles Nico and Bennie. "Bennie is the boss," Craddock assures me.

GETTING UP TO SPEED

History takes many forms along Route 360 through south-central Virginia, and I'd be remiss not to head off the beaten track a little ways to the Virginia International Raceway east of Danville. Originally opened in 1957, the track operated for

Barbara Cage and Bistro 1888 (right) along South Boston's Main Street. Cage, co-owner of the restaurant, grew up in South Boston and returned to her hometown after living for years in Florida. Cage's business partner, Executive Chef Margaret Moore, is also a South Boston native.



Oak Grove Bed and Breakfast (above and lower right) is owned and operated by Mike and Mary Craddock (upper right). The home has been in Mary's family since it was built in 1802. Its interior is replete with history, from its furnishings to its design and structural features.



A Porsche makes a run down a straightaway at VIR during a rainy summer afternoon.



Mike Rose (far left), VIR's director of marketing, and Tom Long, professional driving instructor. Above, author Deborah Huso gets ready for a run at the track.

almost two decades before the gas crisis shut it down.

Almost three decades ago, current majority owner Connie Nyholm and partner Harvey Siegel discovered this hidden gem, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and “decided to bring it back to life,” as Director of Marketing Mike Rose says. *Car & Driver* has called the track one of the top six road courses in America, and it draws race fans from all over Virginia and North Carolina ... and sometimes even farther afield. “This place is a gold mine waiting to be discovered,” Rose adds.

There's a reason for that, as I'm about to learn. “Not too many racetracks have a spa,” Rose chuckles. That's true. VIR also has trackside villas available for rent, a lodge with 27 rooms, an onsite restaurant, off-road driving course, and a thousand-yard shooting range. “It's so far you have to incorporate the curvature of the earth into your shot,” Rose explains.

But let's be serious. I'm not here for the spa or the shooting range. And I'm not even here just to see the 4.2-mile track. Being a travel writer has its perks — like getting a ride and a bit of a driving lesson from Owen Trinkler in a Porsche GT cup car.

I slide into the passenger seat *Dukes of Hazzard* style. (Never mind I'm wearing a skirt — I ask all the gentlemen to look away.) Helmet on, I give Trinkler a nod to let him know I'm ready to ride, and we're off, a little morning rain making the track all the more exciting, and pretty soon we're up to 110 mph with curves at 50. I expect a major adrenaline

rush, but Trinkler is so calm and competent as he describes when one needs to brake and how to take a curve at speeds even this mountain girl would be reluctant to try that I feel almost entirely at ease.

After several laps, we ride back into the pit where Tom Long, a professional race car driver with the Electric Motor Sports Association, is also a professional driving instructor who spends, he says, about 75 to 80 days a year at VIR, coaching mostly hobbyists in how to drive their very expensive cars at breakneck speed.

“This is my home away from home,” Long says of VIR. “I love the diversity of motorsports you can have up here. It's incredible how VIR does this country-club atmosphere with a world-class race track.”

Of course, you don't have to own a Porsche to take advantage of driving instruction from folks like Long. Plenty of driving schools like Ingram Driving Experience work with VIR to coach

hobbyists and serious racers alike. “It costs more than golf,” Long chuckles, “but on a moderate budget, you can enjoy the track.” While most students bring their own cars, one doesn't have to.

Admittedly, most people know VIR as a place to watch races. The track hosts around a dozen a year. Driving clubs also rent the track, and *Car & Driver* has been testing cars here for nine years.

Interestingly enough, the 1,400 acres that make up VIR were once part of the Foote family plantation, which also happened to be the first property in southern Virginia to have electricity. The plantation was a dairy farm and cattle ranch and remained in the Foote family until it became a racetrack in the 1950s. The onsite Oak Tree Tavern occupies the old manor house.

Rose tells me that due to the track's relatively isolated location on the Virginia-North Carolina state line, “A lot of people think we're a quarter-mile dirt track.” Well, I'm here to say that's not the case. Spa and speed, anyone? ■

● IF YOU GO ...

Get your bearings in **South Boston at the South Boston Halifax County Visitors Center** (1180 Bill Tuck Highway, 434-572-2543, www.gohalifaxva.com). And after you've strolled the antique shops on Main Street, slip into **Bistro 1888** (221 Main Street, 434-572-1888, www.bistro1888.com) for drinks and dinner. If you want a peaceful place to rest for the evening far from the madding crowd, check into **Oak Grove Plantation Bed and**

Breakfast (1245 Cluster Spring Road; 434-575-7137), only minutes outside South Boston.

When morning comes, head west on Route 360, and take a worthwhile side trip to the **Virginia International Raceway** (1245 Pine Tree Road, Alton; 434-822-7700, VIRnow.com) just east of Danville, where you can not only take driving lessons or watch one of the track's spectator events, including road racing and motorcycle racing, but you can also get a massage, eat dinner, and spend the night. ■