

Weather Whoopin'



*Kayaking the Chesapeake, Part 3 Autumn 2016
With J1 & J2*

Forward

J1 is the philosopher of the Adventure Duo and he likes to tell people that each adventure embodies a new experience which puts the Js' skills to the test, stretching them and increasing their capability and self-confidence. OK, ... that may be true; but there can be two outcomes when skills are tested ... *pass* ... or ... **fail!** This trip came as close to the latter as the Duo cares to experience.

Day 1 Sunday, September 18, 2016

The logistics for reaching their launch point and returning from their destination are always a challenge for the Js. Over the years Mrs. J2 has born the greatest burden making several round trips to launch sites or destinations, often hundreds of miles! The fall back method is the Duo driving two cars, both equipped with a double roof rack. This gives ultimate flexibility but necessitates making two sets of parking arrangements with at least a reasonable degree of security to assure that the return wheels will be waiting at the destination and the 'launch' car doesn't find a new owner either. The further they push south on the Chesapeake the harder that has become ... and besides, the two car approach doesn't allow for sharing driving along with other drawbacks. So this time J1 suggested a new approach, his sister (Deb) would follow in a car taking advantage of the many pleasant diversions offered by the Maryland eastern shore, financed, of course, by the paddlers. Deb, who was the 'launch' driver for the Hudson River adventure in 2013 and leg 1 of the Chesapeake trip, agreed to the deal with the caveat that sister Sonia could accompany her ... the more the merrier!

To increase the interest on this leg of their Chesapeake adventure, a stay of one night on Smith Island was envisioned. As the ladies desired to share this experience via the scheduled ferry to the island, accommodations had to be arranged for a B&B in Ewell, the principal village on the island. It was the availability of "Susan's on Smith Island" that determined the adventure schedule, moving the launch day up to Sunday, unusual for the Duo, plus it set them up for the nightmare crossing of Kedges Straights the following afternoon!

A 6am Departure of the entourage was made from Boekel Landing, the Susquehanna haunt of the Js. Despite a very crowded SUV, it was a fun ride with lots of banter and the 4 hour journey to Fishing Creek on Upper Hooper Island passed quickly. As usual, the adventure picked up where it had ended in June. There was a tempting dock to launch from but when the owner was located and

permission requested

... it was denied, so it was **over the embankment** again. There is nothing pretty about the shore line in Fishing Creek. It is a working town, full of watermen and their environmentalism seems to stretch only as far as is necessary for a healthy crab catch.



J2 aka Jay Doering J1 aka Jay Mackley

Embarkation at 11am was without ceremony as the ladies were anxious to get on their way, and the Duo was poised for their 10th adventure.



Under way with way on

Departing Fishing Creek with a curtesy salute to the Mexican flag flying over the crab processing plant, they swung into the Honga River turning south into a mild and pleasant head wind. It was one of those beautiful days that keeps kayakers returning to the water.



A heading was set for Bently Point about 5 miles to the southeast. The southerly wind was just enough off to starboard that the subsequent course carried past the point and came close to landing the duo on Asquith I. J1 challenged the navigator who reluctantly broke out the **NAVIONICS app** on his iPhone to make up for the dearth of nav aids, and with it got them back on course. As it turned out, the 'app' proved useful throughout this trip as the landscape was decidedly featureless and the aids to navigation few and far between



Day 1 – Honga River; Fishing Creek to Jenny I -13 miles



A lunch break complete with **fresh cantaloupe** was taken at **Windmill Pt.**



Several more hours paddling followed, and with a freshening head wind, provided the exercise necessary to shake the cobwebs out of the arm muscles.

Navigation became easier as the prominent Honga Straight light tower kept the duo on course without further confusion and a landing was made at Jenny I. in the mouth of the river. Not much more than a **marshy spit**, the narrow peninsula barely served up enough dry land for a **tent site**. Even that was questionable since the tide was ebbing, leaving the Duo questioning whether they would be floating off on their air mattresses in the wee hours. Nonetheless, tents were erected and a **superb meal prepared and devoured** in

time to enjoy a **pleasant sunset** before retiring.



Day 2 Monday September 19th

With the wind gaining strength throughout the night giving an extra push to the rising tide, J1 was awakened at 3am with the Chesapeake Bay encroaching on the entrance to his tent. So it was an early start to the day as camp had to be broken with only head lamps for illumination. The darkness afforded an excellent though not welcome view of major thunderstorm activity to the north. J1 prepared breakfast in the early pre-dawn as the Duo awaited sunrise to launch. (Night paddling had been sworn off after an unpleasant experience on the Delaware Bay several years before.)



Since the storm activity appeared not to be moving southward it was rationalized that the 18 mile paddle to Smith I. and that night's B&B reservations could be executed with minimal weather risk. Bad choice ... and the **sunrise** which followed should have sent any sailor scurrying for cover!

According to the "Weather Channel" small craft warnings were posted, undoubtedly due in part to the strong southwest wind now pouring up the bay. The launch was tricky because fairly large waves were rolling on to the unprotected beach, but once afloat it was business as usual suffering only diminished speed from the headwind. The crossing of Hooper Strait was uneventful and surprisingly devoid of boat traffic which was a welcome relief since the heavy swell obscured the kayaks much of the time.

Bloodsworth I. was in sight to starboard and soon its eastern shore was being transited. While a landing for a break from the hard paddling would have been welcome, the island and surrounding waters were marked as a "Danger Zone" on the chart and the published warning described the island as being used for military exercises. It cautioned that even if the island was not being targeted or invaded that day there was still danger from errant live ordinance. There was no choice but to keep fighting the uphill battle to the south end of Bloodsworth then cross Holland Straights and hope to find a patch of beach on Jones I. on which to land and spend a few moments stretching stiff legs after several long hours of no activity, constrained by the skirts which were required to shed the water rolling across their decks. Rain was also a problem by now, coming as intermittent heavy showers.



On Jones I. a **small beach with a leeward exposure** was found which provided the needed respite ... or so it was hoped! What actually happened, moments after the Dou disembarked, an **amazing wind shift** occurred. In less than a minute the strong, tepid southwest wind shifted to a chilly northeast wind of equal strength. What that did to the sea conditions was as remarkable as it was terrifying. The large, occasionally breaking swell out of the south, which was still being carried along by its own momentum, was suddenly

opposed by the shrill nor'easter and before the surface submitted to its new master, all was wet madness. Fortunately the landing point was a small spit which also possessed a south facing, albeit abrupt, exposure marginally suitable for a launch. J1 was launched successfully and managed to break out into the mayhem and begin his battle to remain upright.

J2 followed but was less fortunate as a set of three rogue waves traveling at right angles to the wind and swell caught him abeam in mid launch with his skirt not yet fastened. The result was a half-filled cockpit and no choice but to continue the launch. For the next several minutes, which seemed like hours, he battled to stay upright while pumping his cockpit, shifting rapidly between the paddle, necessary to execute braces, and the pump to try to stay ahead of the water which was relentlessly sweeping over the boat and into the cockpit. Perhaps the only thing that prevented foundering and capsizing was that the new wind was beginning to trump the lumbering swell and the surface of the bay slowly shifted to a new state consisting of a strong following wind and sea. When the water inventory in the boat was sufficiently reduced, the skirt was snapped in place and J2 was back in business.....



..... but what a business it was. The earlier south wind had made headway difficult but at least encountering the large swell head on suited the kayaks and kayakers quite well. But now with the swells equally sized, if not larger, and approaching from astern, the battle was to prevent broaching. The net result was more difficult and nerve racking paddling with only a slight improvement in speed. This was the condition for the next couple of hours transiting the eastern edge of Jones I.

To complete the picture, one must understand that these “islands” are not much more than marshes with no other features than grass and sedge for most of their area. In other words, there is absolutely nothing about these islands which offer the least shelter or protection. Except for occasionally shielding the seas, depending on the angle of the shoreline, they are little more than obstructions.

The Js had hoped that the wind shift would be accompanied by a favorable change in the weather but the opposite was the case. As they departed the south shoreline of Jones I. heading out across Kedges Straights, the rain showers were increasing in frequency and severity. At this point there was also an occasional rumpling which the mariners wanted to believe was the throaty roar of a crab boat diesel wishful thinking!



While paddling by Jones I. a very dark sky was developing to the west. At first it looked like it was drifting north but as the crossing of Kedges was beginning, reality set in. The crossing was a good three miles and at best would take at least an hour, and it appeared as though the dark cloud, which now sat on the surface, would meet the Duo at mid crossing... and that is what happened. The last bit of sanity found them in sight of the **Solomon’s Lump lighthouse** with the northern most shore of Smith I. barely in sight. But in a moment visibility would change drastically.

The black cloud finally found its mark! First it was the wind. Already strong, it accelerate to what must have been close to gale force since the entire reach of visible bay turned white as the tops of the swells were sheared off. Next came the rain ... in sheets. Visibility dropped well below a mile so

most of the Smith I. shore line was obscured. The only thing remaining plainly visible was the light house. The coup de grace was the thunder, now directly overhead. The only mercy was that lightning flashes were not visible. It is amazing how conditions like these sharpen the prayer life!



The Js, previously separated by a few hundred yards, closed for a brief council of war, shouting above the tumult. It was decided to temporarily depart the heading to Fog Point and make a run for the nearest point of land on the north shore of Smith I. While battling the tendency to broach the whole time, they flew across the remaining mile with the gale at their back and as they closed they could make out a beach suitable for landing which was accomplished without much grace.

They exited their boats and sat near them on the beach making themselves as small and as low a lightning rod as possible. The wind was beginning to return to its pre-gale intensity and the rain, while still hard and steady, no longer came in sheets. It was hoped that a further improvement would soon follow but that was not to be. So a decision was made to relaunch and follow closely on the shoreline until the inlet into Smith Island's "Big Thoroughfare" could be raised and entered. The rumbling continued at a distance but still no visible lightning was observed.



Such a Deal !!!

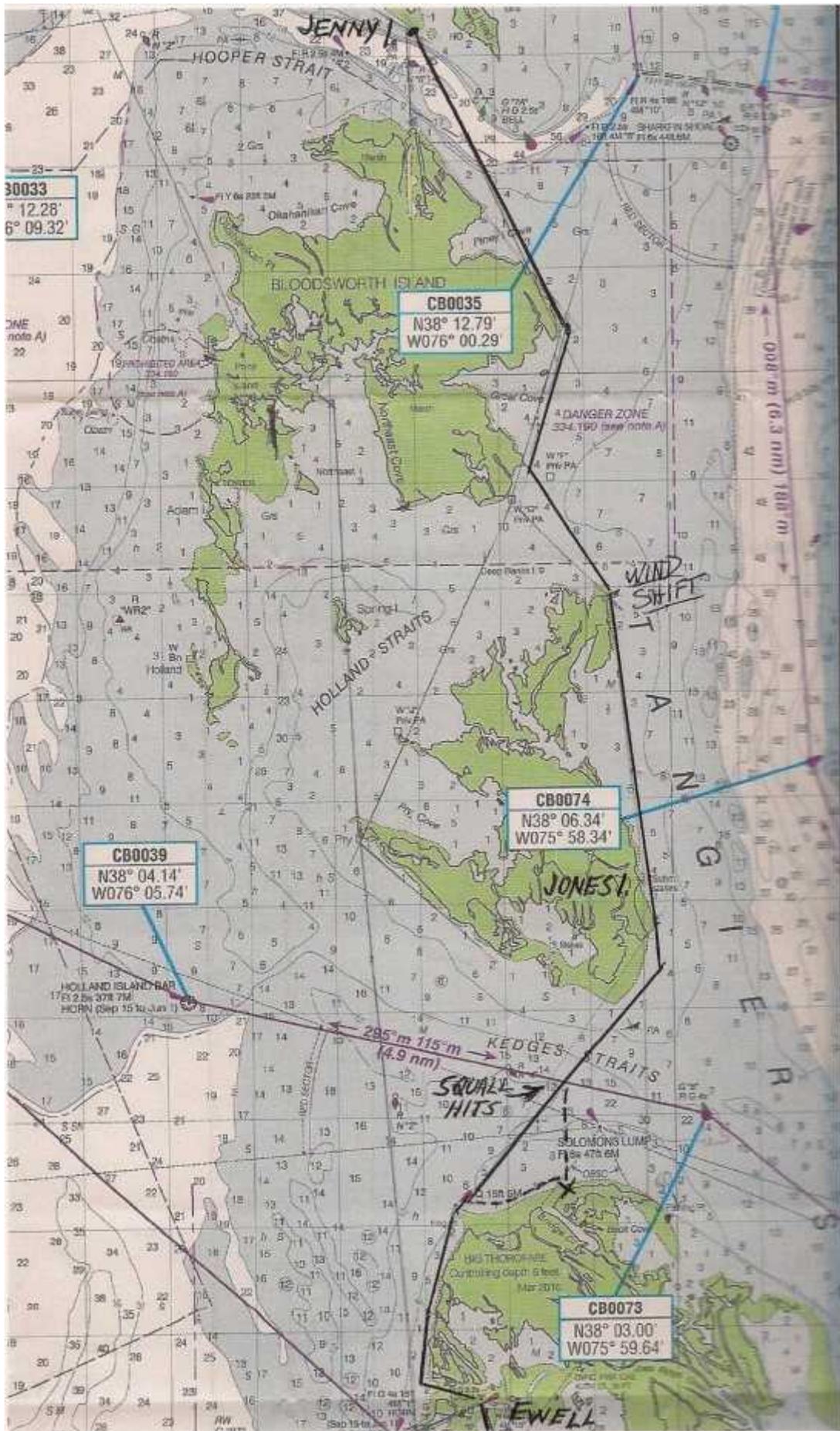
While working their way down the west side of Smith, J1 approached J2 stating that he had proposal for J2's consideration. He stated his intention to load his kayak on the ferry in the morning and accompany his sisters on the crossing of Tangier Sound then graciously await J2's arrival as he completed the 6 or 7 hours it would take to complete the planned paddle. The response to the proposal is not fit for print, but it was a fun way to break the ice for a difficult decision. The Duo had proved their salt in the last several hours but exhausted themselves in the process; and, "Besides," pondered the philosopher, "isn't kayaking supposed to be fun?"

There was only one night's lodging available on the island and the weather the next day was forecast to be little improved, so options for delaying were limited. The clincher was that the fares, even including the kayaks, are very reasonable. So with a little laughter and much relief, the decision was made, even as the inlet came into view.

As the short paddle was made up the channel towards **Ewell**, mother nature threw a little more wind and rain in their direction, with some lightning flashes now thrown in ... but it was too little too late. Susan's B&B was spotted, identified from the photo on her website, and a landing at a neighbor's dock executed. And in about 15 minutes it was warm showers, dry clothes, and snacks.



The sisters were waiting. *The regular ferry from Crisfield had cancelled that afternoon, presumably due to heavy weather... but the "mail boat" braved it and the ladies were able to secure passage on her. Go figure!*



Day 2 – Jenny I. to Ewell, Smith I. – 18 miles
(detour -----)

Smith Island

Smith Island is disappearing like the other islands in the Russel Isles (the first European name, given by Capt. John Smith to the small archipelago spanning the present day MD/VA border). Populations from islands by the names Holland, James, and Poplar had already abandoned their homes generations before. During the last ice age this real estate was part of ridges forming the lower reaches of the Nanticoke River, now a tributary to the Chesapeake Bay, but then to the Susquehanna River. Since we humans, for the most part, find our existence in the warming side of the latest 'ice age', we have been witnesses to rising sea levels and the associated formation then inundation of these islands. The particular chapter of geological history we presently occupy, the 20th and 21st centuries, will encompass their final demise until their existence will only be remembered by aids to navigation marking the residual shoals. But take heart, they shall return! As surely as this current global climate cycle is marching past, another will follow, and once again these pearls will reemerge from the sea. The bigger question is, "Will our far off descendants be around to witness that happy event?"

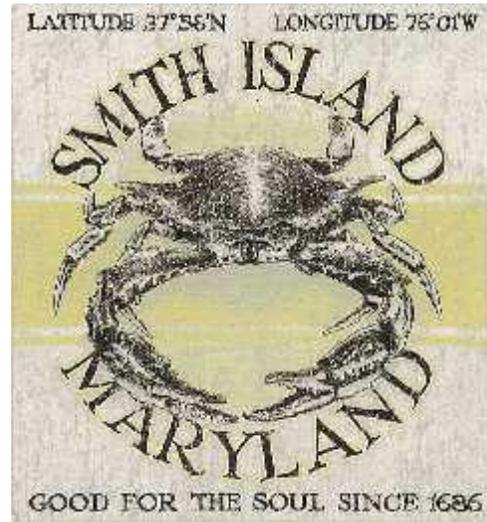
In our spec of time, which we understandably consider so important, there remains only two of these islands (with some variation) occupied 24/7 by mankind, albeit, a very sturdy and enchanting human stock; waterman who wrest their living from the bay bottom, and their amazing mates who raise their broods without many of the conveniences shared by their 'neighbors' a mere dozen miles away across the Chesapeake. Smith I., lying principally in Maryland, is the 'junior partner' to the larger and more populous Tangier I. to the south in Virginia. General access to Smith Island is only by daily packet boats carrying mail, supplies, passengers, and the "cash crop", soft shell crabs. Students commute to high school and others to jobs on the 'eastern shore' mainland.

Sounds idyllic? Probably so, except when weather decides against it!

So unique are the circumstances of these isolated maritime communities, at least on the east coast of the USA, that a 20th century tourist trade developed which the Adventure Duo and their transportation companions were availing themselves to. Many tourists arrive and leave the same day so overnight accommodations are few and declining. The Js considered themselves fortunate to secure lodging at "Susan's on Smith Island", not only for the pleasant comforts, but also the wonderful hostess, Susan Evans, a 13th generation Smith islander and descendent of John Evans, one of the two original occupants who began farming on the island in 1686. If you know nothing about the history of your surroundings upon arrival, Susan is a great resource for correcting that deficiency. Literature and other information, covering her family, Island history, and community life abound in her home.

And beyond literature, Susan herself is a wealth of

interest regarding what it is like growing up and living in this unique environment. For more information on Susan and her B&B try <http://susansonsmithisland.com/> and for the island itself try <http://smithisland.org/> .





After a stormy arrival and subsequent hot shower, J2 toured the town of Ewell, the ‘population center’ of Smith I. It was high tide and the **encroaching bay flooded the streets** and lawns mandating boots if wet feet were to be avoided.

Most of the sights were what would be expected for a waterman community but the surprise is a **Methodist Church** that would make



a mainland community proud (remember, all construction material must arrive by boat!) The presence of this handsome building is explained by the work of an early Methodist evangelist by the name of Joshua Thomas who made his home on the island in the early 1800s and began holding camp meetings. These annual revivals continue uninterrupted to this day. A ‘tabernacle’ replaced the more elaborate and traditional camp meeting facility destroyed by fire decades before. This legacy has left its mark on the town with religious observance remaining popular. Ewell is also ‘dry’, but the obvious reality is that Smith Island does not escape the influences of the world beyond its fragile shoreline.

Another Smith Island surprise was numbers of pomegranate trees which are normally associated with mild climates. While known to be able to survive some frost, their presence here speaks to the moderating influence of the Chesapeake environment



One of the more problematic issues for residents when the day approaches for abandonment is the disposition of ancestral remains. In some cases, for those islands already on the missing list, graves were exhumed and the contents transported to the mainland for reburial. In other situations the deceased were eventually ‘buried at sea’ by the rising waters.

Aside from history and local color, Smith Island offers paddling and pedaling for amusement. Bicycles abound and appear to be the transportation of choice (in dry weather) although there are a handful of unregistered motor vehicles along with one or two of the registered variety fulfilling official functions. Kayaking trails have been identified along the various channels which now slice and dice the island. Visits to the two other villages, Tylerton and Rhodes Point can be accomplished by boat and bike respectively. Another pastime is bird watching in the Martin National Wildlife Refuge, its remote offshore Chesapeake location making it an ornithologist’s paradise. It contains breeding grounds for pelicans which seem more common than sea gulls.



When arranging the stay, Susan reminded J2 that hers was a bed and breakfast only, but that dinner was available for an extra charge. She advised that up until about 3pm dinner was available 'in town'. The principal eatery being the "**Bayside Inn**"

Knowing that even with good weather a 3pm arrival was unlikely, Susan's dinner offer was selected. In accepting the order she 'apologized' that the menu would consist of crab cakes! That brought laughter from J2 knowing that delicacy was an Adventure Duo favorite.



Susan must be part 'Wonder Woman'. During the day she is employed on the mainland commuting morning and evening in the 'ferry'. When she returns, an artful and tasty dinner appears and the following morning the act is repeated for breakfast.



Of course, no visit to Smith Island would be complete without sampling the famous cake bearing the island's name and which has become the "Maryland State desert". Susan did not disappoint on this count either, for the evening meal was crowned with "**Smith Island Cake**" of her own design and making. In fact a picture displayed proudly in her entrance hallway shows Susan presenting a slice to the Governor himself!

The stay at Susan's on Smith Island was wonderfully convivial and altogether too brief. For the Js it was a very welcome refuge and respite. For **Deb and Sonia**, an adventure and vacation. The impact on these four travelers was reflected in the many comments in Susan's guest book, all expressing a desire to return.





The weather the next day, true to forecast, was little improved with a strong wind out of the east, rain, and white capped swells on the bay. That would equate to a couple of extra hours of paddling in saturating conditions with the four hour commute home not beginning until late in the afternoon. Bottom line, the Js were satisfied with their decision and, rising early, prepared their equipment for transportation in a pickup truck to the town dock for a 7am departure. The kayaks, which were larger than typically transported to and from the island, just squeezed on to the rear deck of the mail packet, sharing space with **the island's cash crop**.

Departure was punctual. Seeing Ewell in the wake was a melancholy sight. You can't visit without coming a little under the island's enchantment; and that, compounded by the knowledge that nature's clock is counting down its remaining existence, imparts strong emotions and a desire to return to Smith Island. It was a Brigadoon moment.



The crossing to Crisfield took just over an hour, the sturdy packet making good speed. While there was nothing fancy about it, the cabin offered shelter against the flying spray on deck. High schoolers commuting back and forth to school from Smith Island must earn their sea legs along with their diplomas.

Arriving at Crisfield, the kayaks and gear were off loaded and a hug received from Susan before she drove off to work in her 'mainland' car. Promises were made to return again to Smith Island before the travelers entered J1's SUV and began their trek back to their own 'reality'.

*What doesn't kill you makes you stronger
Stand a little taller*

....lyrics from Kelly Clarkson