

DESTINATIONS

# Looking for New England

With its intriguing history, wild natural beauty and excellent food and drink, Cape Cod's appeal is all-embracing



57



WORDS GUY DIMOND

The dramatic red clay Aquinnah Cliffs are one of Martha's Vineyard's must-see tourist attractions

**A** lengthy spit of sand and hollows jutting into the Atlantic, Cape Cod has long been a place of ebb and flow. The landscape itself seems transient, the shores of breezy dunes and freshwater kettle ponds constantly shifting their boundaries. Created from piles of glacial moraine as the last ice sheet receded, its days are numbered; it now has less than 5,000 years to go before the ocean consumes it. But right now, it's New England's holiday destination for visitors of all stripes: non-stop partying weekenders from Boston and New York, beachcombing families from New England, and plutocrats and presidents who jet in from Washington to their compounds – a tradition begun by the Kennedys. Cape Cod and its two islands – Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket – is a place where you come to meet people, but also to escape; to eat the seaside dishes our grandparents ate, but also to push out the boat with some cutting-edge cuisine.

Most striking of all, though, is the light and the scenery; mile after mile of white sand beaches, backed by the bleached-bone white of clapboard houses and weathered cedar shingles. Eventually you get to Provincetown at the very tip, where the Mayflower first landed before moving on and leaving it for the Nauset Indians. The European settlement of the Upper Cape came much later. →

**The Outer Cape began attracting summer visitors for its isolation and wild beauty during the 1930s**



**ABOVE:** Stars and Stripes decorate a shingle house in Provincetown, Cape Cod, which was the site of the Mayflower's landing in 1620

## GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Boston's Logan airport is the best arrival point. There are hourly buses to Hyannis, transport hub of the Mid Cape, and a good express ferry running to Provincetown. To get to the two main islands, the Steamship Authority runs regular ferry trips for foot passengers from several ports; cars must be booked in advance.

The simplest and best way to explore the Cape is by car; it's a two-hour drive from Logan airport to the port of Hyannis, three or more to Provincetown. Hertz has an airport branch with very fast pick-up and returns when you sign up for the (free) Gold Plus membership. One week's hire via [hertz.co.uk](http://hertz.co.uk) costs from around US\$393 (£287).



**LEFT:** Main Street in Harwich Port, Cape Cod, offers everything from boutique shops to fine dining  
**RIGHT:** Nantucket's Brant Point Light Station overlooks the harbour



restored by the Cape Cod Modern House Trust (ccmht.org), a small charity that rents the properties out by the week during the summer.

"There was a flourishing of innovative modernist architecture, built as experiments. The peak of this was in the 1940s and by the 1970s there were 100 or so modern homes. Many of them survive; some are privately owned, others, like the Trust's, are leased from the National Park Service," says Peter McMahon, founding director of the Cape Cod Modern House Trust.

The pleasures of the Outer Cape are simple yet exquisite; the striking sunsets, swimming in its ponds (freshwater lakes) and hiking in wooded trails along what is now the Cape Cod National Seashore, a huge nature reserve. Follow this northwards and you eventually reach Race Point, with the wild Atlantic →

For the most impressive historical buildings of all, take the day ferry to the neighbouring island of Nantucket

"Since the 19th century, American artists, from the amateur to the avant-garde, have been drawn to Provincetown as a site of inspiration," says Christine McCarthy, executive director of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. "The reasons for that are many and complex, however the lure of the sea and the desire to experience its natural beauty are certainly at the forefront.

"This spit of land serves as a haven for all that is creative and unique, spiking at 100,000 visitors in the summer months, which drops to 3,000 year-round residents during the off season. For those who are lucky enough to call Provincetown home, the off season is magical."

Magical indeed. My first visit was 20 years ago, with a new American girlfriend who wanted to show me her childhood holiday spots. I was bowled over by the beauty of the historic

Cape buildings, the dazzling beaches and the chumminess of the locals. We returned the following year. I was introduced to her family. Eventually, we married. We've been going there nearly every year since – most recently with my extended US family – each season exploring something new: the seafood, the craft brewery bars, the cycle tracks, the secluded walks, the islands. We've researched buying a home and moving there, and we may do yet. The winters might be tough, but the summers are long and idyllic, making the Cape hard to resist.

**MODERNISM & BEACH HOMES**

Provincetown might be a tourist honeypot during the summer, but its hinterland is still remarkably unspoilt. The Outer Cape, as this furthest reach is called, began attracting summer visitors for its isolation and wild beauty during the

1930s. Momentum grew as Boston bohemians bought land cheaply during the Depression years, and fixed up shacks as summer homes. Then things took a rather different direction in the summer of 1937, when Walter Gropius, founder of Bauhaus and then a recently appointed professor at Harvard University near Boston, stayed on the Cape and hosted a reunion of European émigrés who had fled the Third Reich; he started a trend. This community returned for summer holidays. These modernist architects and artists began building holiday homes on the shores around Wellfleet, while building was relatively unrestricted. Some of these homes have been acquired and carefully



**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT:** The Envoy Hotel; Kugel/Gips House; Summercamp; Nobnocket Boutique Inn

**WHERE TO STAY**

**THE ENVOY HOTEL**

Located near the airport in Boston, the Envoy Hotel caters for business during the week and leisure visitors at weekends. The rooftop bar, with its wonderful views of the resurgent Seaport District, attracts long lines of glam wannabes in the evenings; hotel guests can walk straight in. From US\$254 (£195) per night. [theenvoyhotel.com](http://theenvoyhotel.com)

**CAPE COD MODERN HOUSE TRUST**

The trust currently has three historic buildings near Wellfleet that can be rented by the week: the Kugel/Gips House, Weidlinger House and Hatch Cottage. Prices vary from US\$2,750 (£2,095) to US\$3,750 (£2,857) per week, June to September. [ccmht.org](http://ccmht.org)

**NOBNOCKET BOUTIQUE INN**

On Martha's Vineyard in the town of Vineyard Haven, this boutique hotel has been tastefully renovated by its English owners. Rooms are spacious, and attention to detail is exemplary. Two-night minimum stay in high season with breakfast; from US\$350 (£269) per night. [nobnocket.com](http://nobnocket.com)

**SUMMERCAMP**

In Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, this historic hotel has been given a playful makeover with a summer camp theme. Facilities are far from spartan though, and Oak Bluffs' bars and restaurants are a stroll away. Two- or three-night minimum stay in high season; from US\$329 (£253) a night. [summercamphotel.com](http://summercamphotel.com)

## WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Menus on the Cape tend to cater for nostalgic New Englanders, comprising clam chowder, oysters, fried clams, lobster rolls and "scrod" (cod). There are now six microbreweries on the Cape, including the Naukabout Beer Company ([naukabout.com](http://naukabout.com)), which has an atmospheric tap room (bar) in Mashpee. Here is my pick of the scores of Cape restaurants I've tried recently.

### LOWER CAPE

When you're driving the length of the Cape, these two new diners are worth seeking out. Chatham Filling Station ([chathamfillingstation.com](http://chathamfillingstation.com)) on Route 28 has a retro Americana look, but a modern take on Southern cooking; try the grits (like polenta), the linguica (a Portuguese-style sausage) or a popover (Yorkshire pudding). Sunbird Kitchen ([birdinthesun.com](http://birdinthesun.com)) on Route 6A in Orleans is one of the few hipster-style canteens on the Cape, with a menu that wouldn't be out of place in Brooklyn; banh mi rolls, excellent kimchi and fish tacos.

### PROVINCETOWN

For the best array of bars and tourist restaurants on the Cape, head to Provincetown. If you want a fast and inexpensive

bite to eat, The Canteen ([thecanteentown.com](http://thecanteentown.com)) is styled like a pop-up with its outdoor bench seating, but is now a fixture for its excellent breakfast dishes such as shakshuka, lunches of lobster rolls and evening cuisines ranging from Mexican to Japanese. For light meals and drinks, Strangers & Saints ([strangersandsaints.com](http://strangersandsaints.com)) has Mediterranean-inspired dishes and is a great vantage point for Commercial Street. Nearby Spindler's ([spindlersptown.com](http://spindlersptown.com)) offers a tasty New England menu.

### MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Garde East ([gardeeast.com](http://gardeeast.com)) in Vineyard Haven has it all: a great harbour view, slick service and modern dishes, such as raw scallop with dried squid ink and olive oil caviar.



62 FROM TOP: The taproom at the Naukabout Beer Company; Chatham Filling Station; lobster roll

and its unforgettable beaches on one side and Provincetown tucked away in the shelter of Cape Cod Bay on the other side.

### EXPLORING THE CAPE

Cape Cod's high season is between Memorial Day (the last Monday in May) and the end of July. Provincetown is bold and busy, but there are a score of other towns, all with very different characters, to explore along the length of the Cape. On a map the Cape looks like a raised arm, and the "elbow" is called the Lower Cape; this is where the smart money builds homes in Chatham, Brewster and Harwich. The Lower Cape is also very popular with Boston and New England families renting local homes by the week, having barbecues and toasting s'mores in their backyards. It's perfect for family holidays, with beaches, summer activities and affordable public golf courses,

RIGHT FROM TOP: A boardwalk at Chatham, Cape Cod; one of Nantucket's cobbled streets

including Dennis Pines ([dennisgolf.com](http://dennisgolf.com)) and Cranberry Valley ([cranberryvalley.golf](http://cranberryvalley.golf)). Most of the Cape's railways closed down long ago, but the quiet tracks have been converted into some of the best cycle trails you will find anywhere, with smooth surfaces running through the beautiful landscapes, past cranberry bogs and the occasional café and bike hire spot.

The many beaches and walking trails are sensational. Among my favourites are Nauset Beach for its ten miles of unspoilt sand and dunes; Seymour Pond and Long Pond for their swimming; Sandy Neck and Wing's Island for beach walks; and the many cycle trails around Race Point.

To get a flavour of how it was before the visitor centres and car parks were



built, Henry David Thoreau's book *Cape Cod* describes the wild roses, huckleberries, beach plums, songbirds and people he met during his many visits in the 1850s. Nowadays, the closer you get to Boston the more you feel the influence of that city, with day-trippers and heavier traffic. Take a tip: when driving, stick to Route 6A which is slower and snakes through picturesque, historic towns such as Sandwich, Dennis and Brewster.

### ROOTED IN HISTORY

Local names around Cape Cod are a mix of Native American, colonial British and the occasional misnomer or mystery. Atlantic cod (known locally as "scrod") was a huge part of the early economy of Massachusetts, hence Cape Cod. But the largest island off Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, has neither a Martha nor a vineyard, though it did have a lot of wild vines when it was described by Europeans in the 1600s; some think the name derives from this. These days it's a big summer destination for vacationing New Englanders. The best way to get there is by the Steamship Authority ferry as a foot passenger, then use the frequent local buses that criss-cross the island.

In some ways Martha's Vineyard is like the mainland part of the Cape in microcosm, with three distinct towns. Vineyard Haven in the main port is home to chi-chi shops and restaurants, but no bars. The Puritan influence can still be felt in some parts of the Cape, and in Vineyard Haven alcohol can only be served with food. For this reason, nearby Oak Bluffs

has tended to attract a younger crowd as it permits bars.

Oak Bluffs is considerably less buttoned-up now than it was in the 1830s, when it started out as a campground for week-long Christian gatherings, whose members would participate in religious meetings lasting several hours a day. Those early campgrounds were teetotal, and men and women slept in large tents provided by Methodist church sponsors, the genders divided by a curtain for modesty.

As the years went on, visiting families expected more comfort; the last tent was unpegged in 1914 but, by that time, more than 300 wooden cottages had been built, corralled around a central tabernacle. These "gingerbread cottages" are well preserved, whimsically decorated and brightly coloured; the connection to the church remains, but the ban on drinking is now relaxed, as an evening stroll down the adjacent main street, Circuit Avenue, will confirm.

While the visitors to the mainland of Cape Cod are predominantly Boston WASPs or of white European descent, the diversity of Oak Bluffs is noticeable; generations of African-American church-goers have visited the town, and the beach still known as the "Inkwell" became a destination for black holidaymakers. In more recent times, the Obamas holidayed nearby.

Further around the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Edgartown is worth a visit for its splendid architecture; it was once a whaling port, so the owners and sea captains could afford good homes. The 17th-century Cape Cod look was aged grey cedar shingles,

but clapboard became popular later on. "Saltboxes" were more cottage-like, while the Georgian homes were grander and more elaborate. The Cape's signature wild roses, day lilies and blue hydrangeas still garland many such homes.

### A WHALE OF A TIME

For the most impressive historical buildings, take the day ferry to the neighbouring island of Nantucket. Smaller than Martha's Vineyard, it has lately become one of the "it" islands of the super-rich; the tiny airport is second only to Boston Logan in Massachusetts for the number of daily flights hosted, but here it's private jets and charters bringing visitors to their \$15 million homes and private pools. The island's economy is largely kept afloat by these part-time residents, many of them based in Washington DC or New York.

The grandest town there, the eponymous Nantucket, has always been affluent, its wealth accrued while it was the whaling capital of the world. The indigenous Wampanoag people taught the white settlers how to hunt whales, which was the genesis of the industry that eventually saw Herman Melville set the opening of *Moby-Dick* in the town.

Back on shore, huge mansions went up – some with the "widow's walk" atop the roof, a railed platform that afforded a view of the ocean and returning vessels. Nantucket's streets are still cobbled, and they traverse a remarkably well-preserved town.

To see the most pristine of Nantucket's early European settlements, take a tour bus to the village of Siasconset (pronounced "Scone-set"), where the 17th-century houses are built close together, and more modestly. Time and tide has now washed away the details of these early settlers, just as the drag queens of Provincetown or the preppy students nervously buying their first (legal) beers will one day be forgotten as the restless sea reclaims this temporary land. **BT**