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# DOWN BY THE SEA

THERE ARE TWO SIDES TO CAPE COD: ONE A SOPHISTICATED ISLAND THAT'S BIG ON CONSERVATION, THE OTHER A QUIRKY BEACH TOWN OF ARTISTS AND POETS - BOTH A TOES-IN-THE-SAND SLICE OF THE ALL-AMERICAN ESCAPE

BY PETER BROWNE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SQUIRE FOX







FOR CENTURIES THE CURVED FINGER OF CAPE COD has reached out into the cold Atlantic from the Massachusetts mainland to beckon sailors to its shores. The very tip of this tentative sand spit – a watery world of reflective marshland and lagoons – is where the pilgrims first landed in 1620, stumbling off the *Mayflower* after 66 days at sea. Before long they had settled across the calm waters of Cape Cod Bay at Plymouth, from where they would build the foundations of the New World. But this ephemeral place was where it all started, so it’s got a lot to answer for, and live up to.

That such a heavy burden of historic responsibility should alight on this evanescent isthmus is one of life’s sweet ironies. By rights the peninsula, which in some places seems to narrow to a gossamer-like thread, should have long ago disappeared, sucked up and spat out by the tempestuous seas that batter its exposed eastern flank. And yet here it is, as beautiful and vulnerable as it ever was.

I first came to Cape Cod some 20 years ago when living in Manhattan and, like millions of others before and after me, soon went off in search of somewhere more comforting and less confrontational. Of course, New York’s Long Island has served as just such a safety valve for generations of Manhattanites, and there are similarities with Cape Cod in its dune-backed beaches and in the immaculate clapboard houses of the Hamptons. But it cannot match the wild eloquence of Cape Cod, Boston’s seaside playground escape 200 miles further north.

The fact that great swathes of the Cape remain untouched by development can be attributed to its citizens’ almost-religious zeal in the pursuit of historic preservation. That, and the efforts of

John F Kennedy, who returned to his family home in Hyannis Port each summer of his life. ‘I always come back to Cape Cod and walk on the beach when I have a tough decision to make,’ he said. ‘The Cape is the one place I can think and be alone.’

Kennedy had noted the threat to the Cape’s fragile ecosystem when developers began circling in the 1950s, and in the summer of 1961, just six months into his presidency, he signed a bill creating the Cape Cod National Seashore to safeguard 40 miles of wild Atlantic coast for future generations. Thanks to him, there are six federally protected beaches on Cape Cod, all devoid of umbrella sellers and paraphernalia, each retaining a sense of splendid isolation and solitude, even in the crowded high summers.

THE WEALTHY ISLAND ENCLAVES of Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket off the south coast of Cape Cod are almost entirely responsible for creating and promoting the region’s preppy lifestyle of chinos, clam bakes and sunny days spent under sail. Yet the islands command allegiance to one or the other, but seldom, if ever, to both.

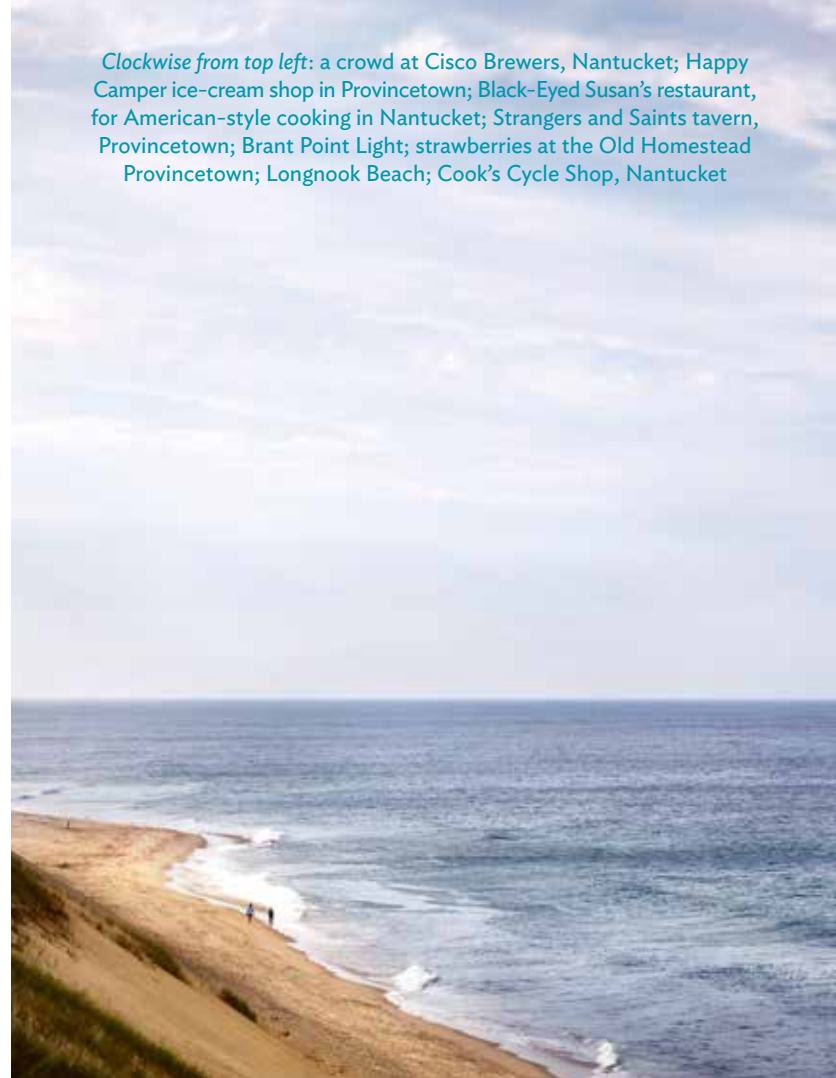
Martha’s Vineyard, 20 miles by nine at its widest point, is twice the size of Nantucket and just four miles from the mainland. Built on bedrock rather than the northern Cape’s shifting sand, with an undulating interior and three distinctive towns, it feels altogether more grounded than Nantucket, which is half the size and retains about it an enchanting quality that closely accords with the National Seashore. The name Nantucket translates from the native Wampanoag language as ‘faraway place’ and, 30 miles out to sea, so it still seems. To my mind, it offers a distillation of the Cape, only

*Above from left: Sea Urchin cottage, Provincetown; watermelon at the Old Homestead Provincetown. Opposite, clockwise from top left: breakfast at Eben House; the owners of Pop + Dutch, Provincetown; Nantucket’s wooden houses; Longnook Beach. Previous pages, Steps Beach, Nantucket*





Clockwise from top left: a crowd at Cisco Brewers, Nantucket; Happy Camper ice-cream shop in Provincetown; Black-Eyed Susan's restaurant, for American-style cooking in Nantucket; Strangers and Saints tavern, Provincetown; Brant Point Light; strawberries at the Old Homestead Provincetown; Longnook Beach; Cook's Cycle Shop, Nantucket







a more pristine version of any current singing of it, a fond memory of what this place once was, at least in the American imagination.

On Nantucket in the early morning, before the sun heats up in its own sweet time, the island is often wrapped in a shawl of pearl-grey mist, the skies above blanketed in low, leaden clouds. Seagulls cry; the clear salt air steals kisses on cold, flushed cheeks. And then... a crescendo of awakening as the first beams of light break through to bounce off iridescent ponds and sandbanks, washing everything in what local artists will tell you is one of the Cape's greatest assets: an innocence and clarity to the light.

Nothing assaults the eye on Nantucket. Its stately, weathered beach houses appear as ghostly widows through the mist, uniformly dressed in cedar shingle the colour of moonlight, the mophead hydrangeas in front of them voluminous confections in shades of lapis blue and pale pink. There is only one road to speak of. It loops around the island's salt-marsh interior past little settlements with wistful Wampanoag names – Sesachacha, Quaise, Shawkemo – linking the charming village of Siasconset (known always as 'Sconset) in the far east with Nantucket town in the centre, before coming to an abrupt end at Madaket beach, where sunsets puddle obligingly on the horizon.

Everyone bikes everywhere here and cycle paths radiate out from Nantucket town itself, along sandy trails to the southern beaches of Surfside and Cisco. Only the remote outpost of Wauwinet stands sentinel in the far north, after which the landmass, such as it is, dissolves into a filament of windswept sandbanks with Great Point Lighthouse at its most distant, exposed point.

By the mid-1800s, Nantucket was the whaling capital of the world. From here, vessels would set sail on hunting expeditions to the Pacific, returning years later laden with sperm oil. But the arrival of the railroad in New Bedford on the mainland, with faster, direct connections to consumers, signalled the beginning of the end, and the discovery of crude oil and electricity did the rest. For more than a century the island slid into a sort of decorous decline, untroubled by the outside world, except for the wind and the waves.

The isolation saved a significant number of pre-Federal buildings from destruction, each now documented, celebrated and protected by vigilant members of Nantucket's powerful historic society. The town's cobbled streets, built with the rocks and soil used as ballast on whaling ships, are lined with grand Greek-revival buildings and mansions and modest clapboard church steeples; privet hedges and lawns are clipped with a precision to gladden the hearts of obsessive compulsives everywhere.

And from everywhere the people come: WASP weekenders from Boston; landlocked Midwesterners attracted like lemmings to the sea; Californians hungry for a hit of history. In the Cape, the party lasts all summer – from Memorial Day in May to Labor Day in September – when private jets and Cape Air hoppers keep the little airport humming and the streets are backed up, bumper-to-bumper, with off-island licence plates. High season holds both frustrations and merits; its popularity ensures an air of fun and busy bars and restaurants, but it also requires careful planning to avoid the worst of the crowds. For me, as the years advance and my patience recedes, the Cape's finest hours are to be had in



*Above from left: staff member Stefan Piscitelli and blueberry pie at Happy Camper. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a vintage car at The Wauwinet; The Old Homestead Provincetown; a Lost Warriors mezcal cocktail at Strangers and Saints; Provincetown's neon-lit Lobster Pot restaurant*





April and early May, with the promise of spring, or September through to Halloween, when there is a bite in the air, the foghorns sound and the light is low and kind.

THERE IS A MUSEUM BUILT IN President Kennedy's memory in Hyannis Port, and guided walks take visitors past Kennedy-related buildings and statues, but the Cape Cod National Seashore is JFK's living legacy. Stretching from Chatham to Provincetown, it takes in 44,000 acres of coastline, spits, lagoons, salt marshes, forests and pastures. There are six thriving towns and ancient burial grounds of Wampanoag and Nausets Indians. Shipwrecks lie shattered on the Atlantic seabed, and even today debris from these vessels washes up onto its long, empty beaches to be picked at by inquisitive gulls.

Around Provincetown, way up on the tip of Cape Cod, there are simple wooden huts in the shifting sand dunes. Built as shelters for fishermen and sailors, they have weathered centuries of snowstorms and hurricanes to serve as rudimentary retreats for artists and writers, most notably in the 1940s and 1950s, when Provincetown's reputation as a bohemian artists' colony was in its pomp. The playwright Eugene O'Neill lived here for eight years until 1924; Jack Kerouac, Tennessee Williams and Jackson Pollock all followed on their long summer breaks; Edward Hopper lived down the road in Truro and Norman Mailer, who wrote *Tough Guys Don't Dance* in his red-brick house on Commercial Street, died here in 2007.

Like Nantucket, Provincetown is immensely proud of its historic associations. It is dominated by the towering Pilgrim Monument, a granite campanile completed in 1910 to commemorate the arrival of the *Mayflower*. Yet it has a more random and ramshackle charm than Nantucket, and is famously gay-friendly, embracing the unconventional and more flamboyant members of American society, here not judged on old family names but on the height of a beehive hairdo, say, or complexity of a tattoo sleeve.

The town, which is only a couple of blocks wide, is divided into two parts, the West and the East Ends, with MacMillan Wharf in the middle, where ferries from Boston come in and the tourist whale-watching boats head out. From the wharf, most visitors turn left onto Commercial Street and go west, where the majority of restaurants, bars and souvenir shops are; the more bohemian-inclined


turn right for the quieter, leafy East End, where there are art galleries and guest houses in shingled and gabled old houses with little front porches.

On warm summer nights the galleries of the East End get together to host open exhibitions, when visitors and residents mingle over paper cups of wine and meander between the different shows; up in the West End the promenade is more raucous but no less egalitarian, with Cher impersonators commingling happily with Boston matrons and wide-eyed kids from Mississippi.

The National Seashore reserve begins where Provincetown ends: to the north is the isolated lighthouse at Long Point, to the west lies predominantly gay Herring Cove and the wider, straighter (in all senses) Race Point beach further along. Linking them, as on Nantucket, there are cycle paths that wind along the grassy dunes, scented by pine trees and salt air, past open salt marches and through shady, blessedly cool beech forests.

Here, lifeguards watch over the Atlantic breakers from their high wooden perches, weathered silver-grey against the China-blue sea. Clear across the ocean lies Lisbon, with no landfall between. It was along this stretch that Guglielmo Marconi sent the first public, two-way transatlantic wireless message – from President Roosevelt to King Edward VII – linking the two continents, old and new, in 1903. The towers he built for that purpose have disappeared, dismantled in 1920, but there is a beach named after Marconi at Wellfleet, 14 miles south of Provincetown. Memorials are big in these parts.

Jack Kennedy learnt to sail at Hyannis Port in the *Victura*, a 25-foot Wainno Senior sloop his parents gave him for his 15th birthday. The all-wood boat set sail on Nantucket Sound every year after that, sometimes on contemplative solo trips, but more often than not with a flotilla of Kennedy kids hanging off the side.

In 1980, the *Victura* was laid to rest at the John F Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, where each summer it is displayed on the lawn overlooking Massachusetts Bay. The boat, which is now 86 years old, was built by Crosby Yacht Yard on Cape Cod, where it returns each winter to be maintained and stored until the following spring. The boat builders wouldn't have it any other way; preservation, continuity and the sea are what lie at the heart of Cape Cod. 

## THE BEST OF THE CAPE

### WHERE TO STAY

Nantucket Island Resorts comprises the classic **White Elephant** hotel (doubles from about £160), family-friendly **White Elephant Village** (doubles from about £140), set in immaculate grounds right on the harbour, and **Jared Coffin House** (doubles from about £120) in a downtown mansion. [nantucketislandresorts.com](http://nantucketislandresorts.com). The resort's **Wauwinet hotel** (doubles from about £140) in the remote north-east overlooks Nantucket Bay and boat transfers are laid on in summer from Nantucket town (for a full review see Gold List 2018 at [cntraveller.com](http://cntraveller.com)). [wauwinet.com](http://wauwinet.com). **Greydon House** (doubles from about £115) opened in summer 2016 and has quickly attracted attention as the fresh place to stay. [greydonhouse.com](http://greydonhouse.com). There are a number of lovely guesthouses in Provincetown, but Salt Hotels owns two of the best, **Eben House** (doubles from about £125) in a smart 1776 building on Bradford Street, and **Salt House Inn** (doubles from about £95) on quieter Conwell Street. New to Salt Hotels this season are a studio, a two-bedroom cottage and a four-bedroom house. [salthotels.com](http://salthotels.com). Over in the East End, there's the beautifully curated **Old Homestead Provincetown** (from about £2,140 per week), a two-bedroom house that's available to rent. [theoldhomesteadprovincetown.com](http://theoldhomesteadprovincetown.com)

### WHERE TO EAT

NANTUCKET It's worth standing in line at **Black-Eyed Susan's** for the brunch: sourdough French toast with caramelised pecans and Portuguese egg scramble. Seafood joint **Cru** is the place for Champagne and oysters with a waterfront view. Get your Stumptown Java fix at **Roastd**, a new café that also sells candles, lotion and vegan fudge. Set in what feels like a barn, **Straight Wharf Restaurant** serves island food including spice-crusted hake with cauliflower tabbouleh and individual clam bakes. At the **Club Car** a retrofitted railway carriage has morphed into a smart bistro with a menu that includes roast broccolini with tahini and dates. PROVINCE TOWN Order lobster rolls or cod *bahn mi* at **The Canteen**, a summer shack with a hidden garden. **Joon Bar + Kitchen** serves cocktails and small plates such as duck-confit sliders and wood-fired mushrooms. **Pepe's Wharf** is a P'Town favourite under new ownership – have a Lime Ricky at the bar and watch the world float by. VICTORIA RICCARDI & KEVIN O'SHEA

### GETTING HERE

Cape Cod is easily accessed from Boston by car, bus or plane. **Cape Air** ([capeair.com](http://capeair.com)) flies to Hyannis, Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard & Provincetown.

*Opposite, clockwise from top left: Café Heaven in Provincetown; the Old Homestead Provincetown; the Chanticleer restaurant in Siasconset, which first opened as a teahouse in the early 20th century; Yates and Kennedy design shop in Provincetown*