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ATLANTIC, SWELL!

Hire a car, add a cutesy cottage, fire up the clam bake... and the most *excellent* American beach holiday is all yours in Cape Cod, where sandy East Coast meets ocean surf. Basking in memories of the Kennedys, **Katie Bowman** shares her tide-and-tested guide

Photography: **Troy House**



Claws for thought: lobster lunch with beer at Landfall, in Woods Hole — the oldest restaurant on the Cape. Opposite, Falmouth Heights Beach, Falmouth





To summer. In Cape Cod, 'summer' is both a noun *and* a verb. Yes, it's the season when the sun beats down on sandy, wholesome family picnics, when the dahlias bloom, and sales of chilled American Chardonnay spike. But it is also a way of life, a ritual – and it's become one of my favourites. Once school bells across the Eastern Seaboard have rung on the last Friday in June, an excitable beach-bound wave of cars joins the Pilgrims Highway out of Boston, trunks filled with stripey towels, boogie-boards and home-made potato salad. Epic sand dunes await; clam bakes on the beach and firepit s'mores (that's a melted marshmallow plus a cube of chocolate smushed in between two cookies, if you want to try it); and windswept bike rides between cute clapboard villages. This is Kennedy country (JFK and his family grew up on the Cape) and no other corner of the US does the picket-fenced-flag-flying-chino-wearing-sunkissed beach break as stylishly as Cape Cod. Come, join the seaward journey to one of the postcard-prettiest corners of the United States.

In actual fact, Cape Cod is more an appendage than a corner – a crooked peninsula shaped like Popeye flexing his muscles, jutting out from Massachusetts into the choppy Atlantic. If you're feeling flash, you can board a 'puddle-jumper' plane and fly from Boston airport to the Cape in 29 minutes flat. Or, you can catch a ferry from the city straight to good-time girl Provincetown, last town on the Cape and a draw for party-seeking weekenders. Or, like me, you can clamber into a rental car and make the two-hour drive south, tired but brimming with holiday anticipation. To 'summer' in Cape Cod is an American

MARVEL AT THE SEALS' BLUBBERY MAJESTY WHILE THE KIDS SHRIEK WITH EXCITEMENT

institution. Here's how to get it just right.

THE UPPER CAPE

If you're lucky, you'll be woken on day one by seals. Incredibly, some people complain about them, barking like asthmatic Labradors, lolling on their sun-soaked sand bar just offshore. You won't care because you're

jet-lagged anyway, and can marvel at the seals' blubbery majesty while the kids shriek with excitement.

This is Chatham, a timewarp town, red-white-and-blue to its core, and my perfect base for seeing the wilder, craggy Upper Cape (Popeye's forearm), much of which is protected National Seashore. As the Patti Page song *Old Cape Cod* goes (you know the one – 'If you're fond of sand dunes and salty air...'), there are 'quaint little villages here and there', dotted in between vast ribbons of dunes. There's Edward Hopper favourite Truro, all peeling clapboard and seaside charm; Wellfleet, with its vintage drive-in cinema; and bustling Orleans, purveyor of every Cape Cod 'essential', from bucket and spade to lobster-shaped cocktail stirrers. It's the place to rent a bike and begin the Cranberry Bog Rail Trail. This former train line has been turned into an idyllic rural cycle track, dipping in to the shade of pitch pines, then rising up on to wooden bridges over cranberry bogs, and finishing at Coast Guard Beach. There are countless spectacular beaches along this untamed Atlantic stretch: ➤

Ice baby: above, clockwise from top left, chilled moment in Woods Hole; Nantucket wharf; check-in at the Cottages and Lofts at the Boat Basin in Nantucket; telescope overlooking the dunes at Coast Guard Beach in Chatham; little house in Nantucket. Opposite, the Lobster Pot in Provincetown



Marconi, Nauset – all lovely lookalikes, with wide sands, a wooden lifesaver tower, and not much else. But Coast Guard is my favourite and the calmest as it can't be accessed by cars.

When it's time to return the bike, I always wheel past Cap't Cass's seafood shack in Orleans, home to the best lobster roll on the Cape. Cosied up in its own cardboard tray, each roll spills over with giant fleshy lobster chunks, lightly tossed in a divine mayonnaise – a gift from the seaside gods. Every time, my plan is to tuck the roll safely into the bike pannier and cycle to a scenic spot before devouring it – but I never make it out of the car park.

If you are intent on getting this Cape Cod trip spot on, you should return – yawning, happy, slightly sunburnt – to Chatham Bars Inn, a collection of traditional clapboard cottages around a grand house. Its gorgeous, hydrangea-encased veranda is a snapshot of blue-blooded beach life (deck shoes, oysters on ice, strawberry-blond families – the Kennedys, basically) and worth a dinner stop, even if you can't afford the £250-and-up to stay. Every summer weekend, Chatham Bars holds clam bakes on its own beach, while the kids roast marshmallows by the camp fire. Your Cape Cod summer so far? Perfection.

THE LOWER CAPE

Pirate-themed crazy golf, beachfront cabins, and lilo stores as far as the eye can see – the Lower Cape (from Chatham westwards to the mainland) is definitely more 'accessible' than the Upper. I suggest you avoid driving its arterial Route 28 in high summer (lilo land) and map out a network of back roads instead; it might add 20 minutes to your journey but you'll dodge the tat and see the beautiful forested neighbourhoods skirting Hyannis, West Yarmouth and Osterville.

'Accessible', of course, is a polite word for affordable – accommodation here is cheaper and plentiful, from family-friendly motels to cutesy B&Bs. My dollar's on Sea Crest Beach Hotel in North Falmouth, with motel rates yet five-star sunsets (the posh east-facing hotels have to make do with sunrise). In fact, Sea Crest used to be a motel, a sunny '30s one, now updated but still right on the beach. Shoreline real estate in the Cape is priceless, so this place books up quick.

Day trips? There's a ton of them. Woods Hole is the jumping-off point for Martha's Vineyard, Barack Obama's summer island of choice, but a pretty harbour town itself.

'What will you cook up with those crabs tonight?' I once greedily asked a fisherman as he lifted a meaty eight-legged specimen out of his brimming bucket. He eyed me dubiously, before retorting: 'This is my bait.' That's how good Cape Cod fishing gets.

After a mooch around the boat-strung wooden jetties and ice-cream parlours, duck into Landfall for lunch; it could pass for a rickety fishermen's workshop – all wooden hung tiles, buoys and old rope – but is actually the best seafood restaurant in town, with a waterfront view that'll distract you even from your Clams Casino (little neck clams baked with a devilish mix of bacon, shallots and breadcrumbs).

When it's time to move on, take the 28a, not the 28, northwards – a rollercoaster road that shadows the undulations of the coast like a stalker, plummeting wildly in a way no modern road would ever be allowed to. It takes you inches from some lovely old Cape Cod mansions, a regal house on one side of the road, its immaculate pier and obligatory cruiser bobbing on the other (meanwhile, 28 is unfurling in a boring straight line somewhere a few hundred metres east). ➤

LOBSTER TALES

Hankering after a Cap't Cass' lobster roll? The good news is, the cafe is BYO (and staff provide paper cups). The bad news is, opening hours are tight (11am-2pm and 5pm-8pm). It's also cash only.



Push the boat out: yacht moored in Falmouth. Opposite, the Toy Boat store on the wharf at Nantucket



Compass Pond Boat \$62.95

OG Pond Boat \$58.95

Pond Catamaran \$36.95



Pond Pirate \$39.95

Pond Boat \$44.95



Pond Pirate \$39.95

Pond Pirate \$24.95

OG Pond Boat \$29.95

French Tub Boat \$28.95

Tub Boat \$44.95



Tub Pig Boat \$12.95

Tub Cargo Boat \$48.95

Tub Ocean Liner \$40.95

Pond Speed Boat \$48.95



Pond Tug \$34.95

Fishing Boat \$22.95

Tub Pig Boat \$32.95

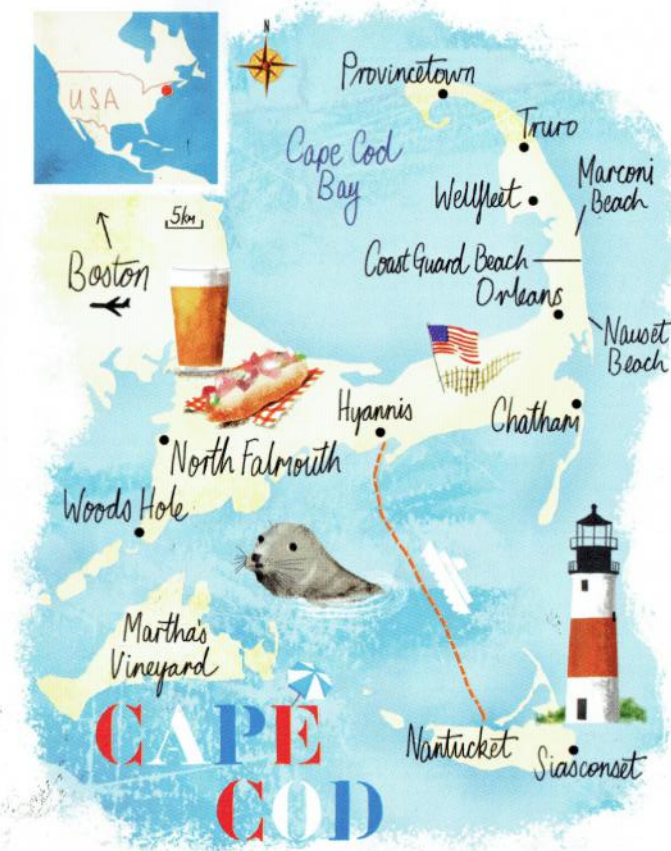
Pond Pig Boat \$32.95

Pond Pig Boat \$32.95

Fish



Cape Cod



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go packaged

America As You Like It (020 8742 8299, americaasyoulikeit.com) can replicate this trip exactly. It has a 10-night fly-drive holiday to Massachusetts from £1,859pp, room only, including return flights from Heathrow to Boston, six nights in Cape Cod, two in Nantucket, and two in Boston staying at the hotels detailed below, and car hire. Or try **Western & Oriental** (020 3553 2958, westernoriental.com).

Go independent

BA (ba.com), **Virgin** (virgin-atlantic.com), **Norwegian** (norwegian.com), and **Delta** (delta.com) all fly direct from London (Heathrow or Gatwick) to Boston — fares start at about £500 return. **Carrentals.co.uk** has a week's car hire (five-door family vehicle), from Boston airport, from £169.

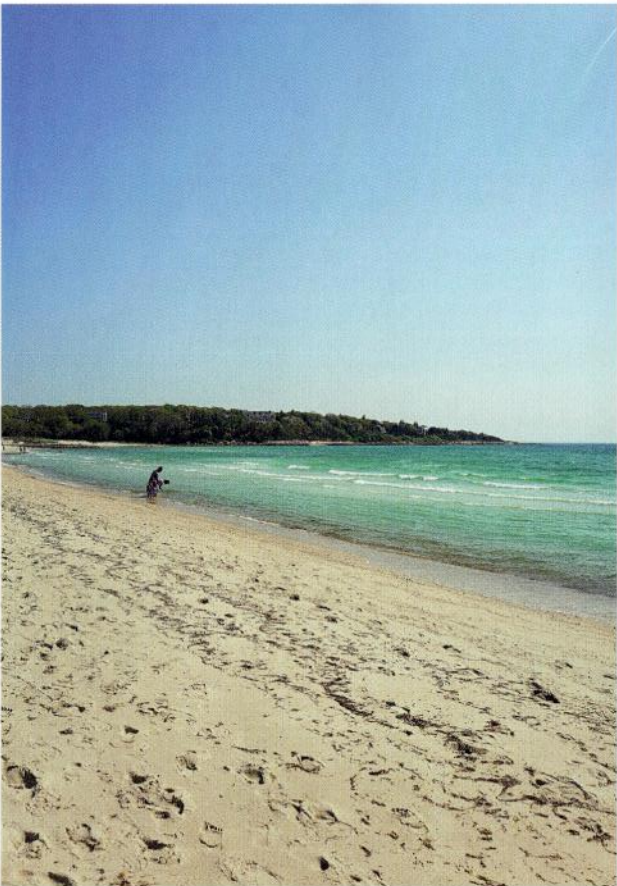
Where to stay

If you can, avoid July and August when hotel rates spike owing to US school holidays; aim for June and

September when the weather is still lovely. **Chatham Bars Inn** (001 508 945 0096, chathambarsinn.com) has doubles from £249, room only. **Sea Crest Beach Hotel** (001 508 540 9400, seacrestbeachhotel.com) has doubles from £68, room only. **Nantucket Island Resorts** (001 508 325 1000, nantucketislandresorts.com) has a selection of places to stay on the island; its self-catering Cottages and Lofts at the Boat Basin start at £113, room only (sleeping two), while its stylish White Elephant hotel has doubles from £154, room only. In Boston, the **Four Seasons** overlooks Boston Common (001 617 338 4400, fourseasons.com/boston; doubles from £406, room only).

Further information

To get to Nantucket, sail from Hyannis (001 508 477 8600, steamshipauthority.com) — the high-speed foot-passenger boat costs from £47pp return (one hour). Or take a car on the vehicle ferry (2hrs 15mins) — prices start at £191 return. For more information, see massholiday.co.uk.



But road trips and clam lunches aside, you need to dedicate a decent wedge of your time to the beach. Where the east shore can be unforgiving, the west – especially this stretch around North Falmouth – is sandy and shallow with that ‘come-on-in’ friendliness of Florida. Beneath Sea Crest’s candy-striped umbrellas, toddlers knock over sandcastles, while retirees bask on loungers, happily engrossed in the latest John Grisham. And when sunset approaches, steel yourself with something strong because it’s a tearjerker...

NANTUCKET

No trip to the Cape is complete without an island adventure. You’ve two to choose from: Martha’s Vineyard or Nantucket. I pick Nantucket, partly since it has such diverse places to stay (Martha’s is all about posh rental homes), but mostly because it’s so damn handsome. Nantucket has its own aesthetic, one that can’t be found anywhere else on Earth, proven by the countless coffee-table books you’ll see across the Cape: *Nantucket Kitchens*, *Nantucket Gardens*, or – a personal favourite – *Nantucket Dogs*. The island’s style is a mixture of tangible things – like its distinctive dyed ‘reds’ clothing that fades to salmon over the decades; or its heartbreakingly pretty pink roses that envelop every lamp-post and postbox; or its weathered timber cottages that scream both shabby and billionaire. But it’s also the intangible: the contented loiter of locals in town; the smell of giant fried shrimp on the air accompanied by the popping sound of a second bottle; and the soft rumble of tyres on cobbles as nobody hurries to go anywhere.

Whether you make Nantucket a day trip or a week’s add-on, the beach that needs most of your attention is

WHEN SUNSET APPROACHES, STEEL YOURSELF WITH A STRONG DRINK BECAUSE IT’S A TEARJERKER...

with a little girl called Caitlin who was selling home-made lemonade for 50 cents a cup. In hindsight ‘bucolic’ is probably underselling Nantucket.

Take a quick snap at blustery Sankaty lighthouse, then pootle on to Siasconset for big waves and bigger panoramas. Somehow, the beach seems too epic ever to get busy (I’ve been in high and low seasons), with great runway-wide sands backed by dunes and nothing but the odd crew-cut of grass. If you’ve forgotten your picnic, the teensy market store will sell you ‘deli meats’, but I say put on your most charming British accent and nab an alfresco table at the Summer House hotel for a life-affirming bowl of chowder or lobster salad. After a third Nantucket pale ale, you might not make it back to the beach...

So, that’s it. Summer on Cape Cod has come to an end. Good news for you, though: while the rest of Massachusetts returns to its offices and classrooms, you can see Boston-in-bloom thanks to the city break you were clever enough to tack on to your beach jaunt. See? We told you we knew how to get this trip just right. ■

preserved-in-aspic Siasconset to the far west. Rent a bike at the harbour and cycle there via the dedicated paths in under an hour. I like to detour via Polpis to ‘up’ the bucolic factor, though you have to beware of crossing turtles – and last trip, I lost half an hour shooting the breeze

Just beachy: above, clockwise from top left, view from the Sea Crest Beach Hotel in Falmouth; red, white and blue window display in Nantucket; tourist store on Highway 6 near Hyannis; lobster roll from the fish market on Nantucket wharf; little Brant Point lighthouse, Nantucket. Opposite, roadside fish’n’ chips in Orleans; local skiff in Falmouth

DRINK ON THE HOOF

If you want the picnic drink to end all picnics, knock up a ‘Cape Codder’: vodka, cranberry juice and a wedge of lime on the rocks in a highball glass (the ‘Rose Kennedy’ adds club soda)