

GEMS OF THE JERSEY SHORE

From Atlantic City to Cape May,
the Garden State's classic seaside strip glimmers
with beaches and boardwalks, casinos and campsites

article and photography by Jeremy and Stephanie Puglisi

The sun is barely above the ocean horizon, and already the Cape May promenade is teeming with cyclists enjoying the scenic 2-mile stretch of paved boardwalk that runs along the beach in this quaint Victorian seaside town at the southern point of New Jersey.

We fall in line on our own bikes, after reminding our boys to stay to the right and avoid sudden stops. Every half mile or so, we depart from the boardwalk to meander through the quiet side streets, packed with charming homes and bed-and-break-

fasts, then circle back around to the seashore. Bicycles are allowed on the promenade until 10 a.m., and we want to enjoy it while we can.

This is our favorite way to start each morning in Cape May, a destination we grew to love as a dating couple and which still calls us back every year now that we have three young children. On some mornings, we follow up our leisurely bike ride with a pancake breakfast at Uncle Bill's Pancake House, a beachfront restaurant staple in Cape May. Other mornings, if we are in the mood for something lighter, we pop into Avalon Coffee Company to grab breakfast sandwiches and fruit cups, eating at the outdoor picnic tables.

We break into our days slowly while vacationing at the Jersey shore. A morning at the beach is meant to be savored, offering warm sun, light breezes and the therapeutic sounds of waves and seagulls.

Originally settled as a whaling and fishing community, Cape May emerged in the mid-18th century as a popular resort destination for Philadelphia's elite. It had become one of America's most famous vacation spots by 1878, when a massive five-day fire destroyed most of the town's homes and businesses. Reconstruction was fast and focused, resulting in a town full of Victorian-style buildings. Throughout the last century, preservation efforts have maintained the architectural integrity of Cape May, and it became a National Historic Landmark in 1976.

Present-day Cape May is a destination that draws in every sort of traveler: the young honeymooners searching for romantic candlelight dinners and moonlit horse-and-buggy rides, the families looking for sandcastle contests and mini golf, and the retired couples hoping to capture beautiful photographs of sunsets and migrating birds.

Towering above the community of Cape May Point, the Cape May Lighthouse invites visitors to climb its 199 steps for a small fee. The lighthouse stays open late on nights with a full moon.



Along Beach Avenue in Cape May, wraparound porches and gingerbread flourishes adorn the Victorian-era dwellings, now mostly bed-and-breakfast inns.



CAMPING IN CAPE MAY

Before owning an RV, we would spend our visits to Cape May in one of the hundreds of bed-and-breakfasts peppered throughout the town. When we bought our first pop-up camper six years ago, we were thrilled to find an amazing assortment of campgrounds and RV parks just outside of the downtown area.

Seashore Campsites, just 4 miles from the Cape May beaches, has emerged as our family favorite, and even though it is a big and bustling place, the landscaping and campsite layout somehow make it feel cozy. We love staying here in September, when the tourists have all gone home but the sun and ocean temperatures are still warm, especially since they keep the pool open until October 1.

About a mile farther away from the ocean, a bit north on U.S. Route 9, is Holly Shores Camping Resort, another family camping favorite. Like many campgrounds along the southern coast of New Jersey, this one has its fair

share of upscale seasonal campsites. The remaining sites are a bit tight, and the best ones are booked far in advance.

On some visits we decide to forgo the pool, spa and organized activities, and stay at the Depot Travel Park, which places us within walking or biking distance of the best shopping and dining in Cape May. It is a great no-frills option, in spite of being a bit quirky. Don't expect to make online reservations or even leave a voice mail. They do not accept credit cards, and guests are required to mail a check within two weeks of booking.

The south Jersey shore has many other appealing options for RV camping (see "Garden State Getaways" on page 60), but we always choose Cape May as our base camp for exploring area attractions all the way up to Atlantic City, 50 miles and less than an hour's drive to the north.

BIRDS, BUTTERFLIES AND BOARDWALKS

The beaches along the southern portion of the New Jersey coast are a diverse bunch, and at times we gravitate toward the ones with bustling boardwalk attractions. The iconic Jersey shore experience includes a Ferris wheel ride, funnel cake and a few games of Skee-Ball in the arcade. You can find all of these things in Wildwood, about 20 minutes north of Cape May. But there you will also find a great many college students and a bar on every corner, so we tend to head a bit farther north to Ocean City, a barrier island with a small

Opened in 1946 and now an Atlantic City icon, White House Subs has served celebrities from Frank Sinatra to the Beatles.



MORE THAN THE SHORE

Beyond pristine beaches and promenades, there's plenty to see and do in the communities that line the South Jersey coast, including the following four diversions.

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE

Cape May County Zoo and Park

609-465-5271, www.cmczoo.com

A visit to this beautiful zoo is absolutely free, and because it is within a county park, you can also enjoy the picnic area, playground and walking trails.

GALLOWAY

Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge

609-652-1665

www.fws.gov/refuge/edwin_b_forsythe

Birders come from all over to see migrating species pass through. Visit the nature center, drive the loop road and hike the trails with binoculars in hand.

MARGATE CITY

Lucy the Elephant

609-823-6473, www.lucytheelephant.org

At 135 years old, America's oldest roadside attraction is also a National Historic Landmark. Tours of this six-story-high wooden elephant run on the half hour.

SMITHVILLE

Historic Smithville and Village Green

609-748-8999, www.historicsmithvillenj.com

This quaint town is packed with shops and eateries, and special events run throughout the year. We love to stop for dinner after a hike at the wildlife refuge, just minutes away.

Another South Jersey icon, Lucy the Elephant was built in 1882 to attract prospective property owners to Margate.



population and sleepy feel.

If you arrive in Ocean City early enough, hop online for fresh homemade doughnuts at either Browns Restaurant or Oves Beach Grill, both situated at the northern end of the 2.5-mile boardwalk. It is a local tradition to argue about which doughnuts are better, and our money is on Browns, but you will have to decide for yourself.

The wide, pristine beaches here are perfect for young children, and at low tide our boys love splashing in the small pools that form along the shoreline. We enjoy our long, competitive games of paddleball on the hard-packed sand. Picking up a Pro Kadima paddle set at one of the sundry shops in town before heading to the beach is a tradition for many returning visitors.

After a long day in the sun, we always head to Ike's Famous Crabcakes for the quintessential seafood-shack experience. The fish and chips are crispy, flavorful and fresh. The crab-cake sandwiches are legendary. We also enjoy the more adventurous

menu items like fish tacos and crab quesadillas.

Our day in Ocean City is never complete until we visit Playland's Castaway Cove, a fixture on the boardwalk for more than 50 years. We purchase our sheets of tickets and rip them up in strips of four and five, laying out the family strategy for riding the Tilt-a-Whirl, Scream Machine, Gravitron and Double Shot. The pirate-theme shooting gallery hasn't changed in decades, and we are instantly transported back to the summers of our youth when we would fork over a pile of dollar bills and fire air rifles at targets for game after game.

Other days we stay closer to the campground, enjoying the beautiful Cape May beaches. You could spend the day at any of the popular beaches that run along the stretch of Beach Avenue, but our favorite place to get sandy requires venturing away from the promenade and driving out to Cape May Point State Park, home of Sunset Beach, the Cape May Lighthouse,

The authors and their sons explore one of three nature trails at Cape May Point State Park.



a World War II bunker and miles of nature trails that meander through wetland marsh and coastal dunes.

We bring our binoculars, and even though our birding knowledge is limited, there is always a stunning amount of wildlife to enjoy at the Cape May Point. We count egrets, herons and ospreys. If it is October, we join the dozens of



▲ World-class comedians, musicians and magicians light up the stages in Atlantic City year-round. Shows sell out, so if you go, be sure to purchase tickets ahead of time.



REACH THE BEACH

To get to the southern Jersey shore from the New Jersey Turnpike, take the Atlantic City Expressway to the Garden State Parkway and drive south. From points south, consider taking the ferry between Lewes, Delaware, and North Cape May (RVs are welcome aboard). Otherwise, take Route 40 to Route 55 South and follow it to where it ends at Route 47 South, then continue to the Garden State Parkway and head south. Cape May is at the end of the parkway, accessible by one of two main bridges.

Cape May-Lewes Ferry

800-643-3779, www.capemaylewesferry.com

New Jersey Tourism

800-847-4865, www.visitnj.org



Down south in South Jersey: Cape May's southern tip is the southernmost point in the state.

birders who gather to watch one of the world's largest hawk migrations, which passes right through Cape May. Hundreds of hawks swarm in the sky above, and as they swoop down, we hear the cacophony of shutter clicks from all the cameras set up to catch an image of one of nature's great shows.

And then there are the monarch butterflies. Tens of thousands of monarchs pass through Cape May every September and October on their way to Mexico. We ask the locals where they seem to be gathering, and often we are directed to the even more remote beaches of the Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area. We walk quietly through the beach plum, bayberry and scrub oak laden trails, and even if we don't spot the monarchs, we are sure to see a variety of migrating songbirds on our hunt.

BEYOND THE BEACHES

After a full day at Cape May Point State Park, we find ourselves walking through the Washington Street Mall, a pedestrian thoroughfare lined with fudge shops, souvenir stores and specialty boutiques. Cape Atlantic Book Company has been providing visitors with great beach reads for decades, and you can find the perfect Jersey shore postcard at Whale's Tale, another longtime resident on the mall.

At the end of the mall, on the corner of Ocean and Washington streets, we spot the horse and buggies from the Cape May Carriage Company. Our boys will beg for a ride, and sometimes we give in, purchasing tickets and settling in to enjoy the 30-minute tour, always packed with fascinating local history. Prior to the boys' arrival in the world, we loved a good ghost tour and can't wait to

enjoy one again in the future.

On other evenings, if we can get away from the kids, we drive north to Atlantic City where the Borgata, Caesars and Tropicana casinos offer us the chance to get dressed up, do a bit of shopping, try out our luck at the gaming tables and then enjoy dinner at one of the many amazing restaurants. We debate endlessly about whether we will eat at Cuba Libre, Morton's or the Borgata Buffet.

Sometimes when we are feeling casual, nothing but a White House special from the famous White House Subs on Arctic Avenue will do. We sit in the orange booths that haven't changed since we were teenagers and scan the hundreds of celebrity photos lining the walls. Afterward, we walk off the sandwiches by strolling through the outlet shops on Atlantic Avenue and drooling over the outdoor gear at Bass Pro Shops.

Cape May is a town for foodies, and we avoid the pub-style restaurants that line Washington Mall and instead make reservations to enjoy surf-and-turf at the Peter Shields Inn, comfort food with a twist at Freda's Cafe or upscale Creole at 410 Bank Street. Many restaurants are BYOB in this town, so we love picking up a few bottles of wine from the Cape May Winery to enjoy with our meals.

After decades of vacationing along the southern Jersey shore, the magic still hasn't worn off for us. The combination of beaches, boardwalks, wildlife, wine and food has kept us coming back again and again. And each time we leave, heading north toward home or south toward another RV destination, we blow our beloved Cape May a kiss and whisper, "See you soon." 🚐



Seashore Campsites and RV Resort

GARDEN STATE GETAWAYS

More than a dozen RV parks dot the Atlantic coast on New Jersey's southern shore. Go to www.goodsamclub.com/travel to search for them all.

CAPE MAY

Depot Travel Park

609-884-2533

www.thedepottravelpark.com

Clean and tidy, this no-frills RV park is perfect for those that want to be near the downtown area of Cape May.

Holly Shores Camping Resort

877-494-6559, www.hollyshores.com

A bustling family-owned campground with fantastic amenities and theme weekends.

Seashore Campsites and RV Resort

877-817-5697, www.sunrvresorts.com

A beautiful family-friendly Good Sam Park less than 5 miles from downtown Cape May. It's also big-rig friendly, but some sites are tricky to get into.

GALLOWAY

Pomona RV Park and Campground

609-965-2123, www.pomonarvpark.com

If you want to be just minutes away from the Atlantic City casinos and restaurants, this top-rated Good Sam Park is your best bet.

OCEAN VIEW

Ocean View Resort

609-624-1675, www.ovresort.com

Midway between Atlantic City and Wildwood, this campground is minutes from the Sea Isle City beaches. It has an on-site pool and lake, as well as a full roster of amenities and activities.

TUCKERTON

Atlantic City North Family Campground

888-229-9776, www.campacn.com

About 30 minutes north of Atlantic City and 15 minutes from the beaches of Long Beach Island, this Good Sam Park has a swimming pool, spray ground and tons of recreation options for families.