



JULY/AUGUST  
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# HOME & AWAY

## *Cape Escape* **Massachusetts' spellbinding national seashore**

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PHOTOS**

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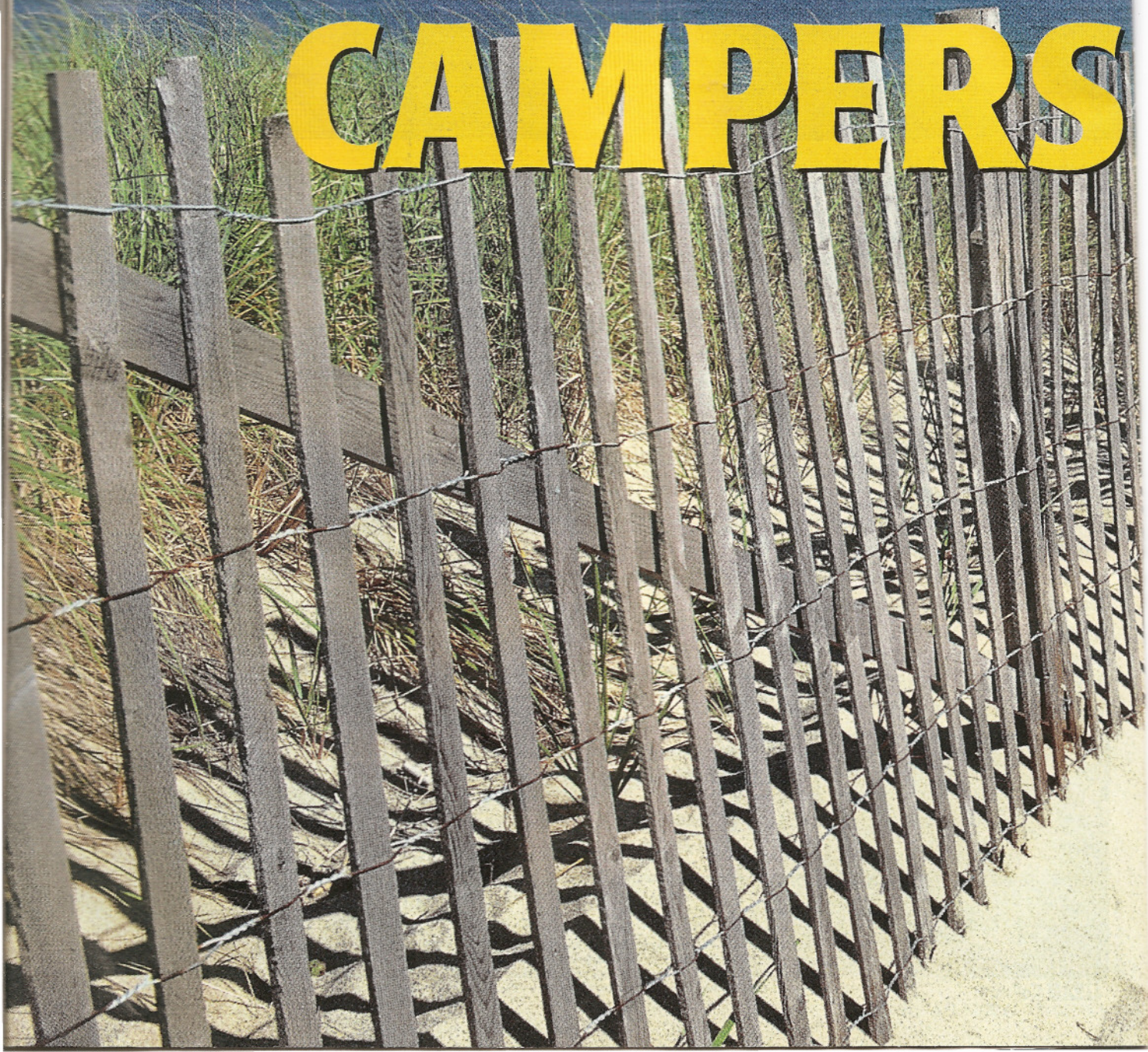
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A family finds beaches, beauty and a bounty  
of wildlife on Cape Cod's National Seashore.

BY MARCIA  
PASSOS DUFFY

# HAPPY CAMPER





*"Cape Cod is the bared and bended arm  
of Massachusetts: the shoulder is at  
Buzzard's Bay; the elbow, or crazy-bone,  
at Cape Mallebare; the wrist at Truro;  
and the sandy fist at Provincetown."*

Henry David Thoreau



Race Point Beach,  
named for the clashing  
waters of the cape and  
the Atlantic, lies at the  
base of a steep dune  
near Provincetown.

MARK GIBSON/THE IMAGE FINDERS



First lighted in 1808, the Chatham Light Station (below) still serves as a navigation aid where Cape Cod divides Nantucket Sound and the ocean. The writer's son and his friend (right) take a break from their enthusiastic two-wheeled exploration of the national seashore.



DAVE G. HOUSER/HOUSESTOCK



## Before my family loaded the van with camping gear and headed for the “wrist” and sandy “fist” of Cape Cod—known today as the Outer Cape—

I had the impression that a vacation there was too expensive, overcrowded and New England's version of Disney World at peak season.

That's because my cape excursions rarely went past the “elbow.” Until, that is, several of our friends convinced us to join them at a campsite in Truro near the Cape Cod National Seashore. While I was leery about camping for a week with our school-age children (we love our indoor plumbing and comfy beds), that one-week vacation six years ago has turned into an annual two-week trek my husband and I, and our children, eagerly look forward to.

The North of Highlands Camping Area is not expensive (currently \$36 a night for a family of four), overcrowded or over-hyped. For two weeks we sleep in our tents under the gnarled scrub pines, enjoy communal meals with our friends and read novels while gently swaying in hammocks. Our kids play cards and board games and ride their bikes endlessly to and from the

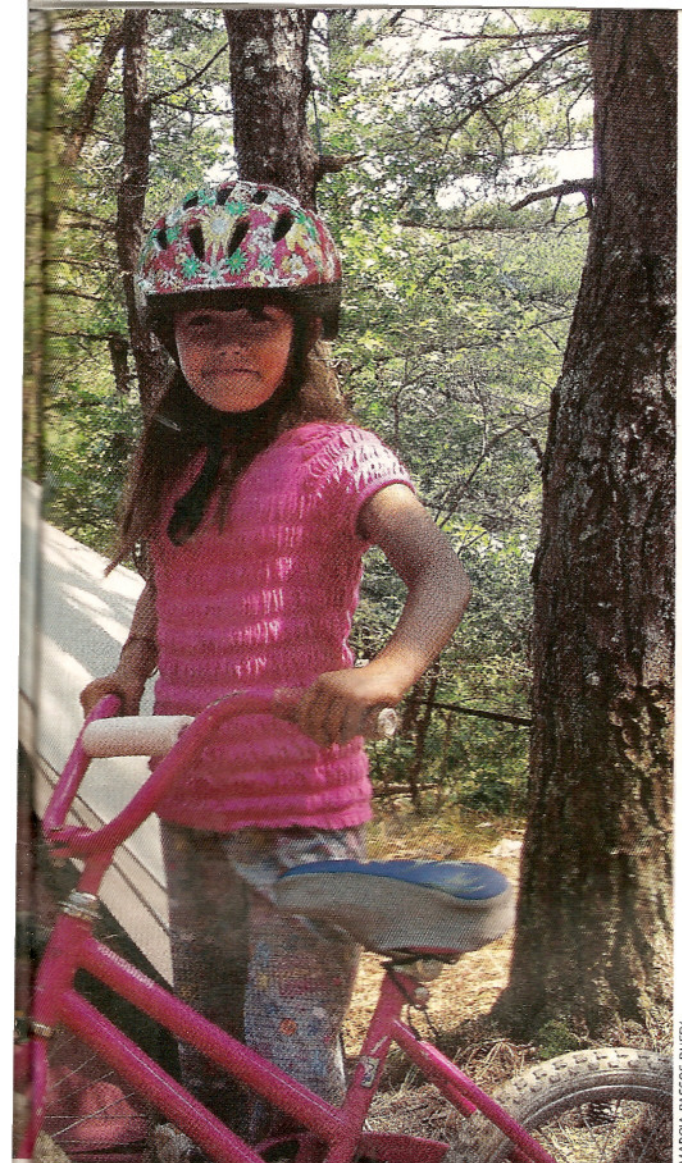
campground's recreation center to buy ice cream and play pingpong. But the highlight of our vacation is the beach. For a short and magical time each summer, our lives are dictated not by the clock but by the high and low tides of the sea because our campsite is a 10-minute walk from the national seashore.

### AN AMERICAN TREASURE, PRESERVED

The Cape Cod National Seashore was preserved for wildlife conservation in 1961 by an act of Congress and President Kennedy, a move that has frozen development to its pre-1960s state.

It is fortunate for the nation to have this legacy because without protection, much of the scenic ocean-front on the Outer Cape would now be reserved for the elite few. Instead, the national seashore—more than 44,000 acres of Atlantic-facing Cape Cod coastline—meanders along 40 undeveloped miles of sandy beaches from Chatham to Provincetown.





MARCIA PASSOS DUFFY

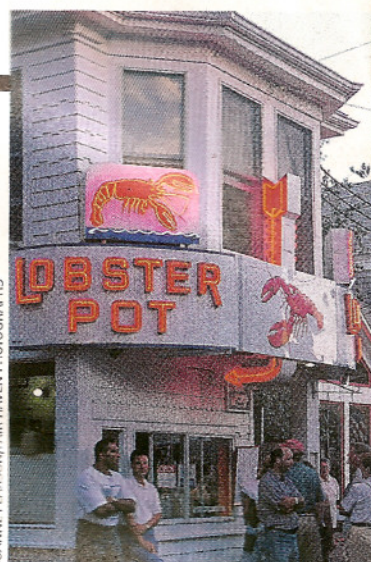
## Daytrip to P'town

Provincetown is only 3 miles long and 2 blocks wide, but no trip to the Outer Cape is complete without a visit to the eccentric, carnival-like atmosphere of "P'town." Once a bustling whaling community and Portuguese seaport, this sandy outpost and well-known gay resort area now thrives by luring tourists with hundreds of small shops, galleries, top-notch restaurants and clubs.

The narrow, European-like main thoroughfare, Commercial Street, is best navigated on foot or by bicycle (or by parking in one of the West End town parking lots and going by shuttle bus). Campers weary of hot dogs and hamburgers can visit the Lobster Pot for a dinner of fresh-off-the-boat seafood. For kid-friendly lunches, visitors should try Bubala's, with its outdoor umbrella-shaded tables, or Karoo Cafe, with its South-African-inspired sandwiches. And they shouldn't leave Provincetown without trying a deep-fried *malasada* (deep-fried dough sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon) at the Provincetown Portuguese Bakery.

Provincetown is also a starting point for many interesting maritime activities—a favorite being whale watching, which is available through Dolphin Fleet or Portuguese Princess Excursions.

Contact the Provincetown Chamber of Commerce at (508) 487-3424 or [www.ptownchamber.com](http://www.ptownchamber.com).



JOANNE HARRINGTON/ART HAVEN PHOTOGRAPHS

While most visitors come for the majestic dunes and invigorating surf on its six public beaches (surfing is allowed outside of lifeguard areas), the CCNS also encompasses 11 nature trails, eight lighthouses, three bicycle trails, dune shacks, picnic areas, scenic overlooks and historical sites. It is also home to an abundance of wildlife: seals, foxes, deer, quail, coyotes (that we often hear howling to one another at night), terns and piping plover.

### A BEACH FOR EVERYONE

But back to the beaches. All towns on the Outer Cape are minutes from a beach, each with a distinct personality—from surfing beaches and the typical crowded-towel-to-towel beaches to those with ample sandbars at low tide and isolated beaches populated only by seals happily bobbing in the waves. Then there are the bay-side beaches, such as Truro's Corn Hill Beach and Wellfleet's Mayo Beach, which are calmer, warmer and perfect for younger children.

Our kids' favorite beach depends entirely on where the sandbars are located. (Because of winter storms,

the summer sandbars vary from year to year.) The rhythm of our days corresponds directly with the tides of the ocean: low tide means exposed sandbars to explore, followed by body-surfing waves as the tide comes back in.

We also take time to explore other beaches within driving distance, such as Marconi Beach in Wellfleet. If we are feeling adventuresome, we might bike to the Province Lands (a five-mile loop that travels through dunes and an old beech forest) and then head for a dip at Race Point Beach or Provincetown's Herring Cove, which is the only beach on the Outer Cape with a food stand.

A daily car pass for CCNS beaches currently costs \$15 a day, but it is only \$3 for those coming in on foot or by bicycle. A season car pass is \$45—an economical idea if plans call for tours of the various beaches during a stay.

### A RICH HISTORY OF PILGRIMS, PIRATES AND SHIPWRECKS

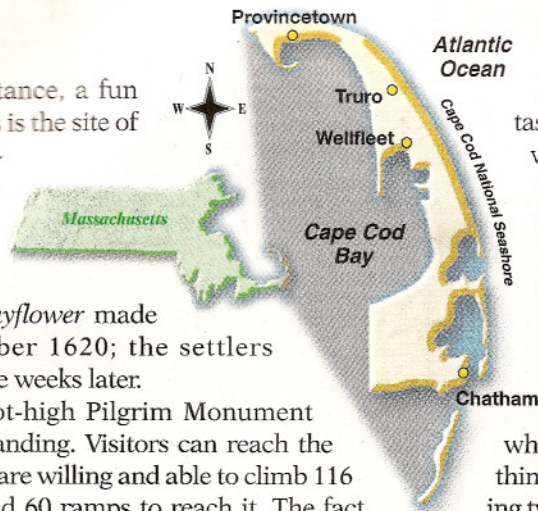
The seashore's ample maritime history offers plenty for kids and adults to explore on less-than-perfect



beach days. For instance, a fun history lesson for kids is the site of the first Pilgrim landing, which, contrary to popular belief, was not Plymouth but Provincetown, Mass., where the *Mayflower* made landfall in November 1620; the settlers reached Plymouth five weeks later.

Today, the 252-foot-high Pilgrim Monument commemorates the landing. Visitors can reach the view at the top if they are willing and able to climb 116 steps and 60 ramps to reach it. The fact that the *Mayflower* landed in Provincetown without incident is notable because in the area's 300-year maritime history, more than 3,000 ships have met their doom on the shoals and shallow sandbars of the cape.

One notorious shipwreck was the pirate ship *Whydah*—with its booty of gold, silver and ivory—which ran into a sandbar on April 26, 1717, and sank off the present-day national-seashore-side of Wellfleet. Some of the salvaged loot can be viewed at the kid-friendly Expedition Whydah Sea Lab and Learning Center at the



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McMillan Wharf in Provincetown. For a taste of more maritime adventures, kids will want to visit the Old Harbor Life-Saving Station, the site of dramatic, historical reenactments of sea rescues (complete with "surfmén" in uniform and equipment such as a cannon, pulleys and buoys).

Visitors can certainly enjoy the Cape Cod National Seashore without pitching a tent—there are plenty of bed-and-breakfasts, cottages and motels for those who prefer the comforts of home. But we think there is something special about spending two weeks camping outside under the scrub pines and living close to a pristine seashore with all its abundant wildlife, which will be protected not only for our kids but for many generations to come.

## PLANNING YOUR TRIP

To learn more about the CCNS, call (508) 255-3421 or visit [www.nps.gov/caco](http://www.nps.gov/caco). For more information on the area, contact the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce at (888) 332-2732 and [www.capecodchamber.org](http://www.capecodchamber.org). For help with travel planning, contact a AAA Travel agent or [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).