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Barnstable & Hyannis, MA: Your Complete Guide

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



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Every trip to Cape Cod passes through Barnstable. The Steamship Authority ferries to Nantucket leave from here. The only commercial airport on the Cape is here. The Kennedy family compound is here. And Hyannis, the town's main village, has evolved from a simple hub into a destination in its own right — with a revitalized Main Street, a legendary summer concert tent, warm south-facing beaches, and more history per square mile than anywhere else on the Cape. Understanding Barnstable means understanding Cape Cod itself.

Hyannis Main Street

Hyannis Main Street has had several lives. For years it was primarily a transit corridor — visitors hurried through on the way to the ferry docks. In the past decade it has become genuinely walkable: local galleries, independent clothing boutiques, ice cream shops, raw bars, and farm-to-table restaurants fill the storefronts between the harbor end and Route 28. The whole stretch is pedestrian-friendly, flat, and compact — easy for families with younger kids.

The John F. Kennedy Hyannis Museum anchors the upper end of Main Street and is worth at least an hour. Further down, the waterfront opens onto Hyannis Harbor, where the ferry traffic creates a constant, pleasant energy in summer — boats coming and going, fishermen unloading, harbor seals occasionally spotted in the channel.

What to eat: Local littlenecks and cherrystone clams at a raw bar on the dock; farm-to-table bistros along the middle stretch of Main Street; independent cafes ideal for a slow morning before the ferry; chowder, lobster rolls, and fish tacos within easy walking distance.

What to browse: Local galleries with Cape Cod seascapes and maritime art; surf and outdoor gear for beach days and bay kayaking; specialty food shops carrying local jams, honey, and hot sauces.

The Kennedy Connection

The Kennedy family's relationship with Cape Cod began in 1926 when Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. purchased a summer home in the Hyannisport neighborhood of Hyannis. What grew from that purchase became the Kennedy Compound — a cluster of connected properties on Scudder Avenue where three generations of Kennedys gathered every summer. It remains private property and a working family compound, but its presence shaped the entire identity of Hyannis and, by extension, Cape Cod.

John F. Kennedy sailed these waters, attended Mass at St. Francis Xavier Church on South Street, and used Hyannis as the base for his 1960 presidential campaign. The night he won the election, he delivered his victory remarks at the Hyannis National Guard Armory. The Kennedy Memorial on Ocean Street, a simple curved wall overlooking Nantucket Sound, is one of the Cape's most quietly moving landmarks.

For families, the JFK Hyannis Museum on Main Street is the right starting point: well-curated, not overly long, and genuinely moving for children old enough to understand what it means. It covers Kennedy's Cape Cod years specifically — sailing, summering, and the easy happiness that Hyannis seemed to give him.

Kennedy sites in Hyannis: - **JFK Hyannis Museum** (397 Main St) — photographs, film, and archival materials; plan 45–60 minutes - **Kennedy Compound** (Scudder Ave, Hyannisport) — private; viewable from the road or from the water on a harbor cruise - **Kennedy Memorial** (Ocean Street at Veterans Beach) — a curved granite wall facing the Sound; free, always open - **St. Francis Xavier Church** (347 South St) — the church where the Kennedy family attended Mass; still an active parish

Ferries: Your Gateway to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard

Hyannis is the main departure point for ferries to both Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. Two major operators run from the harbor — book well in advance in summer, especially for vehicle reservations.

Steamship Authority — Traditional Ferry to Nantucket: The classic two-hour crossing on a full-sized vessel. Carry vehicles, bikes, and gear. Departs multiple times daily from the Steamship Authority terminal on Ocean Street.

Hy-Line Cruises — High-Speed Ferry to Nantucket: A sixty-minute crossing on the high-speed catamaran. Passenger-only (no vehicles). Premium pricing; worth it for day-trippers.

Hy-Line Cruises — Ferry to Martha's Vineyard: Seasonal passenger-only service from Hyannis to Oak Bluffs, approximately 90 minutes. Eliminates the need to drive to Woods Hole for Martha's Vineyard-bound travelers.

Getting to the Harbor: The terminal is walkable from Main Street (about 10 minutes). Paid parking is available at the ferry docks and nearby municipal lots. Arrive 30–45 minutes before departure in summer.

Cape Cod Melody Tent

Since 1950, the Cape Cod Melody Tent on West Main Street has been one of the premier outdoor summer venues in New England. The round canvas tent holds about 2,300 people — and because every seat is equidistant from the center stage, there is no bad seat in the house. The acoustics are famously warm and intimate for a tent venue.

Major touring acts — comedy, classic rock, jazz, country, pop nostalgia — play the Melody Tent all summer long. The season runs June through September. Check the schedule before booking your Barnstable trip; the lineup may well determine your dates.

For families, the Tuesday and Wednesday morning children's shows are a beloved Cape Cod tradition and a genuine discovery for visitors arriving with kids. Shows run rain or shine — the tent handles it.

Two Very Different Beaches

Barnstable Town offers beaches on both sides of the Cape — warm, calm Nantucket Sound water to the south, and wilder, cooler Cape Cod Bay water to the north.

Craigville Beach (Centerville, Nantucket Sound): One of the most popular family beaches on the South Cape. Warm, protected water makes it genuinely pleasant for younger swimmers. Sandy bottom, gentle waves, full amenities. Adjacent to Centerville village — combine a beach morning with a Four Seas Ice Cream visit.

Sandy Neck Beach (West Barnstable, Cape Cod Bay): A 6-mile barrier beach on the Bay side — one of the most dramatic natural landscapes in Barnstable Town. Reached via Sandy Neck Road in West Barnstable. Off-road vehicles (ORV) permitted with a permit, making it popular for families who want a more remote stretch. Cooler water, more wind, bigger sky.

Veterans Beach (Hyannis Harbor): The Kennedy Memorial sits at its edge, and the beach itself is calm and easy, right in Hyannis. Not the Cape's most spectacular, but extremely convenient — good for a spontaneous hour on the water between other activities. Playground on site.

Seven Villages: One Town, Many Characters

Barnstable is technically a single town but encompasses seven distinct villages — each with its own personality, center, and loyal year-round community.

Hyannis is the commercial and cultural center: Main Street, the harbor, the JFK Museum, the Melody Tent, and ferry terminals. The most urban-feeling of any Cape Cod village.

Osterville is one of the most refined villages on the Cape: upscale boutiques, art galleries, antique shops, and a peaceful harbor on West Bay. Less crowded than Hyannis; worth a dedicated afternoon.

Centerville is home to Craigville Beach and Four Seas Ice Cream (est. 1934), a Cape Cod institution with lines worth waiting in. The village center is quiet and residential with classic New England character.

Barnstable Village is the historic and civic center of Barnstable County. The Cape Cod Courthouse anchors the village. Barnstable Harbor is a working fishing harbor with kayak launches and lobster boats — the most authentic fishing-community feel in town.

West Barnstable is the gateway to Sandy Neck Beach and its dramatic barrier dunes. The Cape Cod Rail Trail passes through. Quieter and more rural, with a strong artisan community and several pottery studios.

Marstons Mills is an inland village with a rural character, freshwater ponds for swimming, and local farm stands. A good base if you want a quieter summer and easy access to beaches.

Cotuit is famous for Cotuit oysters, harvested from Cotuit Bay and served at raw bars across New England. The village has a historic boatyard, a preserved Main Street, and the Cotuit Center for the Arts — a strong year-round theater company.

Rainy Day: The Cape Cod Mall and Indoor Options

Hyannis is the only place on Cape Cod with a traditional indoor shopping mall. The Cape Cod Mall on Route 132 has department stores, national retailers, a food court, and a movie theater — and on a rainy July Tuesday, it draws visitors from all over the Cape because it is the only option of its kind for 60 miles.

The JFK Hyannis Museum is an excellent rainy-day anchor. The Cape Cod Art Center on Old Post Road is worth an hour for anyone interested in regional art. And Main Street's covered storefronts, restaurants, and coffee shops make it surprisingly pleasant even in the rain.

Planning Your Visit

Getting here: Hyannis is roughly midway on the Cape — take Route 6 to Exit 5 (Route 132). Year-round bus service from Boston via Plymouth & Brockton Bus. Barnstable Municipal Airport (HYA) offers regional flights.

Getting around: A car is useful for reaching the villages and beaches, but Hyannis Main Street and the harbor are fully walkable. The Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority runs local bus routes. Bike rentals are available on Main Street.

Best time to visit: July and August are peak, with full ferry schedules, the Melody Tent in season, and all beaches open. Late June and September offer similar weather with lighter crowds and lower accommodation prices.

Parking: Paid municipal parking throughout Hyannis. Ferry terminal lots available — reserve ahead in summer. Main Street has a public garage. Most village centers have free lot parking.

Ferry booking: Book Steamship Authority ferries as early as possible. Vehicle reservations fill weeks in advance. High-speed passenger ferries have more flexibility but still benefit from advance booking in July and August.

For families: Craigville Beach is the best family beach (warm, calm water). Melody Tent children's shows run Tuesday–Wednesday mornings in summer. Veterans Beach has an adjacent playground. The JFK Museum is appropriate for ages 8 and up.

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