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VISITING CAPE COD

Eastham, Cape Cod: Gateway to the National Seashore, Fort Hill & the Best Atlantic Beaches

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



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If you're researching **things to do in Eastham, Cape Cod**, you've already made a smart decision. Eastham is the first Lower Cape town you reach heading north on Route 6, and it is quietly one of the most remarkable places on the entire peninsula. The Cape Cod National Seashore owns a substantial share of Eastham's land — which means a small town of roughly 5,000 year-round residents is ringed by protected Atlantic coastline, kettle ponds, ancient marsh systems, and miles of trails. Coast Guard Beach ranks among the best beaches in the United States by nearly every measure. The Fort Hill overlook delivers panoramic views over Nauset Marsh that stop people mid-sentence. The Salt Pond Visitor Center is the single best starting point for understanding the Outer Cape. Eastham has no traditional downtown, just Route 6 threading through the trees with some of the most spectacular nature on the East Coast on both sides of it.

Coast Guard Beach: One of the Best Beaches in the Country

Coast Guard Beach earns every superlative attached to it. East-facing and open to the full Atlantic, it delivers the Outer Cape experience at its most undiluted: rolling surf, wide pale sand, dramatic northward views toward Nauset Light. Dr. Beach's annual ranking has included it repeatedly among the top beaches in the United States [VERIFY current ranking status], and the distinction is well-founded.

The logistics are deliberate and smart. There is no large parking lot at the beach itself. Instead, you park at the Salt Pond Visitor Center or the Doane Area lot and take a free National Seashore shuttle to the sand. This keeps Coast Guard Beach accessible without overwhelming it, and the system works well. Arriving by bicycle? The Nauset Bike Trail connects the visitor center area directly to the beach. In peak summer, get to the shuttle lot before 9am — lines grow quickly after that.

Shark awareness is not optional here. Coast Guard Beach falls squarely within documented Great White shark range on the Outer Cape. The National Seashore stations drone operators during summer months to monitor the water. Check the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy's Sharktivity app [VERIFY current app name] before entering, watch beach flags and ranger advisories, and stay out of the water if seals are present. Sharks are most active in these waters from July through November near seal colonies. This is context, not a deterrent — it is why swimming smart matters here.

Salt Pond Visitor Center: Begin Every Seashore Day Here

The Salt Pond Visitor Center on Route 6 is free, well-staffed, and essential. Before driving to any National Seashore beach or trailhead, stop here first. Orientation films explain the geology and ecology of the Outer Cape in about fifteen minutes. Ranger-led programs run throughout the summer on topics ranging from surf fishing to shorebird identification to Cape Cod's glacial history — check the board when you arrive. The bookshop carries one of the better selections of Cape Cod natural history titles you'll find anywhere.

The salt pond directly behind the center is a kettle pond formed by a retreating glacier and later breached by the sea — great blue herons work the shallows here year-round. The Nauset Bike Trail departs from the visitor center, running north toward Coast Guard Beach and south into the Doane Area. Plan to spend 30 to 45 minutes here before heading to the beach; you will leave with a much richer understanding of what surrounds you.

Fort Hill: The Most Underrated View on Cape Cod

Fort Hill is the Eastham experience that too many visitors miss. The Fort Hill trail — approximately 1.5 miles round-trip [VERIFY distance] — climbs a gentle hillside to an open meadow with panoramic views across the Nauset Marsh to the barrier beach and the Atlantic horizon beyond it. The marsh channels shift color through the day. Arrive at golden hour and you'll understand why landscape photographers make this a pilgrimage.

At the trailhead, stop at the Captain Edward Penniman House — an ornate Second Empire mansion built in 1868 [VERIFY date] by a Nantucket whaling captain who made his fortune in the Pacific. The NPS maintains the property; the whale jawbone arch at the entrance is a signature Cape Cod landmark. Check with rangers about current interior access [VERIFY NPS interior access schedule] — the exterior alone is worth a few minutes.

Parking at Fort Hill is free, accessed via Fort Hill Road off Route 6. The lot fills by 10am on summer weekends. Aim for before 9am or after 4pm.

Nauset Light and the Three Sisters Lighthouses

The red-and-white striped Nauset Light is one of the most photographed structures on Cape Cod. It stands near the Nauset Light Beach parking area, set back from the eroding cliff after a 1996 relocation saved it from the sea. The adjacent Three Sisters Lighthouses — three small cast-iron lighthouses that once stood together on the same headland before the land gave way — are a short walk from the parking area through a wooded path. The ensemble is unique on the Cape and worth the detour.

Nauset Light Beach itself is a solid alternative to Coast Guard Beach: open Atlantic surf, wide sand, somewhat less crowded than its famous neighbor a mile south. A paid parking lot sits directly at the beach [VERIFY current parking fees]. Lighthouse tours typically run Sunday afternoons during summer [VERIFY 2026 schedule].

Arnold's Lobster and Clam Bar

No honest guide to Eastham omits Arnold's. This outdoor counter-service seafood institution on Route 6 has been feeding the Outer Cape for decades. The whole-belly clams are the real thing. The chowder is excellent. The lobster rolls are priced at market rate — not cheap — but they're prepared correctly. Lines build at peak hours and move steadily. Arnold's is seasonal, generally open Memorial Day through Labor Day [VERIFY 2026 hours and season]. Cards are accepted and the picnic tables fill fast on a summer evening.

If you're in Eastham and Arnold's is open, this is where you eat lunch.

Biking Eastham: The Rail Trail and Nauset Trail System

Eastham is one of the best biking towns on Cape Cod. The Cape Cod Rail Trail runs through town for approximately seven miles [VERIFY mileage within Eastham town limits], connecting to Orleans to the south and Wellfleet to the north. The Nauset Trail branches off and runs toward the Salt Pond Visitor Center and Coast Guard Beach. In summer, biking to the beach is often faster than driving and always more pleasant than waiting for shuttle parking.

Bike rentals are available in Eastham and in neighboring Orleans [VERIFY current rental shops near the Rail Trail]. The terrain is flat, the paths are paved, and the connections to the National Seashore make Eastham a two-wheeled town in the best sense.

Doane Area and Wildlife at Nauset Marsh

The Doane Area — accessed via a lot off Doane Road near the visitor center — offers flat, shaded trails appropriate for all ages and a small calm-water beach on a tidal inlet that is an excellent option when Atlantic surf is too strong for young children [VERIFY current Doane Beach access and water conditions].

The broader Nauset Marsh system surrounding Eastham is one of the most productive wildlife and birding habitats on the East Coast. In summer: ospreys, great blue herons, egrets, and least terns work the marsh channels. During September migration, Fort Hill is a documented hawk watch and shorebird stopover — sharp-shinned hawks, merlins, and American kestrels move through in numbers. White-tailed deer are common throughout Eastham’s wooded interior. Diamondback terrapins nest along marsh edges in early June — watch for turtles crossing roads near marsh margins.

Practical Information for Visiting Eastham

Getting there: Eastham sits on Route 6 approximately 90 miles from Boston. A car is necessary for the drive and useful once you’re here, though the Rail Trail and Seashore shuttle reduce car dependence for beach days. Check Plymouth & Brockton bus service for current Eastham stops [VERIFY 2026 route].

Lodging: Eastham has limited traditional lodging. The Whalewalk Inn & Spa is the standout option — an adults-preferred B&B with an excellent reputation [VERIFY current operation and rates]. Most visitors stay in vacation rentals spread across the wooded back roads. For camping, Nickerson State Park in Brewster (20 minutes south) has 418 sites [VERIFY current reservations at reserveamerica.com]; Paine’s Campground in Wellfleet (20 minutes north) is a popular private option [VERIFY].

Fees: National Seashore beach fees apply at Coast Guard Beach shuttle lots and Nauset Light Beach in summer [VERIFY current fee schedule]. An America the Beautiful annual pass covers all National Park fees and pays for itself in a few beach days [VERIFY current pass price].

Best timing: Late June through August is peak season. September is arguably better — smaller crowds, ocean temperatures that peak in late August, and exceptional wildlife watching. Eastham is quiet but fully functional in May and October.

FAQ

Is Coast Guard Beach safe for swimming? Coast Guard Beach has lifeguards on duty during the summer season [VERIFY NPS lifeguard dates]. Great White sharks are documented in these waters from July through November. The National Seashore deploys drone monitoring and posts shark flags when animals are spotted near shore. Follow flag guidance, avoid swimming near seal haul-outs, and check the Sharktivity app [VERIFY name] before entering the water. Smart swimming is the rule here.

Do I need a car to visit Eastham? For getting to Eastham from off-Cape, yes. Once you’re there, a bicycle opens up most of what the town offers — the Rail Trail connects the main attractions, and the National Seashore shuttle handles the Coast Guard Beach run. Check Plymouth & Brockton bus service for current Outer Cape stops [VERIFY 2026 route schedules].

What is the best time to visit Fort Hill? Early morning or late afternoon. The light over Nauset Marsh is most dramatic in the hour after sunrise and the two hours before sunset. The parking lot fills by 10am on summer weekends, so plan accordingly.

Is there a fee to enter the National Seashore? Access to the Salt Pond Visitor Center, Fort Hill, the Doane trails, and the Penniman House grounds is free. Beach parking fees apply in summer at Nauset Light Beach and at the Coast Guard Beach shuttle lots [VERIFY current fee schedule]. The America the Beautiful annual pass covers all park entry fees.

Eastham converts visitors into loyalists. Start at the Salt Pond Visitor Center, ride the shuttle to Coast Guard Beach, walk Fort Hill at golden hour, and eat at Arnold's before the drive back. The National Seashore was protected for a reason — and that reason is most visible in Eastham.

Browse Eastham lodging, dining, and local services at [Cape Cod Certified's Eastham directory](#).

Certified Local Businesses in Eastham

Cape Cod Certified recommends these verified local spots:

- **Fairway Restaurant & Pizzeria** — 4.4★ (778 Google reviews)
- **Hole in One Bakery & Coffee Shop** — 4.5★ (688 Google reviews)

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Eastham · Coffee / Cafe / Bakery

A Cape Cod Certified local — coffee.



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Lucky's Corner Cafe

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Cape Heli Tours — Helicopter Sightseeing

Cape Heli Tours · Hyannis

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