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VISITING CAPE COD

Day Trip to Nantucket from Cape Cod: Ferries, What to Do & How to Plan It

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



capecodcertified.com/guides/day-trip-nantucket-ferry

Nantucket sits 30 miles off the coast of Hyannis, close enough to reach in a morning and far enough to feel like a world apart. The island has cobblestoned streets, rose-covered cottages, some of the best beaches on the East Coast, and a downtown that genuinely earns every superlative thrown at it. A day trip requires a little planning. Done right, it is one of the best summer days you can have in New England.

Why Nantucket Is Worth the Trip

Nantucket is not a theme park version of a New England island. It is the real thing: a National Historic Landmark District, a working harbor town, and a place with a genuine identity rooted in its whaling history. Main Street is paved with the original Belgian cobblestones. The architecture is almost entirely grey-shingled Federal and Greek Revival — no billboards, no chain stores, strict preservation rules.

Getting There from Cape Cod

Both main ferry operators depart from Hyannis, part of the town of Barnstable. Harbor Street has ample parking — arrive early and find free or low-cost lots within a short walk of both terminals.

Steamship Authority. The traditional option and the only ferry that carries cars. For a day trip, skip the car — parking on Nantucket is expensive and unnecessary. Travel time: 2 hours 15 minutes (traditional ferry). Round-trip fare: approximately \$40–50 per adult. Also operates a fast ferry (about 1 hour) on some routes.

Hy-Line Cruises. Passenger-only high-speed catamaran. Travel time: approximately 1 hour. Round-trip fare: approximately \$80–100 per adult. Lands in Nantucket town. If you want maximum time on the island — especially with kids — the Hy-Line time savings are worth the premium.

Book online as far in advance as possible. Summer sailings fill weeks ahead.

How to Spend a Day on Nantucket

Morning: The Historic District. Walk off the ferry and up Straight Wharf into downtown. Main Street and Centre Street are the core of the historic district — spend the first hour walking. The **Nantucket Whaling Museum** on Broad Street is a genuine must. Plan for 1.5 to 2 hours. The museum tells the full story of Nantucket 18th and 19th century dominance of the global whaling industry. The centerpiece is a 46-foot sperm whale skeleton suspended in the main gallery. Admission runs around \$20 for adults.

Mid-Day: Bikes and Beach. Rent a bike near the ferry dock — the single best decision you can make for a day trip. Nantucket is flat with an extensive network of paved bike paths. Surfside Beach is about 3 miles south of town via the Surfside Bike Path — wide Atlantic-facing beach with good surf and lifeguards. Siasconset (called Sconset) is 7 miles east — a tiny village of rose-covered historic cottages that looks like it has not changed in a century. Bike rentals: \$30–40 for a full day.

Afternoon: Lunch and the Harbor. Return to town for lunch. The harbor area along Straight Wharf has several strong options from lobster rolls at a picnic table to sit-down restaurant meals with water views. Nantucket restaurant scene is genuinely excellent even at mid-range lunch.

Evening: Catch the Last Ferry. Set a phone alarm 45 minutes before departure. Last sailings in summer are typically 7–8pm. Allow 20 minutes to walk from anywhere in town back to the ferry dock.

Getting Around the Island

Bikes handle the vast majority of what a day tripper needs. Taxis and rideshare operate on the island if biking is not an option. There is no need for a car — bringing one adds expense and hassle with essentially no upside.

What to Budget

Item	Estimated Cost
Ferry round trip (Hy-Line high-speed)	\$80–100
Ferry round trip (Steamship Authority)	\$40–50
Bike rental (full day)	\$30–40
Nantucket Whaling Museum	\$20
Lunch and snacks	\$50–100
Incidentals	\$20–40

A solo traveler taking the high-speed ferry, renting a bike, and doing the museum and one proper lunch: \$200–300. The most memorable parts — the streets, the beaches, the bike paths, the harbor light — cost nothing.

Planning Checklist

- Book ferry tickets online as soon as your date is set — do not wait
- Confirm return sailing time and set a departure alarm
- Pack sunscreen, layers (harbor can be cool even in July), and comfortable walking shoes
- Check Whaling Museum hours — they occasionally close for private events

A day trip to Nantucket from Cape Cod earns its reputation. The island delivers exactly what it promises, and the ferry makes it accessible from Hyannis in a single summer day.

◆ THINGS TO DO

Make a day of it

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