

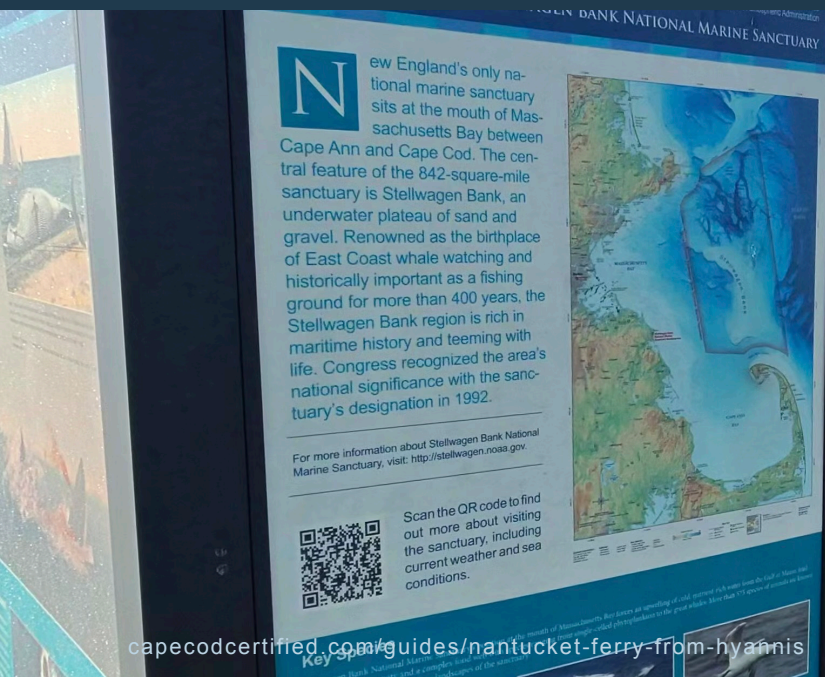


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VISITING CAPE COD

How to Take the Ferry to Nantucket from Hyannis: Schedules, What to Book & What to Bring

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



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The Nantucket ferry from Hyannis is one of the busiest passenger routes on the East Coast every summer, and two operators run it: the **Steamship Authority** (the only service that carries cars) and **Hy-Line Cruises** (passenger-only and faster). For the vast majority of visitors, the right move is to leave your car in Hyannis, walk on, and navigate Nantucket by bike or shuttle — the island is small enough that a car creates more problems than it solves. Here is everything you need to plan the trip correctly.

The Two Operators: Steamship Authority vs. Hy-Line Cruises

Both services depart from Hyannis and arrive at Nantucket's Steamboat Wharf. They are not the same product.

Steamship Authority (SSA) is the public authority that has operated this route for generations. Its traditional ferry carries vehicles and passengers and takes approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes each way. This is the only service that can bring your car to the island. Round-trip foot-passenger fares are approximately \$35–\$45 per adult [VERIFY 2026 rates]. The vessel has a cafeteria, a snack bar, an outdoor upper deck, and enclosed seating — comfortable for families and well-suited for the longer crossing. SSA departs from **South Street Dock** in Hyannis. Book at steamshipauthority.com.

Hy-Line Cruises operates a high-speed catamaran that crosses in approximately 1 hour — passenger-only, no cars. Round-trip fares run approximately \$60–\$90 per adult [VERIFY 2026 rates], roughly double the SSA slow ferry, but you gain well over an hour of island time each way. A First Class upgrade provides reserved outdoor deck seating and additional amenities [VERIFY 2026 First Class pricing]. Hy-Line departs from **Ocean Street Dock**, roughly a 10-minute walk from the SSA terminal. Book at hylinecruises.com.

Which should you choose? For a day trip where time is the constraint, Hy-Line's speed justifies the premium. For families on a budget, or anyone who prefers a relaxed crossing with more deck space and a cafeteria, the SSA traditional ferry is perfectly comfortable. The two operators run different departure times, so check both — it is entirely practical to take Hy-Line outbound and SSA on the return, or vice versa, to maximize your schedule.

Do You Actually Need to Bring Your Car?

For nearly every visitor, the answer is no.

Nantucket is 14 miles long and 3.5 miles wide. The historic downtown — cobblestone Main Street, the wharves, the shops, the Nantucket Whaling Museum — is walkable from Steamboat Wharf. The island's **NRTA Wave shuttle system** covers the main corridors, including routes to Surfside Beach, Madaket, and Sconset [VERIFY 2026 NRTA routes and fares]. Bike rental shops operate steps from the ferry landing — expect to pay \$35–\$50 per day for a quality rental [VERIFY 2026 rates] — and dedicated, paved bike paths connect the town to every major beach.

SSA vehicle reservations to Nantucket are expensive, hard to obtain, and genuinely unnecessary for most trips. The SSA opens a vehicle lottery in February each year for peak summer slots [VERIFY exact 2026 lottery process and opening date], and prime weekend sailings fill immediately. Standby vehicle spots exist but carry no guarantee. Vehicle transport costs add substantially to an already premium fare.

The only situations where a car makes clear sense: you are relocating to the island for the season, you are transporting equipment or large quantities of gear, or a member of your party has mobility requirements that make bike and shuttle travel impractical.

Parking at the Hyannis Ferry Terminal

The Steamship Authority operates a parking facility directly at South Street Dock. This is the most convenient option — park, grab your bags, and walk to the boarding area. **Reserve parking when you book your ferry tickets.** On peak summer weekends, this lot fills completely, and arriving without a reservation risks missing your sailing entirely. SSA parking fees vary by season [VERIFY 2026 daily rates at the Hyannis lot].

Hy-Line passengers have a separate facility near Ocean Street Dock. The same rule applies: book it with your ferry tickets.

If both terminal lots are sold out, several public and private parking options exist within walking distance of the Hyannis waterfront [VERIFY specific lot names, addresses, and 2026 rates near both terminals]. The area is compact, and a 5–10 minute walk with a carry-on bag is manageable for most travelers.

One timing note that matters: if you are driving down from off-Cape on a July or August weekend morning, the Bourne and Sagamore bridges — the only two road connections to the Cape — generate significant backups starting before 9am on Saturdays. Leave early. Missing your Nantucket ferry because of bridge traffic is a real and avoidable problem.

Schedules, Timing & How to Book

Both operators run multiple sailings daily in peak summer. First departures from Hyannis typically begin around 7:00am; last return sailings from Nantucket typically operate until 9:00pm or later [VERIFY 2026 SSA and Hy-Line specific sailing schedules]. Schedules thin out in shoulder season (late May, early June, September) and contract significantly in fall and winter.

Booking guidance by operator:

- SSA foot-passenger tickets: available at steamshipauthority.com; same-day walk-up is possible but July and August weekend sailings can sell out, so book as soon as your dates are confirmed
- Hy-Line tickets: available at hylinecruises.com; Friday outbound and Sunday return sailings move fastest — book early
- SSA parking can be bundled with ferry tickets at checkout
- Arrive at least 30 minutes before departure as a foot passenger; 45 minutes if you are taking a vehicle

Sunday return sailings deserve specific attention. The same logic that clogs the Sagamore and Bourne bridges every Sunday afternoon plays out at Nantucket’s docks. Everyone tries to leave the island at once. Book an early Sunday return if you can, or — if your schedule allows — consider departing Monday morning. The difference in experience is substantial.

Quick Facts

Detail	Info
SSA Traditional Ferry Duration	~2 hr 15 min
Hy-Line High-Speed Duration	~1 hour
SSA Foot Passenger Fare	~\$35–\$45 round trip [VERIFY 2026]
Hy-Line Fare	~\$60–\$90 round trip [VERIFY 2026]
Car Ferry	SSA only; vehicle lottery opens February [VERIFY]
SSA Terminal	South Street Dock, Hyannis

Detail	Info
Hy-Line Terminal	Ocean Street Dock, Hyannis
Arrive at Terminal	30 min early (foot); 45 min (vehicle)
Bike Rental on Nantucket	~\$35–\$50/day at wharf-area shops [VERIFY 2026]
Island Transit	NRTA Wave shuttle covers beaches and villages [VERIFY routes]

Day Trip vs. Overnight: What You Can Realistically Do

A day trip from Hyannis to Nantucket is genuinely worthwhile — especially if you take the early Hy-Line departure and plan deliberately.

A realistic summer day-trip sequence: catch the 8:00am or 9:00am Hy-Line sailing, arrive at Steamboat Wharf before 10am, rent a bike at one of the shops along the wharf, ride the 2-mile dedicated path to Surfside Beach for a swim on the Atlantic, pedal back through town for lunch on Main Street, walk the cobblestones and browse the shops in the afternoon, and catch a 5:00–6:00pm return. You will have 7–8 solid hours on-island if you move through it intentionally.

What a day trip does not accommodate: the full Sconset loop (a beautiful 13-mile round-trip bike ride to the east end of the island with views that reward the effort), a proper afternoon in the Nantucket Whaling Museum, or a sit-down dinner at any of the island’s destination restaurants.

An overnight stay — even a single night — resets the entire experience. Once the day-trippers depart, Nantucket becomes a different place: quieter docks, uncrowded restaurants, the kind of evening light that makes the gray-shingled houses look like they belong to another century. Nantucket lodging in summer books out months in advance; plan accordingly.

FAQ

How far in advance do I need to book the Nantucket ferry from Hyannis? For foot passengers, booking 2–4 weeks ahead covers most summer weekends comfortably. July 4th week, mid-August, and Labor Day weekend sell out faster — book those as soon as your dates are fixed. For vehicle reservations on the Steamship Authority, you need to enter the February lottery for peak summer slots; waiting until spring typically means a waitlist.

Can I take a same-day ferry to Nantucket without a reservation? Yes, for foot passengers, when space is available. The Steamship Authority sells walk-up tickets on the day of travel, and Hy-Line does the same. On a busy July Saturday, sailings can be sold out by morning, so buying even a day or two ahead eliminates that risk entirely.

What should I bring on the ferry to Nantucket? Sunscreen, a light wind layer (the crossing is breezy even on hot days), your ID, and a compact bag that works for biking and walking on the island. Leave the large cooler in the car — it will be in your way. Most businesses on Nantucket accept cards, but cash is useful at beach snack shacks and some outdoor vendors.

Is the Steamship Authority ferry wheelchair accessible? The SSA traditional ferry is designed with accessibility in mind, including elevator access between decks [VERIFY specific accessibility features on 2026 SSA Nantucket vessels]. Contact the Steamship Authority directly at steamshipauthority.com before booking to confirm that your specific needs are accommodated on your chosen sailing.

Planning a trip to Nantucket is straightforward once you know which operator to use, where to park, and what to skip (the car). Get the ferry booked, reserve your parking, and the rest of the day takes care of itself.

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