



CAPE COD CERTIFIED

VISITING CAPE COD

Cape Cod Packing List: What to Bring for a Perfect Cape Trip

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

Cape Cod is not a generic beach vacation. The tides uncover miles of tidal flats. The bay side and ocean side behave like two different places. The water stays cold enough in July to take your breath away. Seals haul out on sandbars. Ticks wait in the beach grass. The difference between a great Cape trip and a frustrating one often comes down to being prepared for the Cape specifically.

Beach Essentials

Reef-safe sunscreen — non-negotiable. Choose mineral-based (zinc oxide or titanium dioxide) SPF 50+. Cape Cod coastal waters are ecologically sensitive. Oxybenzone and octinoxate harm marine ecosystems.

Beach umbrella or shade tent — check rules first. Some National Seashore beaches restrict structures during peak shorebird nesting season. A compact UPF-rated beach tent is often smarter than a large cantilever umbrella.

Low beach chairs. Several Cape beaches require low-profile chairs (under 9 inches) in certain zones. Standard camp chairs may earn a ranger conversation.

Collapsible cooler. Soft-sided. Pack freeze packs, not ice — keeps food dry.

Extra towels. Two per person is the reality.

Cape Cod-Specific Gear

Clamming rake. If you plan to shellfish. Quahogs, steamers, and razor clams are found in Cape Cod tidal flats. You need a Massachusetts shellfish permit from the town where you plan to clam.

Binoculars. The Cape is world-class wildlife-watching territory. Bring binoculars for whale watching on Stellwagen Bank, seal colonies at Race Point, shorebirds on tidal flats, and osprey nests on bay channel markers. A compact 8x42 pair transforms every walk.

Insect repellent — two threats. Mosquitoes near freshwater ponds and marshes at dusk (DEET-based repellent). And ticks — the Outer Cape is a documented high-tick area. Permethrin spray for clothing is highly effective; treat hiking clothes before leaving home.

Tick check as a daily habit. End every trail walk with a full-body tick check. Check scalp, behind ears, under arms, behind knees. Children and pets too. Not an overreaction — standard operating procedure on the Outer Cape.

Clothing

Light layers for evening. Summer temps can drop 15–20 degrees after sunset even in July. Pack a light fleece or thin down jacket for dinner out.

Windbreaker. The Cape extends 70 miles into the Atlantic. A packable windbreaker earns its place every time.

Water shoes. Rocky jetties, tidal flat muck, oyster shell shallows, cobble at sea cliff bases. Water shoes handle all of it. Also right for clamming and wading in estuaries.

Comfortable walking shoes for town browsing. Cobblestone and brick sidewalks in Barnstable Village, Provincetown, and Chatham are hard on sandals after a few hours.

Water Activities

Rash guard. Long-sleeve UPF 50. More practical than reapplying sunscreen every time you come out of the water.

Wetsuit for surfers. Ocean-side water hovers 60–65°F through most of summer. A 3/2mm full wetsuit is standard for surfing at Nauset or Head of the Meadow.

Waterproof case or dry bag for your phone. Salt water and sand ruin electronics. A waterproof case costs little and prevents a trip-ruining problem.

For Families with Kids

Coast Guard-approved flotation devices. For children who are not strong swimmers. Puddle jumpers (Type III) are widely used and well-reviewed for young children.

Sand toys. Castle molds, shovels, buckets, sifter for shells.

Beach tent for kids shade. A dedicated pop-up beach tent gives a shaded zone for naps, snacks, and sunscreen reapplication.

Extra change of clothes in the car. Always. Sand, wet bathing suit, ice cream incident, tide miscalculation. Keep a dry bag in the trunk.

Whale Watching

If departing from Provincetown MacMillan Pier to Stellwagen Bank:

Extra warm layer. Ocean temperature on Stellwagen is cold even when it is 80°F in Provincetown. Wind chill at 15 knots makes the deck uncomfortable in a t-shirt.

Anti-nausea medication. Stellwagen Bank is open ocean. Take Dramamine 30–60 minutes before departure. The operators recommend it.

Binoculars. Do not skip them.

Photography Gear

Dry bag. Spray and humidity are constant on the Cape.

Telephoto lens. 200mm minimum, 400mm preferred. Cape wildlife does not cooperate with 35mm primes. Humpback breaches, seals on Race Point sandbars, osprey returning to nest platforms — all reward reach.

Practical Car and Admin Items

Parking quarters and small bills. Some beach meters and lot attendants still operate cash-only.

Beach parking sticker — if you bought one. Print it or save to your phone.

Massachusetts saltwater fishing license — if fishing in saltwater. Available through MA Division of Marine Fisheries online portal. Shellfishing permits are town-issued and separate.

Full water bottles in the car. Hiking to the beach in July heat is dehydrating work. Pack at least one insulated water bottle per person.

Snacks for the drive home. Sunday afternoon traffic on the Mid-Cape Highway is a Cape Cod tradition nobody enjoys. Snacks turn a two-hour backup into a manageable inconvenience.

The Short Checklist

Beach core: reef-safe mineral sunscreen, low beach chairs, shade tent (check rules), extra towels, collapsible cooler, freeze packs

Cape-specific: clamming rake, binoculars, DEET repellent, permethrin for clothing, tick check routine

Clothing: light evening layers, packable windbreaker, water shoes, walking shoes

Water activities: rash guard, wetsuit (surfers), waterproof phone case

Kids: flotation device, sand toys, shade tent, extra clothes in car

Whale watching: warm layer, anti-nausea medication, binoculars

Photography: dry bag, telephoto lens

Car and admin: parking cash, beach sticker, MA fishing permit, water bottles, snacks

◆ THINGS TO DO

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