

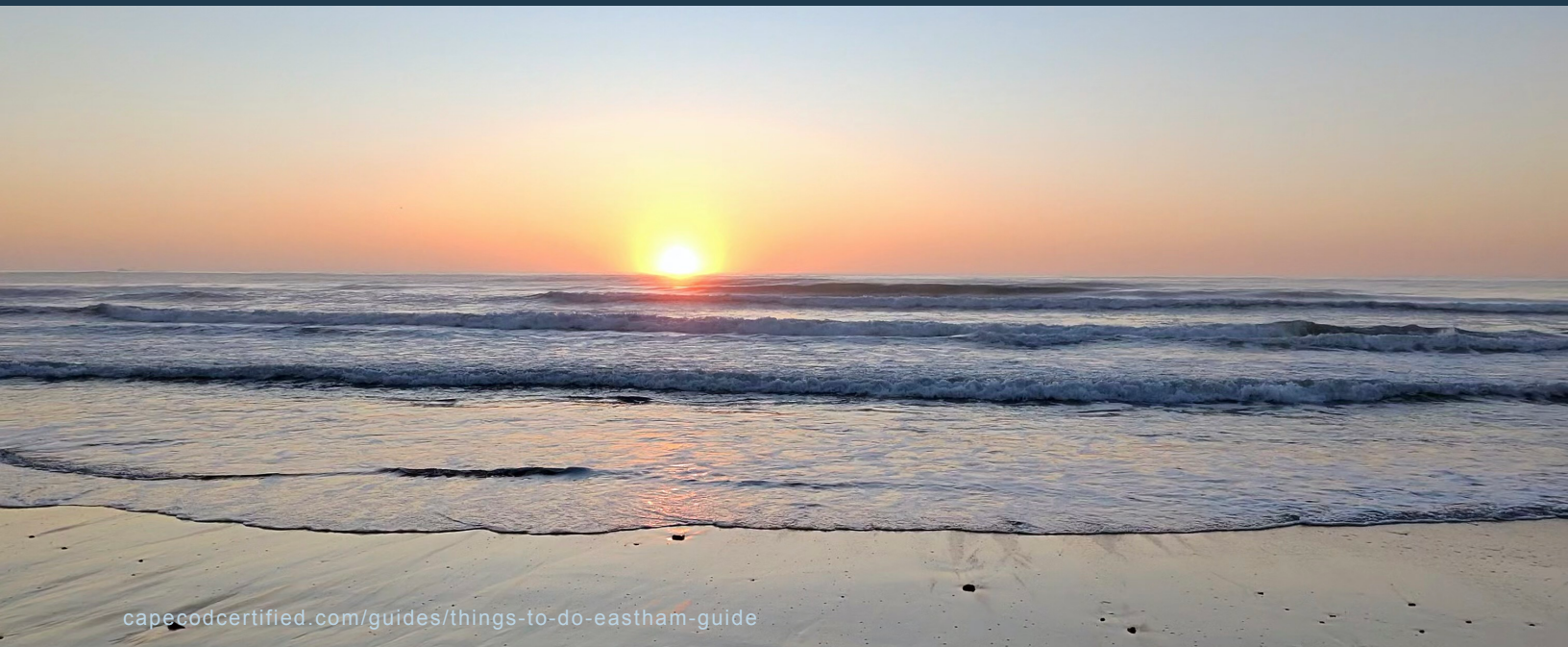


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VISITING CAPE COD

Things to Do in Eastham, MA: Gateway to Cape Cod National Seashore

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



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The outer Cape begins at Eastham. Cross the Orleans town line heading north on Route 6 and something shifts — the commercial strip thins out, the pitch pines close in, and the scale of the landscape changes. Cape Cod National Seashore claims the majority of the town's coastline, and the result is miles of protected beach, marsh, and forest that look essentially the same as they did when President Kennedy signed the park into existence in 1961. Eastham is the right place to start any serious exploration of the National Seashore: the visitor center is here, the best beach in New England may be here, and the natural history is extraordinary.

Salt Pond Visitor Center: Start Here

The Salt Pond Visitor Center is the headquarters of Cape Cod National Seashore and the right first stop for any visit to the outer Cape. Exhibits cover the Cape's glacial geology, ecology, maritime history, and the communities that lived within what is now the park. Rangers offer programs daily in summer — guided walks, lighthouse tours, and talks on everything from sharks to shorebirds. The short film about the Cape's formation is genuinely good. Pick up a map, get current beach conditions, and find out what ranger programs are running before you head out.

Coast Guard Beach

Coast Guard Beach is consistently rated one of the best beaches in the United States — a wide, clean Atlantic beach with a historic former lifesaving station at the access point and views that extend to the horizon in both directions. In summer, the small parking lot fills by 7:30–8:00 am; the park runs a free shuttle from the Little Creek parking lot in Eastham, and that's how most visitors arrive. The shuttle runs frequently and it's a better experience than fighting for a parking spot. The surf is real Atlantic surf — boogie boards and careful swimmers do well here; strong rip currents form, and lifeguards are on duty in season.

Fort Hill Area

Fort Hill is one of the most underrated spots in the National Seashore. The Skiff Hill overlook provides a sweeping view of Nauset Marsh — an immense salt marsh system that is one of the most productive bird habitats in New England. The trail through the Red Maple Swamp boardwalk passes through a freshwater swamp in autumn becomes a tunnel of brilliant red foliage. Birders know Fort Hill well; the marsh reliably holds great blue herons, snowy egrets, ospreys, and in fall, large concentrations of migrating shorebirds and songbirds.

Nauset Light and the Three Sisters

Nauset Light — a red-and-white striped lighthouse — stands on the bluffs above Nauset Light Beach and is one of the most photographed lighthouses on Cape Cod. Nearby, in a grove off Cable Road, stand the Three Sisters: three small cast-iron lighthouses that were moved back from the eroding bluff in the 1890s and now sit in the woods, preserved by the National Park Service. They're free to visit, atmospheric, and easy to miss if you don't know to look.

First Encounter Beach

First Encounter Beach on the bay side gets its name from the 1620 encounter between the Pilgrims and Wampanoag people — the first meeting between Europeans and Native Americans in what would become Massachusetts. A monument marks the site. The beach itself is a wide tidal flat on the bay, with water that can be exceptionally warm by August and tidal conditions similar to Brewster's. Sunrise here is spectacular.

Eastham Windmill

The Eastham Windmill, built around 1680, is the oldest windmill on Cape Cod and one of the oldest surviving windmills in the United States. It sits in the town center, free to view from outside. In summer it opens for tours — worth a stop, particularly with kids.

First Encounter Coffee

First Encounter Coffee is the local coffee shop and community gathering place in Eastham — the kind of unpretentious, genuinely good coffee spot that makes a town feel like a town rather than a resort. It's the place to grab breakfast before the beach shuttle fills up.

Frequently Asked Questions

How early do I need to arrive for Coast Guard Beach parking? The lot is consistently full by 7:30–8:00 am on summer days. Use the free park shuttle from Little Creek Road parking area, which runs from late June through Labor Day. The shuttle is frequent and convenient.

What is the Cape Cod National Seashore fee? There is a vehicle fee to enter National Seashore beaches, currently \$25/vehicle in season (subject to change — check the NPS website). An America the Beautiful annual pass covers entry. Access to Fort Hill and the Salt Pond Visitor Center is free.

Is Eastham worth visiting outside of summer? Absolutely. The National Seashore is beautiful year-round. Fall birding at Fort Hill is outstanding. Coast Guard Beach in September after Labor Day is less crowded and still warm enough to swim.

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