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VISITING CAPE COD

Cape Cod Ferry Guide: Steamship Authority, Hy- Line, and How to Get It Right

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



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Taking the ferry to Martha's Vineyard or Nantucket sounds simple until you're standing at the wrong terminal, your car reservation is non-transferable, and the next available sailing is four hours away. This guide covers everything: which company, which terminal, car vs. walk-on, parking, standby, and the insider moves that regulars use every summer.

The Two Companies: SSA vs. Hy-Line

Steamship Authority (SSA)

- **The only ferry that carries cars** to both Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket
- Terminals: **Woods Hole** (MV only), **Hyannis** (Nantucket only)
- Walk-on passengers: Yes, on all routes
- Year-round service: Yes
- Reservations: Required for vehicles; walk-ons can board same-day (space permitting)
- Website: steamshipauthority.com

Hy-Line Cruises

- **Passenger-only** (no cars)
- Terminals: **Hyannis** (to both MV and Nantucket)
- High-speed catamaran option (Grey Lady) to Nantucket: ~1 hour crossing
- Seasonal service (spring through fall)
- Website: hylinecruises.com

Bottom line: If you need your car on the island, SSA is your only option. If you're walking on, both companies serve Nantucket from Hyannis, and SSA is your choice for the Vineyard from Woods Hole.

Martha's Vineyard Ferry: What to Know

Route: Woods Hole → Vineyard Haven (45 min) or Oak Bluffs (seasonal, 45 min)

With a car: - SSA only; car reservations open 90 days in advance - Round-trip vehicle cost: approximately \$175–\$215 depending on vehicle size and season - Reserve early — peak summer weekends sell out weeks in advance - If you miss your sailing, your reservation is not automatically transferred; contact SSA immediately

Walk-on: - Adult round-trip walk-on: approximately \$20–\$22 - Bikes: approximately \$10–\$14 round-trip on SSA - No reservation needed for walk-on passengers, but arrive 30 minutes early on busy days

Parking at Woods Hole: - SSA lots at Woods Hole: approximately \$20–\$28/day (fills early on peak days) -

Better option: SSA Falmouth Park & Ride at Palmer Avenue — free parking with shuttle to the terminal. This is what regulars use. - WHOOSH bus from Falmouth also serves the terminal

Nantucket Ferry: What to Know

Routes: - SSA Hyannis → Nantucket (traditional ferry): ~2.25 hours - Hy-Line Grey Lady Hyannis → Nantucket (high-speed): ~1 hour

With a car (SSA only): - Same 90-day advance reservation system - Round-trip vehicle: approximately \$400+ in peak season — most visitors choose to leave the car on Cape - Nantucket is extremely bikeable and taxi/rideshare accessible; the car is rarely worth the cost

Walk-on: - SSA adult round-trip: approximately \$44–\$50 - Hy-Line Grey Lady adult round-trip: approximately \$75–\$85 (premium for speed) - Bikes on Hy-Line: approximately \$30–\$40 round-trip

Parking at Hyannis: - SSA Hyannis lot: approximately \$20–\$28/day - Several private lots within walking distance at slightly lower rates - Staying in Hyannis the night before and walking to the terminal eliminates parking costs entirely

Car vs. Walk-On: The Real Calculation

For Martha's Vineyard, the car vs. walk-on decision comes down to your itinerary: - **Leave the car:** If you're spending 1–3 days in Vineyard Haven, Oak Bluffs, or Edgartown, the island's shuttle bus (VTA) and bike rentals cover everything. Saves \$175–\$215 and eliminates the reservation stress. - **Bring the car:** If you're renting a house up-island (West Tisbury, Chilmark, Aquinnah) and need to haul gear for a week, the car is worth it. Reserve 90 days out the moment you confirm your dates.

For Nantucket, **leave the car** is almost always the right call. The town is compact and bikeable, taxis are widely available, and the car ferry cost exceeds \$400 round-trip in peak season.

Standby: Does It Work?

SSA maintains a standby line for vehicles that no-showed on their reservation. On slower days (mid-week, shoulder season), standby works well. On peak summer Fridays and holiday weekends, do not count on standby — the no-show rate drops and the standby line can be long.

Standby tips: - Arrive before the standby line forms (usually 30–45 minutes before sailing) - Weekday standby is significantly more reliable than weekend standby - Walk-on passengers are almost never turned away — standby anxiety is primarily a car-carrier concern

Insider Moves: What Regulars Do

1. **Book the car reservation the day the 90-day window opens** if you know your travel dates. Peak-season sailings sell out. Set a calendar reminder.
2. **Use the Falmouth Park & Ride** instead of paying for Woods Hole parking. Free parking, regular shuttles, less stress.
3. **Take the first morning sailing** if you're doing a day trip. The 7:00–7:30 AM departure from Woods Hole gets you to the Vineyard by 8:30 AM — you'll have the beaches and bike paths nearly to yourself for the first two hours.
4. **Book a round-trip ticket and set your return time realistically** — missing your return sailing means rebooking at walk-on rates plus waiting for the next available departure.
5. **Bikes go on the ferry.** Renting on the island is convenient, but bringing your own bike (especially for kids) is allowed on SSA at a modest fee and can save money on a multi-day trip.

6. **Check-in cutoff is 30 minutes before sailing** for vehicles. SSA will release your space to standby if you're not checked in. This is enforced.

Seasonal Notes for 2026

- Oak Bluffs direct service from Woods Hole typically runs late May through mid-October
- Hy-Line high-speed service is seasonal — confirm operating dates before booking
- Early and late season (May, October) has lighter traffic and same-day car reservations are sometimes available
- SSA updates its fare schedule seasonally — always confirm current prices at steamshipauthority.com before budgeting

◆ THINGS TO DO

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