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VISITING CAPE COD

Things to Do in Orleans, MA: The Lower Cape's Year- Round Hub

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



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Orleans sits at the transition point between the mid-Cape and the outer Cape — the place where the landscape starts to feel wilder, the traffic thins out, and the light changes. It's also a year-round town in a way that most Cape communities are not: a working downtown with grocery stores, hardware stores, and restaurants that serve locals as much as visitors. That duality makes it one of the most livable and genuinely interesting towns on the Cape. It has serious natural assets — Pleasant Bay, Nauset Beach, the Rail Trail — and a local culture that doesn't perform itself for tourists.

Pleasant Bay: The Cape's Great Estuary

Pleasant Bay covers 9,700 acres and is the largest estuary on the East Coast of the United States. It's protected from the Atlantic by Nauset Beach, creating a sheltered environment of remarkable ecological richness: eelgrass beds, shellfish flats, tidal creeks, and osprey nesting platforms. For visitors, it's world-class kayaking and paddleboarding territory — the bay is calm, the scenery is beautiful, and you can cover enormous distances without fighting currents. **Pleasant Bay Community Boating** offers affordable access to the water for all skill levels. The bay is also one of the finest shellfishing areas on Cape Cod; licenses are available at Town Hall.

Nauset Beach

Nauset Beach is one of the great Atlantic beaches on Cape Cod — a long, wide barrier beach with excellent surf, a working snack bar, and a parking lot that fills early on summer weekends. The southern end of Nauset Beach connects eventually to the Chatham barrier beach system, making it one of the longest continuous beach walks in the region. The surf break at Nauset is legitimate enough that you'll see surfers in the water from May through October.

The Cape Cod Rail Trail

The Rail Trail passes directly through Orleans and connects north to Wellfleet and south toward Chatham. Orleans is one of the best starting points for a ride — there's parking near the trailhead, and the stretch north through Eastham and into the National Seashore is particularly beautiful. Bike rentals are available locally.

Rock Harbor

Rock Harbor on the bay side is a working harbor where charter fishing boats depart at dawn and return mid-morning. Even if you're not fishing, it's one of the best sunset-watching spots on the Cape — the western exposure means the sky turns remarkable colors over the harbor and Cape Cod Bay. A small restaurant and fish market operate seasonally at the harbor.

Where to Eat

Hole in One on Route 6A is an Orleans institution — a donut and breakfast shop with lines out the door every summer morning, cash only, and worth every minute of the wait. The donuts are made fresh and disappear fast. **Sir Cricket's Fish and Chips** is the local-dive fried seafood spot: no pretense, good fish, excellent value. **Goose Hummock** on Town Cove has been outfitting Cape Cod outdoors people since 1946 — kayak and canoe rentals, fishing gear, and the kind of staff who actually know the water.

Academy of Performing Arts

The Academy of Performing Arts is a community theater that's been producing plays, musicals, and summer shows since 1975. It draws talented performers from across the region and offers a consistently good alternative to the beach on a rainy afternoon or an evening out.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Orleans open year-round? More so than most Cape towns. Orleans has a working downtown with year-round restaurants, a grocery store, a hardware store, and services that keep locals here through winter. Several restaurants and shops close seasonally, but the core of the town stays open.

How do I access Pleasant Bay? The easiest public access is at Meetinghouse Pond and Town Cove. Pleasant Bay Community Boating offers rentals and instruction. Several kayak outfitters also operate guided tours of the bay in summer.

Where should I park for Nauset Beach? The main lot at Nauset Beach fills by 9–10 am on summer weekends. Arrive before 9 am or use the satellite lot system. There is a parking fee in season.

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