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VISITING CAPE COD

Best Beaches on Cape Cod: A Local's Guide by Region, Water Type & What You're Looking For

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



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The best beaches on Cape Cod depend entirely on what you are looking for — calm tidal flats for toddlers, classic Atlantic surf, dramatic clay cliffs, or a quiet stretch far from the crowd. Cape Cod has over 130 miles of coastline split between two very different water bodies: the Atlantic Ocean on the east (rougher surf, cooler water, dramatic scenery) and Cape Cod Bay on the west (warm, calm, shallow — ideal for young children). Knowing which side fits your trip is the single most important decision before you pack a beach bag.

Calm Water for Young Children: Bay Side Beaches

For families with kids under 8, the bay side is the right call every time. Cape Cod Bay water runs measurably warmer than the Atlantic, and the tidal flats that emerge at low tide create a natural shallow-water playground stretching hundreds of yards from shore.

Paine's Creek Beach, Brewster — At low tide the flats extend so far you lose sight of the waterline. Park off Paine's Creek Road, pay the non-resident day fee [VERIFY current rate with Town of Brewster], and wade out in knee-deep water for as long as the kids can walk. Morning low tides are the best timing.

Breakwater Beach and Ellis Landing, Brewster — Two more Brewster bay beaches with the same tidal flat character. Brewster's flats are unique on the entire East Coast — up to a mile of exposed sandy bottom at low tide. Bring water shoes; the bottom turns to exposed sea grass and shells near the water's edge.

Skaket Beach, Orleans — Faces Cape Cod Bay directly, with warm shallow water, a large parking lot, and genuine sunset views. Non-resident day passes required in season; the lot fills fast on weekend afternoons.

Bass Hole (Gray's Beach), Yarmouth Port — A long boardwalk stretches over the marsh and out to tidal flats on Bass Hole Creek. More nature walk than swim beach, but spectacular for small children to explore. Free parking. One of the most underrated spots on the entire Cape.

Old Silver Beach, Falmouth — On Buzzards Bay rather than Cape Cod Bay proper, Old Silver is the Upper Cape's standout calm-water beach. A sandbar creates a sheltered lagoon on the north end perfectly suited for young children. Non-resident fees apply; the lot fills early on summer weekends.

Classic Atlantic Beaches: The Big Wave Experience

The Atlantic side delivers the iconic best beaches Cape Cod experience — wide barrier beaches, real surf, cooler water, and views that feel infinite. These are the beaches that make the national best-of lists.

Coast Guard Beach, Eastham — Consistently ranked among the best beaches in the United States. Part of Cape Cod National Seashore. In summer the lot at Coast Guard Beach is reserved for permit holders [VERIFY current permit program status]; most visitors park at the Salt Pond Visitor Center on Route 6 and take the free NPS shuttle. National Seashore fee: \$25/vehicle or America the Beautiful pass.

Nauset Beach, Orleans — Ten miles of unbroken barrier beach running south from East Orleans toward Chatham. One of the most dramatic stretches of coastline on the East Coast. Town of Orleans beach — non-resident day or week passes required in season. Large parking lot off Beach Road, but it fills by 9am on summer Saturdays.

Marconi Beach, Wellfleet — Named for Guglielmo Marconi, who transmitted the first transatlantic wireless message from this bluff in 1903. The dramatic clay and sand cliffs rising above the beach are the visual signature of this section of the National Seashore. NPS fee applies. Stairs down to the beach; no flat beach-level accessible route.

Cahoon Hollow Beach, Wellfleet — A Town of Wellfleet beach with excellent surf conditions and the Beachcomber restaurant at the top of the bluff — a Cape Cod institution for post-swim meals and drinks [VERIFY current season and hours before visiting]. Non-resident Wellfleet beach sticker or day pass required.

Head of the Meadow, Truro — Two sections side by side: a National Seashore section (NPS fee) and a Truro town section (town sticker or day pass). Wide open beach backed by classic Cape dunes, often meaningfully less crowded than Eastham’s beaches. No food concession on site.

Race Point Beach, Provincetown — At the very tip of Cape Cod, Race Point faces northwest rather than east. The wind comes straight off the open Atlantic, the dunes are massive, and the isolation feels real even in peak season. National Seashore property. Humpback whales are sometimes visible offshore in morning hours from late spring through fall. Arrive before 8am on summer weekends — the lot fills completely.

Finding Fewer Crowds

Every great beach on Cape Cod gets busy in July and August. Here is where locals look for breathing room.

White Crest Beach, Wellfleet — Adjacent to Cahoon Hollow, equally good surf, and slightly fewer people on peak weekends. Same Wellfleet town sticker or day-pass requirement applies.

Corn Hill Beach, Truro — Bay side, quiet, and beautiful in late afternoon light with long views across Cape Cod Bay. Truro resident sticker or non-resident day pass required. A genuine local favorite that does not appear on the promotional top-ten lists as often as it deserves.

Sandy Neck Beach, Barnstable — Six miles of barrier beach off Sandy Neck Road in West Barnstable. Over-sand vehicle access available with the appropriate ORV permit [VERIFY current ORV permit requirements and cost from Town of Barnstable Conservation Division]. The dune ecosystem behind the beach is extraordinary and largely unvisited. Town of Barnstable day passes required for non-residents at the gatehouse.

Dogs on Cape Cod Beaches: The Real Answer

Options are genuinely limited during summer months. Most town beaches ban dogs from roughly 9am to 5pm, May through September. Key facts:

- **Sandwich Town Neck Beach** allows dogs year-round [VERIFY current policy directly with Town of Sandwich before visiting]
- **National Seashore beaches** (Coast Guard, Nauset, Marconi, Race Point, Head of the Meadow) prohibit dogs at all times in the federally protected areas
- **Off-season access** is more generous: most town beaches allow dogs outside daytime hours even in-season, and freely during the shoulder and off-season; October and November beach walks with dogs are a Cape Cod local tradition
- Always verify with the specific town before your trip — policies change and enforcement varies by year

Great White Sharks: What You Should Know Before Swimming

Great White Sharks are documented near Outer Cape beaches from late June through November, drawn by the recovered gray seal population. This is a genuine concern, not media exaggeration. The highest-risk areas are Atlantic-facing beaches nearest large seal colonies: Chatham Lighthouse Beach, Nauset Beach (Orleans and Chatham), Coast Guard Beach (Eastham), Marconi Beach (Wellfleet), and Race Point (Provincetown).

Practical steps for every beach visit on the best beaches Cape Cod Atlantic side: - Download the **Sharktivity app** (Atlantic White Shark Conservancy, free) — provides real-time drone sighting alerts at staffed beaches - Swim at beaches with lifeguards and active drone surveillance in season - Stay out of the water if seals are visible nearby — their presence attracts sharks - Avoid swimming at dawn, dusk, and after dark - Check the shark flag system at beach entrances: green (all clear), yellow (caution), red (shark sighted — exit water)

Bay-side beaches in Brewster, Dennis, Yarmouth, and Barnstable have no documented great white shark activity — another practical reason families with young children prefer the bay side.

Beach Stickers and Parking: What It Actually Costs

Nearly every town beach on Cape Cod requires either a resident sticker or a non-resident day or week pass from roughly Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Typical non-resident fees (verify with each town before visiting): - Day pass: \$20–\$40 per vehicle - Week pass: \$60–\$120 per vehicle - Purchase locations: town hall offices, and often the beach lot attendant booth on arrival

National Seashore beaches (Eastham, Wellfleet, Truro, Provincetown sections): \$25/vehicle per day, or covered by the America the Beautiful annual pass (\$80/year — pays for itself in four NPS beach visits).

Parking fills early. On summer weekends, lots at Nauset (Orleans) and Race Point (Provincetown) routinely fill before 9am. Plan to arrive by 8 to 8:30am, use the free NPS shuttle from Salt Pond Visitor Center to Coast Guard Beach, or ride in via the Cape Cod Rail Trail, which connects several Eastham trailheads directly to Coast Guard Beach.

Quick Reference: Cape Cod Beaches by What You Want

Goal	Beach	Side	Fee Type
Calm water, toddlers	Paine’s Creek, Brewster	Bay	Town day pass
Tidal flat exploration	Ellis Landing, Brewster	Bay	Town day pass
Calm sandbar lagoon	Old Silver Beach, Falmouth	Buzzards Bay	Town day pass
Classic Atlantic surf	Coast Guard Beach, Eastham	Atlantic	NPS (\$25)
Iconic barrier beach	Nauset Beach, Orleans	Atlantic	Town day pass
Dramatic clay cliffs	Marconi Beach, Wellfleet	Atlantic	NPS (\$25)
Surfing and après beach	Cahoon Hollow, Wellfleet	Atlantic	Town day pass
Wild dunes, far tip	Race Point, Provincetown	Atlantic	NPS (\$25)
Quieter Atlantic option	White Crest, Wellfleet	Atlantic	Town day pass
Quiet bay beach	Corn Hill Beach, Truro	Bay	Town day pass
ORV and barrier dune access	Sandy Neck, Barnstable	Bay	Town day pass + ORV permit

FAQ

What is the best Cape Cod beach for families with young children? Brewster’s tidal flat beaches — Paine’s Creek, Breakwater Beach, and Ellis Landing — are the top recommendation. At low tide the water retreats up to a mile, leaving warm shallow pools perfect for children under 8. Skaket Beach in Orleans and Old Silver Beach in Falmouth on Buzzards Bay are strong alternatives with similarly calm, shallow conditions.

Do I need a beach sticker for Cape Cod beaches? Yes, for almost all town-operated beaches in season. Non-resident day passes typically run \$20–\$40 per vehicle, purchased at town hall or at the beach lot attendant booth. National Seashore beaches — Coast Guard, Marconi, Race Point, and Head of the Meadow — charge \$25/vehicle or accept the America the Beautiful annual pass, which covers all national parks.

Are Great White Sharks really a concern at Cape Cod beaches? Yes, particularly at Atlantic-facing Outer Cape beaches near seal colonies, from late June through November. The free Sharktivity app (Atlantic White Shark Conservancy) provides real-time drone sighting data at staffed beaches. Bay-side beaches in Brewster, Dennis, Yarmouth, and Barnstable have no documented great white shark activity — the safest swimming areas on the Cape for that reason.

What time do Cape Cod beach parking lots fill up in summer? On peak summer weekends, popular lots at Nauset Beach (Orleans) and Race Point (Provincetown) fill before 9am. Plan to arrive by 8 to 8:30am, use the free NPS shuttle from Salt Pond Visitor Center to Coast Guard Beach, or ride in on the Cape Cod Rail Trail. Weekday mornings are noticeably easier throughout the season.

Whether you are chasing tidal flats for a toddler's first ocean morning or looking for the most dramatic Atlantic barrier beach on the East Coast, Cape Cod has exactly what you need — once you know which beach to target. Browse certified local recommendations, seasonal alerts, and the full guide directory at capecodcertified.com/directory.

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