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Cape Cod Cycling Guide: The Rail Trail, Shining Sea Bikeway & Every Route Worth Riding

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



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Cape Cod cycling is one of the best ways to experience the peninsula — you cover more ground than walking, move slowly enough to notice the marsh hawks and cranberry bogs, and arrive at the beach without the parking headache. The Cape has three dedicated paved multi-use trails, a network of park dirt tracks, and road routes that reward early risers. Whether you are a first-timer looking for a flat family ride or a serious cyclist planning a multi-day Cape Cod cycling itinerary, this guide covers every route worth riding.

The Cape Cod Rail Trail: Everything You Need to Know

The Cape Cod Rail Trail is the backbone of Cape Cod cycling and one of the most-used multi-use paths in New England. It runs 22 miles from South Dennis to South Wellfleet along the former Old Colony Railroad bed — the same corridor that carried summer tourists to the Lower Cape before the car took over. The trail is paved, flat to gently rolling, and genuinely family-friendly. A 10-year-old on a cruiser can handle it. A serious rider can cover the full length and back before lunch.

Trailheads with parking: South Dennis (main southern terminus, large lot), South Harwich, Harwich, Brewster, Orleans, Eastham, and South Wellfleet. Mid-Cape entry points fill up by 10am on summer weekends — aim for a 7:30am start if you want parking without circling.

Key stops along the way:

- **Nickerson State Park, Brewster:** The trail passes directly through the park. Eight-plus miles of interior dirt trails branch off for mountain bikers; the main ponds — Flax, Cliff, and Little Cliff — are open for swimming and have bathrooms and a camp store. This is the natural midpoint for a Rail Trail day.
- **Rail Trail Dessert Bar, Harwich [VERIFY current operation]:** A beloved mid-ride institution positioned perfectly between Dennis and Brewster. Ice cream, slushies, outdoor picnic tables. Expect a line on summer afternoons.
- **Rock Harbor, Orleans:** A short detour — roughly half a mile off the main trail [VERIFY distance] — brings you to a classic Bay-side marina with views back across Cape Cod Bay. Worth the loop if you are riding in the late afternoon.
- **Wellfleet Center:** The trail terminus in South Wellfleet sits about half a mile from Wellfleet Center [VERIFY exact distance], and another ten minutes by bike reaches Wellfleet Harbor. Ride in, find oysters at a raw bar, turn around satisfied.

Bike rentals along the Rail Trail: Shops in Dennis, Brewster, and Orleans rent bikes, with additional options in Chatham for riders coming from the south [VERIFY current operators — these change season to season]. Most shops offer helmets, locks, and trail maps. Reserve ahead on summer weekends; rental inventory sells out by mid-morning in July and August.

Extending the ride: From the Wellfleet terminus, short on-road connections reach National Seashore beaches — Marconi Beach, White Crest, Cahoon Hollow — in under two miles. The Atlantic White Cedar Swamp Trail, one of the Cape's most underrated walks, is a five-minute ride from the Marconi Station parking area.

The Shining Sea Bikeway: Falmouth's Coastal Route

The Shining Sea Bikeway is the Rail Trail's quieter, more scenic sibling. It runs approximately 10.7 miles [VERIFY exact distance] from Falmouth center to Woods Hole, passing through salt marsh, coastal scrub, and the edge of

Vineyard Sound. The character is completely different from the Rail Trail. Where the Rail Trail is inland and surrounded by pine forest and kettle ponds, the Shining Sea Bikeway feels genuinely coastal — you smell saltwater, you catch glimpses of boats, the light shifts every half mile.

Start at the Depot Avenue trailhead in Falmouth, which has parking [VERIFY current parking availability]. Alternatively — and this is one of the best Cape Cod cycling logistics moves available — take the Steamship Authority ferry from Martha’s Vineyard with your bikes, arrive at Woods Hole, and ride the Bikeway into Falmouth for breakfast. Then ferry back.

Falmouth’s flatness makes this the most accessible of the Cape’s major trails for younger children and casual riders. It is also significantly less crowded than the Rail Trail on summer weekends, which makes it feel more like a local ride than a tourist attraction.

Province Lands Bike Trail: Dunes and Drama

If the Rail Trail is Cape Cod cycling at its most practical, the Province Lands Bike Trail is Cape Cod cycling at its most cinematic. Approximately 5.5 miles of paved path [VERIFY exact distance] wind through the open dune landscape of Provincetown’s Province Lands — a National Seashore unit that looks more like coastal Morocco than New England. You cross ridges of sand, dip into shadowed hollows, and emerge at ocean overlooks that stop riders cold.

The difficulty is moderate. The dune topography means real climbing in both directions — this is not the right trail for very young children on small bikes. Sand blows across sections of pavement and can make corners unpredictable. Slow down more than you think you need to.

The Province Lands Visitor Center, near the center of the loop, has water and restrooms. Beach Fo’c’sle parking area provides direct trail access to Herring Cove Beach, one of the best Bay-side swimming beaches in Provincetown.

Bike rentals are available in Provincetown [VERIFY current operators near the Province Lands trailhead]. Most shops are on Commercial Street, roughly two miles from the main trail entrance. Ride from town, complete the loop, ride back — a perfect half-day with a beach stop built in.

Road Cycling: Route 6A for Serious Riders

Route 6A, the Old King’s Highway, stretches more than 30 miles from Sandwich to Brewster along the historic north side of the Cape. It passes 18th and 19th century houses, working antique shops, saltmarsh views, and stretches of tree canopy old enough that branches meet overhead in a full arch.

This is not a beginner route. There are no dedicated bike lanes, the road narrows through several village centers, and summer traffic on Route 6A includes wide RVs and distracted drivers rubbernecking at historic houses. The right strategy is to ride on a weekday morning, before 8am, before delivery trucks and antique-shop browsers fill the road. At that hour it is extraordinary — dappled early light through the tree cover, almost no traffic, the occasional deer in the understory.

The best stretch for cycling is Yarmouth Port through Brewster, where Route 6A passes through the village center and then opens into longer sections with marsh and meadow views. Strong riders can link this route with the Rail Trail by cutting south to Brewster on a connecting road, building a 40-plus mile loop.

A Multi-Day Cape Cod Cycling Itinerary

Three days, three trails, the full length of the Cape covered.

Day 1 — Falmouth: Shining Sea Bikeway round trip from Falmouth to Woods Hole and back (approximately 21 miles total with a turnaround). Lunch in Woods Hole. Afternoon at Falmouth Heights Beach. Overnight in Falmouth.

Day 2 — Dennis to Wellfleet: Rail Trail full length, 22 miles one-way. Start early from the Dennis trailhead to claim parking. Swim at Nickerson State Park’s Flax Pond. Stop at the Rail Trail Dessert Bar in Harwich [VERIFY current operation]. Reach Wellfleet by afternoon. Overnight in Brewster or Orleans; arrange a shuttle or second car at the Wellfleet terminus in advance [VERIFY whether bike-specific shuttle services operate on this corridor — options vary by season].

Day 3 — Provincetown: Drive or take the Boston ferry to Provincetown. Province Lands loop (5.5 miles). Afternoon at Herring Cove or Race Point. Dinner on Commercial Street.

This itinerary is realistic for fit recreational riders and families with children ten and older. The Rail Trail day is the physical centerpiece; days one and three are shorter and allow natural recovery.

Quick Facts

Route	Distance	Surface	Difficulty	Best For
Cape Cod Rail Trail	22 miles	Paved	Easy	Families, all riders
Shining Sea Bikeway	~10.7 miles [VERIFY]	Paved	Easy	Families, coastal riders
Province Lands Trail	~5.5 miles [VERIFY]	Paved	Moderate	Adults, older children
Route 6A	30+ miles	Road	Moderate	Experienced road cyclists
Nickerson State Park Trails	8+ miles	Dirt	Moderate	Mountain bikers

Season: The Rail Trail and Shining Sea Bikeway are rideable April through November; peak season June through September. Province Lands is best May through October. Route 6A is rideable year-round, with late September and early October offering fall foliage and reduced traffic.

Helmets: Required by Massachusetts law for riders under 16; strongly recommended for all ages.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the Cape Cod Rail Trail good for beginners and young children? Yes. The flat-to-gently-rolling paved surface and wide path make it one of the most family-friendly long trails in New England. Children comfortable on two wheels can handle sections of any length. Most families ride 6 to 12 miles between two trailheads and turn around — a completely manageable half-day that leaves time for a pond swim.

How long does it take to bike the Cape Cod Rail Trail? A fit adult can ride the full 22 miles in roughly 1.5 to 2 hours without stopping. Factor in rest stops, swimming at Nickerson, and a mid-trail ice cream, and a day trip covering the full length takes 5 to 7 hours total. Most families ride 10 to 15 miles round trip and finish comfortably in half a day.

Can you rent bikes along the Cape Cod Rail Trail? Yes. Rental shops operate in Dennis, Brewster, and Orleans, typically open Memorial Day through Columbus Day [VERIFY specific current operators — shops change year to year]. Reserve ahead on summer weekends. Rental inventory sells out by mid-morning in July and August, so calling the day before or booking online is the move.

Is cycling in Provincetown worth it if you skip the Province Lands trail? Provincetown's Commercial Street is enjoyable by bike in the very early morning before pedestrian traffic builds, but the town itself is small and walkable. The real cycling draw in Provincetown is the Province Lands trail. If you are bringing bikes to P'town, build your schedule around a few hours on the trail — the dune landscape is unlike anything else on Cape Cod.

Ready to plan your Cape Cod cycling trip? Browse cycling-friendly lodging, guided outdoor experiences, and local bike shops at capecodcertified.com/directory.

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