

2 Days, 1 Night in Cape May

If 'quaint' is your cup of tea, America's first seaside resort offers the perfect blend of hospitality.



By Stacy Tillie

While slews of cities and towns across America boast the label “quaint,” perhaps no other destination in the country lives up to that label like Cape May, a Victorian seaside resort on the southernmost tip of New Jersey—so southern that it sits below the Mason-Dixon Line—that it’s called the Capital of Quaint.

Cape May’s history dates back to the mid-1700s when Philadelphians began patronizing the town for its healthful air and laidback lifestyle. By the 1800s, the town was in its heyday, drawing many of the rich-and-famous from New York, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. New grand hotels and guest houses soon followed to accommodate the new influx of visitors—putting Cape May on the vacation map.

Today, Cape May remains true to its Victorian heritage with the second-largest collection of Victorian-era homes in the country (following San Francisco). In fact, in 1976 the entire city of Cape May was designated a National Historic Landmark, a title that only a small handful of U.S. towns has achieved. Cape May is also home to more bed-and-breakfasts than you can shake a cinnamon stick at, and although you’ll find the occasional franchise store, most shops in town are family-owned and -operated.



Memorial Day to Labor Day is high tourist season here, but even during winter, when most of its neighboring shore towns go into hibernation, Cape May welcomes guests with special tours, festivals and activities—along with lower hotel rates and fewer crowds—most every weekend. Here are a few suggestions on how to spend a weekend this winter.

Day 1: Saturday

A Treasure-Trove of Architecture

Cape May has many guided and self-guided architecture tours on tap, including walking tours of historic inns, trolley rides through the historic district and audio tours. But for a twist on the traditional talking points tour, explore Cape May's architectural landmarks clue by clue on a Family Treasure Hunt. Geared toward both adults and kids, the self-guided treasure hunt includes a clue sheet, map and answer sheet. Packets are available at the Washington Street Mall Information Booth and cost only \$5.



A Grand Estate

When the clues lead you to the Stick Style architecture of the Emlen Physick Estate, Cape May's only Victorian house museum designed by Frank Furness in 1879, take some time out to explore the museum's changing exhibits, representative of the Victorian Cape May lifestyle. Also check out the gallery's collection of teapots, serving pieces and other unusual gifts. The proceeds from your purchases help support the nonprofit Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts, operators of the estate.

The Un-Mall

The Washington Street Mall offers old-fashioned Main Street shopping—but without the street. Boutique-style stores flank three blocks of a pedestrian promenade (open to traffic only between blocks at Ocean, Decatur, Jackson and Perry Streets) in the heart of Cape May. The Mall features everything from clothing shops, jewelry stores and art galleries to gift emporiums, toy stores and candy shops.

For a souvenir that's quintessentially Cape May, check out Cape May on Canvas, offering the largest selection of Cape May scenes—such as “digital paintings” of Victorian Row, the Physick Estate and Congress Hall—by Scott Griswold, Jr. You can also shop for unique Christmas decorations, including ornaments of famous Cape May B&Bs, year-round at the Winterwood Gift and Christmas Gallery, housed in a historic brick bank built in 1895. And for nostalgic five-and-dime shopping, check out Dellas 5 & 10, a Cape May staple since 1947; there's even a soda fountain counter inside. For more snacks, The Original Fudge Kitchen and Kohr Bros. frozen custard are local favorites.

The 'Ugly' Meal

You may want to save your appetite, however, for a bite at The Ugly Mug on the Mall, which opened in 1926. The menu is the same for lunch and dinner, featuring everything from pub-style grub to surf-and-turf entrees. Feeling adventurous? Try the famous Ocean Burger, a hamburger topped with shrimp and sharp cheddar cheese. You also can't go wrong with a seafood dish like the Shrimp Mug, a casserole combining shrimp and the fresh catch of the day.

But perhaps more than the food, the Mug is known for its festive atmosphere based on the motto "Mix a little folly with your wisdom; a little nonsense is pleasant now and then." As for the décor, what's with the mugs hanging from the ceiling? Following pub tradition, they belong to members of The Ugly Mug club. The mugs facing the ocean belonged to those members now deceased. (And if you still have the stamina later—and a babysitter for the kids—return to The Ugly Mug after 10 p.m., when the pub turns into a happening nightspot with live music or D.J.s and dancing.)

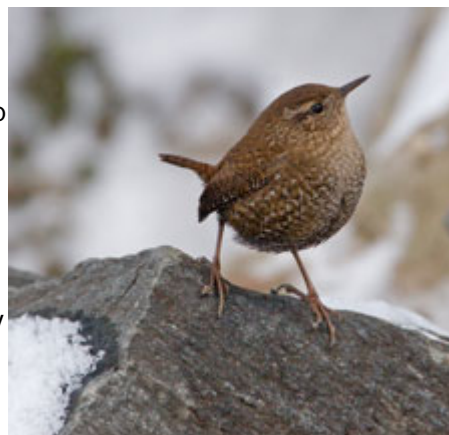
Congressional Quarters

After a long day of touring and shopping, head a few blocks up Perry Street toward the ocean to Cape May's landmark hotel. Congress Hall first opened in 1816 as a boarding house and through the centuries has hosted U.S. Presidents Ulysses S. Grant, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan and Benjamin Harrison. Expanded and completely renovated, the hotel features 108 modern guest rooms and five suites—yes, with private bathrooms—as well as on-site restaurants and lounges including Cape May's first tavern and post-Prohibition cocktail bar. When reserving your room, request one of the many guest rooms in the hotel's L-shape design for a postcard-perfect ocean view.

Day 2: Sunday

The Early Birder

Let nature take the course on your second day in Cape May. Located smack-dab along the Atlantic Flyway, the area is one of the top birding hotspots on the continent and, hands down, is the number-one birding location on the Eastern Seaboard. Hotspots include Higbee Beach, harboring New Jersey's last stand of dune forest; the Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge; and Cape May Point State Park. Depending on your timing, you may be lucky



enough to catch some glimpses of hawks, gulls, loons, scoters, eagles, owls and more. You can perch yourself on one of the observation platforms or explore the many trails in hope of sightings. Or, check out the New Jersey Audubon Society's Cape May Bird Observatory, hosting many guided walks and workshops in the park and surrounding areas, including Take a Kid Birding. (Preregistration for many programs is required.)

A Bird's-eye View

Exploring Cape May Point State Park, you can't miss the lighthouse, standing 157 feet, 6 inches tall. Built in 1859, the lighthouse still operates as a beacon with its light visible 24 miles out to sea. The grounds, ground floor, tower and watch room gallery are open to the public. For the ultimate bird's-eye view, climb the lighthouse's 199 steps via a cast-iron spiral staircase.

Diamonds in the Rough

From the lighthouse, head to Sunset Beach at the Point, where you can comb the sands for Cape May diamonds. These quartz crystal "diamonds" wash up on the shore here in great quantities, thanks to the tidal flow against the hulk of the *Atlantus*, the partially sunken concrete ship visible from the shoreline. When polished and faceted, these crystals look like bona-fide diamonds to the untrained eye. (It's said that, before the advent of technology, many a pawn broker had been duped by a Cape May diamond.) The Sunset Beach Gift Shop has a wide collection of finished Cape May diamond rings, earrings and necklaces, which you can also purchase online.

Go Fish

Before crossing back over the bridge toward home, stop at Fisherman's Wharf for a close-up look at some impressive fishing and pleasure boats docked in the harbor. Time it right, and you can watch the boats coming in with their catch of the day. Large commercial boats fish off the shores of Cape May, making the town the second-largest commercial fishing port on the East Coast.

And for some the best fresh seafood on the island, no visit to Cape May would be complete without dining at The Lobster House on the harbor. (Get in line early, though, for reservations are not accepted.) With its own fleet of fishing boats, The Lobster House catches and prepares fresh seafood daily. Try the Lobster House Specialty, comprised of lobster tails, scallops and shrimp served over linguine with garlic butter. And a great way to end your meal and your weekend stay in Cape May is with a warm serving of bread pudding drenched in butter rum sauce that will leave you satisfied yet hungry for more both at once.

For more information:

Family Treasure Hunt

Washington Street Mall Information Booth

609/885-5404 or 800/275-4278

capemaymac.org

Emlen Physick Estate

1048 Washington Street

609/884-5404

Washington Street Mall

1048 Washington Street

609/884-5111

Washingtonstreetmall.com

Cape May on Canvas

412 Washington Street

609/884-8716

Resortsoncanvas.com

Winterwood Gift and Christmas Gallery

526 Washington Street

609/884-8949

winterwoodgift.com

Dellas 5 & 10

Washington and Decatur Streets

609/884-4568

Dellas5and10.com

The Ugly Mug

426 Washington Street

609/884-3459

Congress Hall

251 Beach Avenue

888/944-1816 or 609/884-8421

Congresshall.com

Cape May Bird Observatory



Northwood Center

701 East Lake Drive

Cape May Point

609/884-2736

Birdcapemay.org

Cape May Lighthouse

Cape May Point State Park, Delaware Bay entrance

609/884-8409

Chalfonte.com

Sunset Beach

Cape May Point

800/757-6468

Sunsetbeachnj.com

The Lobster House

Fisherman's Wharf, Cape May Harbor

609/884-8296

thelobsterhouse.com

The information in this story was accurate when it was published on the AAA World Web site in January 2009, but details such as dates, times and prices may have changed since then. We suggest you verify such details directly with the listed establishments before making travel plans.