

Where Presidents Hang out

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From the Kennedys to the Obamas, it's been the favourite holiday destination of the presidential set. But even if your home address isn't the White House, Martha's Vineyard is chic and charming.

I didn't just need a break, I needed a complete change of scenery. So when a friend suggested we visit her parent's new house on Martha's Vineyard, I packed in such a hurry I forgot my toothbrush. I'd never been on the Vineyard before and decided to 'google' what I could about it.

When I told non-American friends where I was going, I could actually see their eyes glaze over with the brain-strain of trying to compute: Martha's plus Vineyard equals 'Where?' I thought it was ironic that a tiny island made infamous in the media by presidential visits (from the Obamas and Clintons back to Ulysses Grant) and Kennedy scandals was still one of the best-kept secrets in the world. I'm not a beach bum, into yachts or own a J Crew catalogue, so I envisioned myself spending mornings in quaint cafes with a good book and evenings sipping cocktails on the harbour front with my friend.

As it turned out, travelling to the island takes commitment and a strong stomach. The only way there is by ferry from one of the ports off the East Coast or flying there from New York or Boston. We took the cheaper option. As I boarded the three-tiered ferry with two hundred other people, I wondered what the brown bags stored on either side of the boat were for. An hour and a half later of choppy water that had the boat swelling and dipping the entire twelve-kilometre journey to Oak Bluffs harbour, and I found myself almost reaching for one of those bags. I knew for the first time in my life what it was like to want to kiss solid ground when we docked. It was amazing how calm everyone on the ferry was though. They were obviously seasoned aficionados and once my pallor had disappeared, I was curious to find out what it was that kept them coming back.

As we drove to the house, my friend's dad pointed out the grey stone wall fences by the side of the road that New England is famous for - evidence of the first settlers and a reminder of colonial roots. My friend's parents had a house up-island in Aquinnah, known for its distinguished and wealthy residents including Jacqueline Onassis Kennedy. The five-bedroom sprawl came with an unbroken view of Vineyard Sound and the 'googled' promise of a scenic sunset was fulfilled on my first evening on the Vineyard.

After a couple of days of harbour front cocktails in the island's 'wet' towns (out of the six towns on Martha's vineyard, only Oak Bluffs and Edgartown sell alcohol), staring at yachts and J Crew preppies, I decided I'd soaked up enough sea-front flavour and plundered each town for whatever historic offering it had. That's when I fell in love with the island. The exhibition of a local artist named Stanley Murphy led me onto the Legend of Moshup, which is when I first heard of the Wampanoag tribe, which still has 500 of its members living in Aquinnah. I learned about the Greek Revival architectural style in Edgartown, which was populated by wealthy sea captains who made their fortunes in the whaling industry that Herman Melville immortalised in Moby

Dick. I discovered that 'gingerbread' cottages in Oak Bluffs are named for the unique filigree work on their fences and the bright candy colours of their facades. Edgartown Lighthouse was my favourite of the five dotting the island, because of the children's memorial that lay on its concrete base with the names of underage children from all over the world who had died too young, scribbled into each solid cobblestone. I gazed at the Aquinnah (formerly Gay head) cliffs from a height, imagining the sight of the giant Moshup, protector of the Wampanoag Native American Indians, bashing a whale against the cliff sides for his dinner. Natives say it was the whale blood that laid the red streaks in the multi-coloured clay cliffs.

Don't bother visiting if you've got seafood allergies - it would just be a damn shame. The 'quahog chowdah' (that's clam chowder to non-Bostonians) from Seafood Shanty was worth every calorie-filled spoonful and don't think of leaving the island without having sampled a brown bag full of deep-fried oysters or scallops (my personal favourite) from 'The Bite' Menemsha clamshack.

It's a rectangular, blue, plywood box lying nowhere in particular on the road down to Menemsha beach where you can pre-order your paper bagfuls and drive by to pick them up before heading to the beach to join the others for another glorious orange and purple-hued sunset. Pop into Larsens fish market along the pier strewn with trawlers, lobster cages and fishing shacks to pick up a lobster roll for a fiver or a fresh lobster from the tank for a whole lot more.

A-list celebrities like Beyonce, Jay-Z and Spike Lee have been spotted on the island. Singer Carly Simon of You're so Vain and Coming around again fame co-owns a boutique store called Midnight Farm in Vineyard Haven. It's full of odds and ends of clothing, furniture and is a treasure-trove of scented candles that may lead you to a special keepsake. And John Belushi of The Blues Brothers fame is buried in Chilmark. But, don't visit for celebrity spotting. There's no point. Residents are infamous for protecting their privacy and those of their neighbours. It is what keeps the A-listers coming back for more. That, and Mad Martha's ice-cream of course. As I stood in one of her parlours waiting for my order of Oreo Cookie Nookie, I wondered if Spielberg had stood in the same place when he was here filming Jaws at Menemsha beach.

A week flew by all too quickly and my summer fling was over as soon as it had started. It had taken me by surprise; creeping under my skin and into my heart when I wasn't looking. As the ferry drew away from port, I threw a penny into the Sound, promising to come back and keep the depth of my affection for this little island to myself. I finally understood why this little island was one of the best-kept secrets in the world. Dammit, I've given it away.

GETTING THERE |

By plane from New York or Boston.
Passenger and car ferries are the cheaper option.

WHERE TO STAY |

Accommodation ranges from private home rentals to affordable boarding houses.

Backpackers can opt for Hostel International-Martha's Vineyard (www.usahostels.org), where dorm beds are as little as \$29- \$39.