

Victorians' Secrets

The quaint, quirky beachfront charms of Cape May, N.J.

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Every summer, confused tourists walk up the front steps of my family's beach house in Cape May, N.J., thinking it's a bed-and-breakfast, and we shoo them away. Sometimes there's not even room for me, so I don't feel too badly dismissing unrelated people. Truth be told, it was a treat one summer weekend to find accommodations elsewhere (no offense, Mom) as the family house was overcrowded. After seeing how the other half lives in Victorian Cape May, I know where to send people.

In air-conditioned comfort (unavailable at my family's house) at 931 Beach Guest House (609-884-0275 or 931beach.com), my husband and I slept soundly, something we're not used to doing in Cape May. Dozing in our queen bed, we didn't hear the beach cleaner, the trash trucks, the guy who empties the parking meters or the street cleaner. Those fastidious Victorians. We also had a kitchenette, a comfortable sitting room and a gorgeous bathroom, but every suite Meg Breeze, the gracious manager, showed us was tastefully appointed, light and airy. (And most came with ocean views.) My siblings were jealous.

Cape May is quaint, quirky and quick to nab tourists' money. Beach tags are required when lifeguards are on duty, and they aren't cheap (\$9 a person for three consecutive days or \$4 a day for beachgoers 12 and older). But the beach-tag inspectors go off duty around 3:30, which for my money (or lack of a beach tag) is the best time on the beach anyway. Lifeguards stay till 5:30.

In typical Cape May fashion, rollerblading and bike riding are allowed on the 1.4-mile beachfront promenade — get this — from 4 a.m. to 10 a.m. There used to be a law banning dog barking after 10 p.m. Nice try. The beach is closed after dark, and noisy beach-cleaning machines run back and forth all night to discourage romantic walks along the shore. Damn those Victorians. But during the day, the beaches are pristine and walkable — all the way down to the scenic Cape May Point Lighthouse.

Luckily, Cape May is a beach town where being off the beach can be worthwhile, too. Bike-riding along the tree-lined streets is an architectural feast, since the entire town is a National Historic Landmark, with scads of beautifully painted Victorian homes, shops and restaurants.

When hunger strikes, hit The Lemon Tree (609-884-2704) on the Washington Street Mall for great fries, hot dogs and ices. Another option, George's Place (609-884-6088), is a reasonably priced family-run restaurant on the beachfront with a fabulous breakfast quesadilla, and the locals know dinners are great here, too. Taking things up several notches, the Washington Inn (609-884-5697 or washingtoninn.com) is stellar, as is The Blue Pig Tavern in the swanky Congress Hall (888-944-1816 or congresshall.com), a beautifully renovated hotel that also has its own nightclub.

I'm more likely to sample the nightlife available on an oceanfront porch — conversation, perhaps a little music and a moon with a view.

A Highlight of the Trip

Don't miss walking or perhaps even taking a horse-drawn carriage ride (609-884-4466 or capemaycarriage.com) down Hughes Street. It's canopied by trees and features an especially lovely group of old homes — even a couple pre-Victorian ones that survived the fire of 1878. It's a charming combination. Meandering through the back streets after a sumptuous dinner out is an old-fashioned way to walk back in time at America's oldest seaside resort.