

THE GREAT BEACH AT NAUSET—FOLLOWING IN THOREAU'S FOOTSTEPS

By

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Driving along Cape Cod's quiet Route 6A, my daughter and I can't help but be impressed with the by-gone charm of weathered old gray buildings nestled amongst leafy elm and red maple trees. To our delight, we are viewing a virtually untouched, quintessential New England landscape.

Cape Cod is a bent arm-shaped landmass jutting out into the Atlantic from the southeast corner of Massachusetts. Thousands of years ago, glacial activity and the natural forces of wind and sea created this area of sandy, rolling hills with low brush and pine trees. Many freshwater ponds carved by retreating glaciers can be found tucked away in the surrounding woods.

Although much of the Cape is developed, an act of Congress in 1961 establishing a National Seashore Park preserved a great deal of the Outer Cape's pristine beach, marsh, and forest environment.

Following a twisting and turning side road, we are on our way to the Park's Visitor Center in Eastham. Early morning fog, often found on the Cape in July, is beginning to give way to a slightly overcast sky. Crossing multiple, small bridges spanning calm, gray saltwater marshes and purple-hued cranberry bogs, we are pleased that we chose this route and an early start for our exploration.

America's great 19th century writer, Henry David Thoreau, followed the same route on his way to Nauset Plain and the Great Beach, which the modern-day National Park incorporates. During his life time, Thoreau wrote numerous articles recalling his three walking trips on the Cape in 1849, 1850 and 1855 for the magazine, Putnam's Monthly; as well as giving speeches about the subject. After his death, these beautiful descriptions were published in a book titled, Cape Cod.

Fortunately, this stretch of the Cape's Atlantic coast has seen very little change since the work was written. Forty miles of the Outer Cape are still dominated in places by massive bluffs of sand from 50 to 150 feet high, covered in sea grass interspersed with hollows, which provide shelter from the wind and sea. Virtually rock-free, and undisturbed except for the unrelenting ocean surf rolling in and breaking on the offshore shoals, the 4 or 5 rods-wide Great Beach (16.3 feet per rod) is as glorious as when Thoreau first glimpsed it. Seagulls still circle noisily overhead and fishing boats are a common sight.

The Eastham Salt Pond Visitor Center, located near the elbow of the Cape, provides the National Park's gateway to this scenic area. Orienting ourselves at the center with an informative and well-produced visitors' film, we head outside for a pleasant hike. Set on a scenic bluff overlooking a large saltwater pond surrounded by scrub pine trees, three trails of varying length radiate from the center.

Nauset Marsh Trail, about a mile around, circumvents the Great Salt Pond and Nauset Marsh, a tidal estuary, and is the longest. Native vegetation is clearly labeled and identified. Nearby Doane Trail, a half mile in length, also offers vistas of Nauset Marsh, is paved, and good for strollers and wheelchairs. Uniquely designed Buttonbush Marsh Trail, about a quarter mile around, provides a wide path with a

guide rope, and signs in Braille for those who are sight impaired. We chose this trail only because it is the shortest and we are looking forward to the beach.

Quickly rounding a bend and crossing a boardwalk bridge, we reach a rush-filled pond populated with heron, ducks, and chirping red-winged blackbirds. Hardworking beavers are also in evidence judging by the number of their reed houses. Fruit trees of former colonial settlers labeled with a brief history are scattered along the way. Thoroughly enjoying ourselves, we spend about thirty minutes on the trail. Other tourists we spoke with gave equally good marks to the Nauset Marsh Trail with its boardwalk across the marsh and wonderful views.

Small by a Westerner's standard, the Park covers only 44,000 acres, but includes a 40-mile long stretch of dramatic Atlantic shoreline from Chatham, at the Cape's elbow, to Provincetown, at the Cape's northern-most tip or fist. Additional hiking trails, up to three miles long, meander through and around estuaries, ponds, tree swamps, and bay island beaches. Three biking trails, from one and a half to seven miles in length, run through similar terrain.

Also, within the National park's boundaries and open for tours by the Park Service are five historic buildings. Located in Eastham is Penniman House, a whaling captain's home; and two lighthouses with important Cape History: Nauset Light and the Three Sisters. Further north, the Atwood-Higgins House in Wellfleet, is a wonderful example of a Cape Cod cottage. And at Truro, you'll find Highland Light and Highland House, the Cape's oldest lighthouse, circa 1798, and a museum with displays from the Cape's numerous shipwrecks.

Thoreau began his Great Beach walk north in the area of Nauset Light and ended at Highland Light some 15 miles and a day later. En route, he overnighted with a Wellfleet oysterman.

My daughter and I drive north from the same Nauset Lighthouse, paralleling the ocean, across the moor-like landscape of Nauset Plain. Few houses are visible; civilization is close by, but there is an air of remoteness—not unlike that of a century and a half ago. We're headed for Cahoon Hollow Beach in Wellfleet, halfway between Nauset Light and Highland Light. There, as a child, my daughter and a close friend spent many happy summer days.

Normally, beachgoers would be here in droves, but today's weather has limited them—all the better for us to savor the sound of the pounding surf and salt air. We make our way down the dunes aided by a wooden staircase with railing. Testing the water, we quickly retreat from the shore's edge realizing it is just as well we didn't bring our swimsuits. Out of the wind, in the lee of the dunes, we join a few other hardy souls enjoying the ocean's freshness and admiring the sailboats.

Has anything changed here since Thoreau ventured along this shoreline? Most importantly, debris from ships wrecked on the Cape's dangerous outer shoals no longer litter the Great Beach. A three-hundred-year recorded history of some 3,000 shipwrecks has ended thanks to the building of the Cape Cod Canal. The canal's location enables ships, great and small, to by-pass the Cape's treacherous Atlantic shore. And the result has been an infinitely more pristine, Outer Cape beach area greatly enjoyed by hikers, bird-watchers, sunbathers and surfers alike. NO SHARKS NEED SWIM BY!!!!