

The Towns Of Martha's Vineyard

Aquinnah (formerly known as Gay Head)

Aquinnah, also known by its former name Gay Head, is the site of the most dramatic natural phenomenon on Martha's Vineyard - the Gay Head Cliffs. A must-see for every visitor, the mile-long cliffs of multi-colored clay are a geological wonder. The public beach where the cliffs and ocean meet is awe inspiring. One of the America's first lighthouses was erected atop the cliffs in 1799, where the majestic Gay Head Light now stands

Many year-round residents of Aquinnah are descendants of the Wampanoag, the only federally recognized Native American tribe in Massachusetts. This recognition has resulted in a government-to-government relationship between the United States and the Wampanoag Tribal Council.

The Wampanoag have a long history and showed the colonial settlers how to kill whales and plant corn and where to find clay for the early brickyards. Much later, these Aquinnah Indians were in great demand as boatsteerers in the whaling fleets. Their courage also made them take to the seas in incredible weather to aid the survivors of some of the famous wrecks that took place off the Aquinnah Cliffs. As further testament to their valor, a plaque on the schoolhouse commemorates the fact that Aquinnah sent more men in proportion to its size to World War I than did any other town in New England.

The brilliant colors of the mile-long Aquinnah Cliffs astonished the early explorers and have continued to be a source of intense interest to scientists and visitors alike. The layers of sands, gravel, and compact clays of various hues tell a hundred-million-year-old story of a land first covered with forests, then flooded and laid bare time and again.

Erosion continues as it has for centuries, turning the seas red and revealing fossil secrets. From these we know of the great sharks that swam over what is now Chilmark, of the clams and crabs — so like our own — that inhabited ancient seas. Pieces of lignite from the Cretaceous period are found on the beach, looking like nothing more than the remnants of recent campfires. Fossil bones of camels and wild horses, as well as those of ancient whales, have been found in the cliffs.

Because of the extremely dangerous rocky ledge offshore, this has always been a place of great peril to the mariner. One of the first revolving lighthouses in the country was erected atop the cliffs in 1799. It had wooden works, and when they became swollen in damp or cold weather, the lighthouse keeper and his wife would be obliged to stand all night and turn the light by hand to send out its white flash. The current red-brick, electrified Aquinnah Light stands its place.



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Chilmark and Menemsha

The Town of Chilmark is a small rural community located toward the western end of the island of Martha's Vineyard. Most of its 10,639 acres are devoted to residential and agricultural use. Chilmark was named for a town near Thomas Mayhew Sr.'s birthplace in England. It was established in 1671 along with Tisbury and Edgartown. It became a farming community, and by 1850 had 96 farms.

Chilmark boasts the island's highest elevation. The ancient stone fences, undulating landscape, and soaring ocean views suggest Ireland. The town provides some of the best hiking and photography on the island. The town center, near Beetlebung Corner, offers a modern library, community center, a general store, and a chocolate factory.

The Chilmark village of Menemsha is an authentic New England fishing village with several small shops and eating places. During the spring, summer, and fall, fishing vessels come in with their catches and fresh seafood can be purchased there. The harbor, in addition to a commercial pier where fishing vessels tie up, has a small yacht marina that is extremely popular during the summer months. Menemsha is also the home of a Coast Guard Station.

Chilmark is a particularly welcoming in the fall. The busy tourist season is over, the weather is beautiful, and the rolling hills, woodlands, and lovely panoramic ocean views make the town an extraordinary place to visit.



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Edgartown and Chappaquiddick

One of New England's most elegant communities, the town of Edgartown was the island's first colonial settlement, and it has been the county seat since 1642. The stately white Greek revival houses built by the whaling captains have been carefully maintained. They make the town a museum-piece community, a seaport village preserved from the early 19th century.

Main Street is a picture book setting with its harbor and waterfront. The tall square-rigged ships that sailed the world's oceans have passed from the Edgartown scene, but the heritage of those vessels and their captains has continued. For the past hundred years, Edgartown has been one of the world's great yachting centers.

To view and appreciate this town fully, you must walk its streets. North Water Street has a row of captains' houses not equaled anywhere. South Water Street is dominated by a huge pagoda tree brought from China as a seedling by Captain Thomas Milton in the early days of the last century. The house beyond it was that of Captain Valentine Pease, on whose ship Herman Melville made his only whaling voyage.

Many houses in Edgartown predate the whaling era. Most are private residences, but three notable ones are serving other needs. The Vincent House (built in 1672, the oldest known house on the Island) and the Thomas Cooke House are museums. At 34 South Summer Street, you'll find the home built by Benjamin Smith in 1760. It is now the office of the Vineyard Gazette. Across from the Gazette is the Federated Church, built in 1828. It still has the old box pews, which are entered through little doors and have narrow seats around three sides.

The famous Old Whaling Church with its six massive columns commands Main Street. Built in 1843 at the height of the whaling industry, the Church was given to the Martha's Vineyard Preservation Trust in 1980. It has been transformed into a performing arts center. Next door is the Dr. Daniel Fisher House, built three years before the Old Whaling Church.

There are excellent public beaches in the township of Edgartown. Norton's Point, known as South Beach or Katama, Wasque and Cape Poge on Chappaquiddick are both unspoiled areas owned and maintained by The Trustees of Reservations. They are favorite spots for bluefish and bass fishermen. Lighthouse Beach, located off North Water Street near the town center, offers calm water and views of harbor activities. Bend-in-the-Road Beach, part of Joseph Sylvia Beach, has ample parking and is accessible by bicycle trail.

Felix Neck is about three miles outside the center of town on Vineyard Haven Road. The 200 acres, owned by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, provide marked trails and a program of wildlife management and conservation education throughout the year.



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Oak Bluffs

The Town of Oak Bluffs is a resort town on the northeast shore of the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Originally incorporated in 1880 as Cottage City, in 1907 the town's name was changed because of the growth in the year round population and the changing face of the resort required an acknowledgement the town was not just "Cottage City" any more.

The rechristening marked the coalescence of all the elements that make Oak Bluffs unique as an oceanfront resort and distinguish its character in relation to the other Island towns.

With its diversity and density of population and the tradition of being the site of institutions that serve the Island-wide community, Oak Bluffs has proven itself to be the innovator and resilient flak-catcher in response to changing trends and conditions in the society at large.

Oak Bluffs is home to many historical and nationally recognized landmarks. Located at the foot of Circuit Ave, the Flying Horses Carousel is the nation's oldest operating platform carousel. It is one of the two known carousels built by Charles W.F. Dare in 1876. In 1884, the Flying Horses were brought to Martha's Vineyard; this treasured carousel has been enjoyed by Vineyarders and visitors for more than a century.

The Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association, located in the center of Town offers a unique experience for visitors. The Campground consists of hundreds of imaginative and colorful gingerbread cottages containing the most perfectly preserved collection of Carpenter Gothic style architecture in the world. These truly unique Victorian "gingerbread" cottages are just a stones throw from the famed Tabernacle.

Oak Bluffs operates the largest marina on Martha's Vineyard, which not only has the most slips, but is situated in the midst of the historic gingerbread campgrounds, and offers easy access to the rest of the Island. "OB", as it is sometimes referred to, also is home to several beautiful public beaches, a teaming shore of wildlife, fish and shellfish, fabulous public parks and even a microbrewery, and the island's finest golf course, Farm Neck.

In modern times Oak Bluffs has come to terms with all of the strands in its past. Oak Bluffs has experienced simultaneous development of a secular seaside resort, and the continuation of a religious summer revival. Today, an active downtown is complete with exciting restaurants, charming inns, shops, and galleries, a variety of specialty food shops, movie theatres, and places to enjoy live entertainment and dancing.

Several annual events highlight Oak Bluffs calendar of events: The 20th Monster Shark Tournament, Illumination Night in the Campground cottages, and the August Fireman's Association Fireworks.



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Vineyard Haven (Tisbury)

The Town of Tisbury is a resort community on the north shore of Martha's Vineyard. In 1663, Indians sold West Chop to whites. The first permanent European settlement was established in 1674, although European explorers, traders and fishermen had roamed the area from early in the 16th century.

Gosnold, among other explorers, recorded his impressions during a voyage in 1602. The area abounded in shellfish, striped bass, bluefish, and swordfish and drew Indians as well as Europeans for offshore fishing and the massive herring runs. Early settlers relied on agriculture, grazing, and raising hay for cattle, but the town grew very slowly.

Tisbury was incorporated as a town in 1671. It was named for the parish in England where Thomas Mayhew Sr. was born. Originally it was much larger, but in 1892 part of Tisbury became the separate Town of West Tisbury.

In 1700, there were only three families in Tisbury with a total of 27 people; in 1775, there were only 45 families with 225 people. In 1787, there were 21 licensed inn holders, again clearly servicing a transient population much larger than the permanent one and certainly foreshadowing the town's modern character. Residents managed the port, fishing boats, and salt works. In 1836, the town built deep-water wharves and two marine railways to facilitate boat handling.

The first submarine telegraph line was laid across Vineyard Sound to West Chop in 1856, significantly improving communications for townspeople. Residents fished for whales and operated 125 farms at the end of the 19th century, but by the turn of the century, Tisbury had shifted from a maritime to a land economy, with residents operating a steam corn factory, embossing leather, building harnesses, and raising poultry and fruit.

By the 1950s, the town had established its modern character, which relies heavily on the servicing of a growing and affluent summer community that continues to build large summer homes on the island. Fishing and farming are still carried on to a lesser degree. The vibrant business community supplies the island's extensive building trade, and the time-honored boatbuilding industry thrives.



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West Tisbury

West Tisbury covers 34 square miles and has a year-round population of 2612. As a popular vacation destination that number grows to several times that in the summer. The first recorded settlement was in 1669 and incorporated as a town on April 28, 1892. West Tisbury is home to many acres of State Forest, scenic beaches, rich farm land and retains many historical structures still in use today.

West Tisbury, the bucolic heart of the island of Martha's Vineyard, prides itself on its genuine rural qualities, its well-protected natural resources, its resident writers and artists, its ocean beaches, its neighborly sense of community, its wildflowers, its homespun general store, its fertile farmland (a winery, a strawberry farm, a llama farm, and hundreds of cows, sheep, and onion patches), its summer farmers' market, and its boisterous agricultural fair each August. This slow moving and simple rural village was the fastest growing community in the Commonwealth through the 1980s



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