

The Impulsive Traveler

Woods Hole and the science of vacation

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

In another life, I used to vacation on Martha's Vineyard. My guy and I would fill the car with bags and beagle, and we'd drive to Woods Hole — a village in the town of Falmouth on the southwestern corner of Cape Cod — singularly focused on catching our ferry to the Vineyard. At the Steamship Authority, we lined up with everyone else who'd made reservations two seasons in advance. The staging area was stressful and intense, filled with SUVs jockeying for spots and people anxious to reach their summer retreats. Certainly, it was worth all the hassle to vacation with some of my favorite people on a blissful perfect island.

But today, I forgo the ferry and enjoy the port town I once bypassed.

Woods Hole was settled more than 300 years ago, and for centuries, it was a fishing and farming community. Today, thanks to the abundance of fauna in its waters — luring researchers from around the world — it's known as a center for marine, biomedical and environmental science.

It's home to the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the largest such research institution in the country; the Marine Biological Laboratory, where more than 50 Nobel Prize winners have taught, taken courses or conducted research; and divisions of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Geological Survey. Together, these institutions occupy about 170 buildings in town and operate a dozen research vessels and collecting boats. Walking into Woods Hole (and especially crossing over the drawbridge, which few tourists do) feels like walking onto the set of a marine biologist reality show.

But to fully enjoy this show and all the town's treasures — bike path, small beaches, fiery sunsets, deck dining, resident scientists — the best time to visit is just after Labor Day, after all the college students, post-docs and those making a beeline for the Vineyard ferry have gone home. Or alternatively, before it all begins around Memorial Day.

During my most recent visit, I picked up a bike map at Pie in the Sky bakery and started each day with an early ride. The town's commercial center is tiny, but it's worth exploring the Marine Lab campus, nestled around Eel Pond. Woods Hole is surprisingly hilly, and no matter which direction I headed in, my legs enjoyed a serious workout. Some days I followed the path of the Falmouth Road Race, which starts at the Woods Hole drawbridge and then passes the Nobska Point Lighthouse, a long stretch of beach and finally the gray-shingled houses of Falmouth.

Other days I pedaled along the Shining Sea Bikeway, a 10.7-mile paved path along the shore of Buzzards Bay between Woods Hole and North Falmouth. Morning tweets and chirps provided surround sound, fog hung low on the path, bunnies scampered into the woods, and I often wouldn't see another human for miles.

During the off-season, it's easy to feel like a local in Woods Hole. Before long, you'll know the schedule of the drawbridge (every half hour), and you'll start calling Coffee Obsession "Coffee O." You'll become a regular at Pie in the Sky because you can't resist the popovers, and for the simple reason that you have to adore a place that keeps a dog bowl and bike pump on its patio. And once you discover the lobster and grilled fish tacos at Quicks Hole, you will find yourself making excuses to eat there at least once a day.



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Eel Pond is the home of the Marine Biological Laboratory, where more than 50 Nobel laureates have worked or studied.



LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

While the facilities of the Oceanographic Institution and the Marine Lab aren't open to the public, both have visitors centers and gift shops in town. The institution — in the news this spring after locating the wreckage of Air France Flight 447 off the coast of Brazil — has its own museum, which is worth a visit.

And it doesn't take much effort for a curious soul to hook up with the scientific community. One of the attractions of Woods Hole for visiting scientists is that there are endless opportunities for impromptu dialogues with other scientists simply walking around town or sitting at one of the watering holes. Spend a few nights at the Captain Kidd and you're likely to meet a scientist doing something super cool and eager to talk about it over whatever's on tap.

One night at the bar I met Bruce, a pilot for the submersible Alvin, who had all kinds of stories. The old Alvin, which made more than 4,200 dives, including surveying the wreckage of the Titanic in 1986, had recently retired, and Bruce was helping to build its replacement.

My friend David, a cell biologist from Boston who has been going to the Marine Lab to teach and conduct research for decades, said years ago that Woods



The Captain Kidd is a favored watering hole for scientists and other scurvy dogs.

Hole was a town of scientists and fishermen. "There were two camps," he told me one night at the Kidd, "and plenty of bar fights." He said that the scientists used to hang out at the Kidd, and the fishermen hung at an establishment across the street called the Landfall.

Scientists clearly still reign at the Kidd, but I didn't see many of their rivals around. "Where do the fishermen go now?" I asked over a drink.

"The fishermen," he said, "are gone." Along with the fish.

Woods Hole may have changed from the era of scientist vs. fisherman bar brawls, but the village retains enough old-fashioned charm to appeal to anyone who cherishes a water view and conversations that stretch well into the night. And if I weren't indebted to the locals for sharing their town with me in

the first place, I certainly was after forgetting both my cellphone (for hours) and my bike helmet (for days) in public places and finding both exactly where I had left them.

My final morning, I took one last bike ride out of Woods Hole, catching a whiff of pre-sunrise baking splendor at Pie in the Sky. I rode up the steep hill to the lighthouse and along Buzzards Bay. Sand on the side of the road sprayed off my tires and covered my calves. Off in the distance, I heard the foghorn of the ferry coming in from the Vineyard and preparing to pick up a new shipment of island-goers. Gritty and exhilarated from the cool salty air, I felt — once again — glad to have stayed in Woods Hole.

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IF YOU GO

Want to take a spur-of-the-moment trip to Woods Hole, Mass.? Here's what you need to know for the weekend of Sept. 9-11:

GETTING THERE

AirTran and JetBlue offer flights from BWI Marshall to Boston with fares starting at \$179 round trip. From the airport, take the Peter Pan bus to Woods Hole (80 miles) for \$55 round trip.

WHERE TO STAY

Woods Hole Inn

28 Water St.
508-495-0248
www.woodsholeinn.com

Nine rooms with private baths in the center of town; pet-friendly. Rates from \$130 include breakfast, parking and use of bikes.

Sands of Time

Motor Inn & Harbor House

549 Woods Hole Rd.
508-548-6300, 800-841-0114
www.sandsoftime.com

Simple rooms, free parking, best view of ferry terminal and harbor. Rates from \$150.

WHERE TO EAT

Pie in the Sky Bakery & Cafe

10 Water St.
508-540-5475

www.woodshole.com/pie
Piping hot popovers (\$2.50), coffees, homemade granola, sandwiches and enough pies (\$15 per pie, \$3.50 per slice) to make your head spin.

Quicks Hole

6 Luscombe Ave.
508-495-0792

www.quicksholewickedfresh.com
Local lobster and fish tacos, Cape Cod microbrews, local greens, fresh salsa and outdoor patio. Tacos start at \$4.95, burritos \$8.95.

Phusion

71 Water St.
508-457-3100

www.phusiongrille.com
Starters include coconut-lobster bisque and duck sliders. Dinner entrees \$18 to \$36.

WHAT TO DO

Shining Sea Bikeway

www.woodshole.com/bikewaymap.pdf
10.7 miles of paved pathways through four villages, along the shore of Buzzards Bay. Bicycle rentals in Falmouth (Holiday Cycles).

Woods Hole Science Aquarium

166 Water St.
508-495-2001
aquarium.nefsc.noaa.gov

Learn about animals of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic waters. Catch the feedings of the injured/stranded harbor seals at 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Ocean Science Exhibit Center

15 School St.
508-289-2663
www.whoi.edu

See cool underwater footage of Titanic wreckage, plus exhibits on marine mammals and toxic algae. Suggested donation, \$2.

INFORMATION

www.falmouthchamber.com

— M.D.G.K.

All lodging and flight info valid as of press time Thursday.

More Travel this week

FRIDAY

Escapes descends into the mines in Beckley, W. Va., in Weekend.

NEXT SUNDAY

The Impulsive Traveler revisits the Ground Zero neighborhood, in Travel.