

Destination: Cape May

The Victorians still reign, but upscale newcomers have brought 21st-century appeal to Jersey's southernmost resort.

Posted May 8, 2012 by [Jen A. Miller](#)

Every summer Friday, Dave McNamee leaves his office in New York City and takes the New Jersey Transit train to Metropark in Iselin, where his car awaits. He then heads south on the Garden State Parkway until he can drive no more. The signpost says it all: Exit 0, Cape May.

Once the Parkway runs out, the 27-year-old McNamee is likely to ease into his weekend with a stop at Harpoon Henry's, a North Cape May bar where 250 types of frozen drinks are served and where the outdoor deck faces Delaware Bay—the perfect perspective for a nightly sunset toast. Or he might go straight to Cabana's, a casual spot for cold beer and live bands in the oceanfront heart of Cape May.

As much as McNamee enjoys the scene, he can't help noticing the difference from the sleepier Cape May of his boyhood. "It's gotten a lot glitzier," says the Delaware native.

On the face of it, not much has changed since McNamee's parents bought a house 20 years ago in North Cape May. That's because, in 1976, the heart of Cape May was named a National Historic Landmark, a designation that protects its characteristic Victorian buildings from demolition.

But the vibe has changed; a chic attitude has crept in. Cape May has stopped clutching its Victorian pearl choker, shaken off its corset and realized that not everything here must drip fussy tassels and gingerbread ornamentation for the town to survive and thrive as a tourist destination.

"It's a good moment for Cape May," says Jack Wright. "It's quaint without being dull." Wright, the editor and publisher of local newsweekly *Exit Zero*, settles into a deep-cushioned couch in the Brown Room, a watering hole with walls the color of milk chocolate and an aesthetic that Gatsby would appreciate. Wright moved from Manhattan to Cape May in 2002. "It felt kind of sexy," he says. "It had an amazing vibe of a classic American seaside town."

The Brown Room—Cape May's unofficial living room—is located in Congress Hall, an 1816 hotel that was reborn as a swanky getaway for a well-heeled clientele, thanks to a \$25 million renovation completed in 2002. Once a Bible-school summer retreat, Congress Hall is at the center of Cape May's latest revival. Its re-opening 10 years ago was a grand statement that the resort's vintage structures could be updated with modern rooms and amenities without losing their authenticity.

At the Rusty Nail, a few blocks down Beach Avenue from Congress Hall, barefoot kids with dogs in tow and 20-somethings in tank tops swish their bare feet through the trucked-in sand around the blazing fire pit. The former surfers' hangout is as close to a beach bar as you can get without crossing the avenue to the actual beach. Here, singles sip beers from frosted mugs, and families crowd around picnic tables (on that same trucked-in sand), ordering old standards like fried pickles and boardwalk fries doused in vinegar. Some of the patrons might even be staying at the adjacent Beach Shack, a hip, retro-looking oceanfront hotel carved out of the old Coachman's Motor

Inn.

Cape May can be described in many ways. Sophisticated. Funky but chic. Touristy. Lively. Historic. Up-to-date. No one understands its broad appeal better than Curtis Bashaw, the Jersey-bred president of Cape Resorts Group. “The backdrop of the town is Victorian architecture, but it’s not a museum like Williamsburg, and not crazy like Disney World,” says Bashaw, whose company owns Congress Hall, the Beach Shack and the Rusty Nail. Other Bashaw properties in Cape May include the Virginia Hotel and Cottages, the Sandpiper Beach Club, and the Star Inn.

Bashaw’s vision for Cape May is simple: “It’s a great place for kids, but we can be adults here too,” he says. The formula is working. Despite a lingering poor economic climate and the loss of a key weekend at the end of August when the area was under mandatory evacuation orders due to Hurricane Irene, Cape May generated \$1.1 million in room-tax revenue through October 2011, an increase of 3 percent over 2010. Beach-tag sales were up 9.5 percent; revenue from parking meters rose by 14 percent.

As in past decades, today’s visitors come to Cape May for surf and sun on the wide, white beaches. They come for the restaurants—from casual eateries like the Mad Batter and George’s Place to upscale classics like the Ebbitt Room and the Washington Inn. They come for Cape May’s two Equity theater companies: Cape May Stage and the East Lynne Theater Company. They come for the shopping, the Victorian architecture, the historic attractions and the natural beauty, including unparalleled bird-watching ([read story here](#)). Visitors even come year-round, thanks to Cape May’s steady diet of seasonal events.

These days visitors also come for the scene, whether it’s poolside cocktails at the Ocean Club Hotel or wine and tapas at Martini Beach—where last summer actress Anne Hathaway let loose karaoke-style to Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’” and K.T. Tunstall’s “Suddenly I See.” (Hathaway, who grew up in Millburn, is a longtime summer visitor.)

Congress Hall, with its distinctive colonnaded façade, yellow-painted brick exterior, ocean-view balconies and lushly manicured grounds, represents the high end of the Cape May experience—priced at \$319 to \$639 a night in the summer.

The success of Congress Hall inspired facelifts at many of its neighbors. The Grand Hotel and Cape Resorts’ Sandpiper Beach Club were reinvented for a tonier crowd. The motel-like Montreal Inn was renovated from dreary to new.

The latest addition to Cape May’s roster of updated resorts is the Ocean Club Hotel, which was renovated in 2011 from what had been the Atlas Inn. Developer Nick Neza had previously renovated the Hotel Alcott, an 1878 Italianate villa that he re-opened in 1987. With the Ocean Club, he sought to bring “a modern flair” to Cape May.

Sipping tea at Sea Salt, the Ocean Club’s Asian- and Mediterranean-influenced seafood restaurant, one is struck by the inky-blue walls and dark wood tables. Even the pool’s bottom is painted in the same alluring dark blue. The Victorians would likely blush at the sight.

The town has gotten into the act, too, with the renovation in 2008 of the Washington Street Mall, a three-block-long pedestrian shopping street just a short walk from the beach. Here, a pretty brick promenade replaced drab concrete. “It really made a difference,” says longtime Cape May vacationer Heather Vanca of Vestal, New York. “You see that things are getting spruced up, picked up, new different shops coming. It moves with the times, and what trends are there, and what people are looking for.” Among the dozens of shops on the mall are upscale newcomers like Across the Way, a gift/import store, and Gallery D’May, presenting fine art.

Preservation has long been essential to Cape May. The large Victorian homes that sprang up in a building boom from the 1860s to the 1880s might have fallen to the wrecking ball without a preservation movement that started in the early 1970s. Tourism in Cape May had been in decline for decades, thanks in large part to the emergence of more modern destinations, such as Wildwood to the north. Cape May’s Victorians were expensive to maintain, especially as second homes. The once-grand structures were turned into apartments and boarding houses or were abandoned. As the tourism economy soured, the town’s grand hotels also deteriorated.

According to Ben Miller, author of *The First Resort: Fun, Sun, Fire and War in Cape May, America's Original Seaside Resort and Cape May Moments* the town's urban renewal plan in the 1960s included the construction of a new, theme-park-like Victorian village in the middle of town. The old Victorians would be knocked down and replaced with modern motels and tract housing. The town even received a \$3 million federal grant for the project in 1963.

"Cape May was really struggling to survive in those days," says Miller. But a group that called themselves the Cape May Cottagers fought to save the city's architectural treasures and, in 1970, petitioned—without the knowledge of the mayor or the town council—to have Cape May named a National Historic Landmark.

What followed was a period of revitalization, with what *Exit Zero's* Wright refers to as "hippies" buying the old Victorians and restoring them according to new guidelines enforced by the Cape May Historical Preservation Commission. Many of the Victorians were reborn as bed-and-breakfasts, adding a new appeal to Cape May as a romantic destination. Today, there are some 600 restored structures in Cape May, the largest concentration of Victorians in America.

Thankfully, the latest rush toward modern amenities has not trampled the much-loved casual beach haunts like HotDog Tommy's, just up the beach from Congress Hall, where wieners with your choice of toppings (Swiss cheese, bacon, mashed potatoes) are served through a sidewalk window. At lunchtime, the line stretches around the block—and no one cares who paid what for a hotel room. Every visitor is equal while waiting for a hot dog.

It's been this way since Cape May became one of the nation's first resorts in the years after the American Revolution. Eleven presidents have visited the town, four while still in office. Benjamin Harrison even set up a summer White House in Congress Hall. Twice. But middle-class vacationers could get here, too—on the stagecoach from Philadelphia to Cape May for just two bucks.

For today's budget minded, Cape May still has free beaches. Not the main ocean beach in town, but the smaller beaches along the Delaware Bay (which are also dog friendly). There are also trolley tours, walking tours, house tours, nature tours and boat tours; crafts and antique shows; music festivals; and food and wine events. Or visitors can simply stroll or bicycle the historic streets on their own.

"Cape May is drawing an incredibly sophisticated crowd, but you don't have to spend a lot to be here," says John Cooke, president of the Chamber of Commerce and general manager of the budget-priced Victorian Motel.

J.P. Toto and Christine Cusick of West Norriston, a suburb of Philadelphia, come to Cape May for its history, its restaurants—Toto swoons for the Kobe beef burger at Union Park—and its unique vibe. "It's got a very old and established feel, but, at the same time is slightly weird," says Toto, 36. "You get a total range of demographics of people on vacation."

Families are included in that demographic. The newly renovated hotels and motels have increased the options for families, who used to find slim pickings for kids' accommodations at Cape May's often finicky B&Bs.

Heather Vanca and her husband, Mike, have been coming to Cape May for 15 years. "It's clean, it's quaint, it's quiet," says Heather, 41. "It has the shopping and the great hotels and the great restaurants. It's just the perfect beach vacation for our family." The Vanca family typically stays at the Victorian Motel across the street from Congress Hall, but about one-third the price.

As much as progress has benefitted Cape May, it has not always been smooth sailing. Gaze across Beach Avenue from the front steps of the new Convention Hall, and you stare at the empty spot where the Beach Theatre, a classic 1950s movie house, used to stand. One of the last existing works of William Harold Lee, who designed cinemas throughout New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the building was torn down in 2011.

A grassroots organization called the Beach Theatre Foundation spent four years fighting to preserve the theater, but in the end the city council allowed the demolition. The theater was unprotected by the town's National Historic Landmark status, since it was not properly registered with the park service. After the demolition, the land was rezoned for condos.

"For a city that espouses preservation, we have lost way, way, way too many important buildings," says Steve

Jackson, president of the Beach Theatre Foundation. “It’s a darn shame how much has been lost. This is just another example.”

The U.S. National Park Service, which bestows landmark status, has had Cape May on its watch list since 2002. On its website, the park service says of Cape May: “Recent development and rehabilitation efforts in the historic district are potentially detrimental to the landmark’s historic character.”

Indeed, there have been other conflicts. The addition of ersatz lighthouses at the entrance to town in 2010 caused an uproar because they were made of vinyl, which the preservation commission has banned from the historic district. The bogus beacons were removed.

The new \$10.5 million, 20,000-squarefoot multi-purpose Convention Hall that opened in May was a source of controversy, even though the building it replaced (a temporary convention center built after the [Great Storm of 1962](#)) had been condemned. The preservation commission deemed the original plans too modern. The building was redesigned.

Then there was the Christian Admiral Hotel, a former grand hotel that was razed by Bashaw in 1996, after the planning board overruled the preservation commission, which initially denied the demolition permit. Bashaw subsequently sold the property to pay off creditors and help fund the renovation of Congress Hall. Homes were later built at the Christian Admiral site. When Cape May blogger Mark Miller attempted to make an April Fools joke out of the episode, tweeting that an investor was interested in rebuilding the Admiral, the resentment over its demolition rushed back to the surface.

While Cape May isn’t in immediate danger of losing its landmark status, the fate of its remaining, unprotected 1950s and ’60s buildings—many built on the sites of Victorians leveled before they could receive landmark protection—continues to be a source of local debate.

“There will be periods that come forward that need to be saved as well, not just everything that is pure Victorian,” says Jackson. “It’s a town that holds up preservation as its credo, but what that means is that preservation cannot be a static thing.”

Cape May is opening its 2012 summer season not quite with a bang, but with a song: a concert with Peter Nero and the Philly Pops on the Friday of Memorial Day weekend at that new Convention Hall. The venue will allow Cape May to host more conventions and bigger special events, like weddings for more than 250. Throughout July and August, a Monday-night concert series will be presented at Convention Hall in partnership with the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

The town continues to grow and change. Businesses that were opened during the recession have begun to take hold. Big Wave Burrito brought food- truck culture to a slip of a shop on the edge of town, serving gourmet burritos to go—under its ceiling decorated with surfboards. The Cape May Organic market opened in West Cape May over the winter, just around the corner from Higher Grounds, a fair-trade coffee shop that launched in 2009. The Cape May Brewery, which opened its tasting room and tours in 2011, has already had to expand. They’ve spawned some competition too: the Tuckahoe Brewing Company opened for business in late 2011. The brewers join Cape May County’s four wineries, augmenting Cape May’s food-and-beverage culture.

These are not the kinds of places you’d have found in Cape May 20 years ago. There just wasn’t the crowd for them.

There is now, mixing with the same people who made this jewel box by the sea a vacation spot in the first place.

Jen A. Miller is author of [The Jersey Shore: Atlantic City to Cape May](#).



A row of perfectly restored Victorians line Jackson Street in the heart of the city's historic district.

Photo by Chris Crisman.



Washington Street Mall.

Photo by Chris Crisman.



The fire pit at the Rusty Nail is (literally) a Cape May hot spot. It's located between the open-air bar, left, and the Beach Shack hotel, just across Beach Avenue from the ocean.

Photo by Chris Crisman.



HotDog Tommy's loyal fans of HotDog Tommy's wait in line for his famous fare.

Photo by Chris Crisman.