

This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.nashuatelegraph.com
To print this article if a print dialogue does not open automatically, open the File menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Biking the cape

By PEGGY NEWLAND Correspondent

Spring in New England can be one of the cruelest months: mud, rain, wind, chills and flowers barely coming up next to grey mounds of leftover snow. Not a time to think of beaches and fried clams, boardwalks and ice cream. Which is why you can find solace and crowd-free beaches on the Cape.

In July or August, prepare to sit in traffic on Route 6 going over the Sagamore Bridge, but in early spring, you sail through free and clear. Especially if you bring your bicycles and stay in a hotel right on the water. My daughter Haley and I decide on Brewster as the place to enjoy a little New England spring-time.

The Cape Cod Rail Trail runs parallel to Route 6 in Brewster, Mass., flat and straight as the railroad tracks it once was in 1873. The Old Colony Railroad Co. linked Boston to the isolated banks of Provincetown before the 1900s, transporting food, provisions and hearty visitors to the scrubby-pined beaches and mountainous sand dunes. Isolated and barren, the Outer Cape of Victorian times was windblown and full of the ship wreckage.

"Nothing's open," Haley says. The Cape appears almost as barren as the 1900s. Many of the fish shacks, tourists shops, taffy stores and gift shops are still boarded up for winter. Which is fine with me.

There's also no traffic as we whiz along scenic 6A through Barnstable and Yarmouth.

"We can bike to the beach tomorrow," I tell my daughter. She doesn't look too excited. Our usual bike rides to the beach are filled with me shouting, "Get to the side of the road!" "Get over!" and various forms of "Car Back," "Car," and "Over." It's not exactly relaxing to bicycle to Hampton Beach in the summer with the hoards of people, cars and motorcycles. "We'll be on a Rail Trail," I say.

I explain that the Cape Cod Rail Trail is off road and freshly paved for 22 miles through the towns of Dennis, Harwich, Brewster, Orleans, Eastham and Wellfleet. Few hills, no cars, with views of estuaries, harbors and ponds. We could ride side-by-side and not pay attention to anything other than what was in front of us. I'd also read on the Rail Trail website that there would be many opportunities for food, snacks and drinks. Restaurants and food stands would be everywhere.

"I'm sure we'll find ice cream," she says.

"Moose tracks," we both say.

The Ocean Edge Resort sits squarely upon a bluff overlooking the Cape Cod Bay. The day turns a brilliant 80 degrees, and the drive into the resort seems way too decadent for a station wagon filled with greasy bikes and helmets. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Ocean Edge seems like Italian villa mixed with English country manor as we pull up to the columned piazza deck with its overstuffed lawn chairs and sofas.

"Wow," Haley says.

The original mansion was built in 1890 by Samuel Mayo Nickerson, a prominent New Englander from Chatham, Mass. A distiller of alcohol but also the co-founder the First National Bank of Chicago, Samuel retired as a multi-millionaire in 1891. Married to Matilda Crosby, the couple had one child, Roland. They entertained in style, hosting a wide range of dignitaries and politicians.

The main foyer is ornate, with a carved oak staircase, leaded glass windows, busts of Shakespearean characters and intricate wooden beams and floors. The Carriage House next door matches the mansion in dimension and opulence. As we stare outside at the croquet sets, expansive lawn and curved walkways, we feel a bit overwhelmed by the grandeur. Haley and I slink inside to the reception desk in our flip-flops and shorts, but surprisingly, there's not an attitude inside at all.

"Perfect day," the receptionist says.

We are given a map to the 429 acres of golf, swimming, tennis, private ocean beaches, pools, kids' clubs, snack shacks, restaurants and bike trails. Our guest room is adjacent to the Nickerson Mansion and overlooks clay tennis courts. The room is decorated in modern Cape Cod decor, with quilted bedspreads and white-washed marble bathrooms, and I look forward to a deep bath with spa essentials that evening. I head to the deck to take in the sea air and read more of the resort's history.

In 1906, the original mansion burned down, and the Nickerson family lost heirlooms, antiques and paintings. After Roland died (apparently from the heartache of losing everything in the fire), his widow and father rebuilt the house in 1907 with steel reinforced concrete to make it fireproof. The new house was larger than the original Fieldstone Hall and included 16 rooms. All main bedrooms were outfitted with Italian marble fireplaces, individual bathrooms and walk-in closets. The mansion remained in the Nickerson family until 1945, when it was sold to the LaSalette religious order. It became Ocean Edge Resort and Golf Club in 1986.

The next morning, we wake to another bizarrely hot April day. The ocean beckons from our deck, but we decide it is time to ride the Rail Trail. After a bagel breakfast, we make a quick crossover of Route 6A from Ocean Edge and are soon free and clear on a tree-lined trail with the wind on our backs. We bring four water bottles but decide against filling our bike packs with snacks because we're confident that food and drink and snacks will be everywhere.

"This is great!" Haley says.

A biker coming toward us is hunkered down in spandex and clip-on shoes while we can glide, barely pedaling. The ocean breeze is warm as we pass Nickerson State Forest and Namskaket Creek. We stop at a map that displays the entire Rail Trail and opt to ride all the way to Wellfleet because the biking is so easy. Riding through the town of Orleans at noon, we're not even hungry for a snack and so we keep going to Wellfleet Harbor.

"We can have a seafood lunch on the water," I say.

We pass Herring, Minister and Great Ponds and are tempted to take a detour to Nauset Light.

"I'm getting a little hungry," Haley says.

We think of fried clams, steamers, perhaps some sort of chowder that we can dunk bread into, and we keep going. Sun is directly overhead and the flats of the rail trail through Eastham seem to go on forever. Boarded up hotels and motels are on the left of us, a wide expanse of scrub brush and four wheeler trail on our right. The trail is straight and narrow and black and we have one more bottle of water between us. We see no one else on the trail either ahead or behind as we careen toward Wellfleet.

"How much longer?" Haley asks, as we pass a restaurant that's closed for the winter.

"Soon," I say, not really knowing.

Marconi Beach Trailhead is on our right. I've heard it is one of the most beautiful beaches on the cape with its natural dunes and wide expanse of beach in both directions. We don't go. Finally, we make it to the Wellfleet Trailhead. The parking lot is empty. The water fountain does not work. We see the Wellfleet Deli and ride to it.

The clerk tells us that in order to get to Wellfleet Harbor, we'd have to travel via Route 6 for another 5 or more miles and then head another 3 into town.

"I don't think anything is open right now for lunch," she says.

"Do you have sandwiches?" I ask.

"No," she tells me. "The deli is getting renovated for summer. It's closed."

Haley and I buy Cape Cod potato chips, some trail mix and three bottles of cold water. We head back to Brewster. The wind is against us.

There are some things you just have to get through and pedaling straight into the wind with hungry bellies is one of them. But then we see it: the Chocolate Sparrow Ice Cream Shack in Orleans. There are bikes lined up against the racks and thrown down upon the grass, and everyone appears to be smiling. There is shade from trees and empty Adirondack chairs. There is ice cream. Moose Tracks is the listed at the top.

With chunks of chocolate, swirled cream in oversized cups, we soon forget about the wind, the flat and narrows and the lack of lunch. The shade is cool as I lean back into the wooden chair.

"This is perfect," Haley says.

Tomorrow, we'll drive back to Marconi Beach, our bicycles in the car.

© 2009, Telegraph Publishing Company, Nashua, New Hampshire