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If Cape Cod were a state—rather than a state of mind—Hyannis would surely be its capital. Though technically a village in the town of Barnstable, Hyannis is home to the Cape's largest year-round population. With ferries, tour boats, fishing vessels and hundreds of private yachts coming and going at all times of the day and night, Hyannis might not be the most bucolic harbor, but has to be the most useful port on the peninsula. Here you'll find good restaurants, lively night spots, museums, shopping, excellent transportation links, fishing boats, ferries, multi-million dollar yachts, simple daysailers and top marine services.



Hyannis represents different things to different people, but its very name evokes the same image for almost everyone—a handsome young President named John F. Kennedy sailing on its waters. JFK's parents, Joseph and Rose Kennedy, bought a summer home in Hyannisport in the late 1920s and expanded it to accommodate their nine children.

In the '50s, Jack and his brother Bobby bought nearby homes, creating what became known as the Kennedy Compound, the site of legendary family gatherings, touch football games, and boating outings. The compound still belongs to the Kennedys. You can see it—but not well—from the water to port near the breakwater as you enter Hyannis Harbor. You will certainly feel the Kennedy presence in the village—at the John F. Kennedy Memorial, in museum displays, and in memorabilia sold in shops along Main Street.

Hyannis was important long before the Kennedys arrived. Iyanough (a.k.a. Iyanough), a sachem of the Cummaquid Indians for whom the village was named, and his tribe were digging clams and oysters from Lewis Bay long before English explorer Bartholomew Gosnold arrived in 1602. Legend has it that Iyanough sold the village for 20 British pounds and two pairs of pants when settlers arrived in the mid-17th century. By 1840 Hyannis was a thriving port. A couple of decades later, Nicholas Davis began pickling his oysters in brine and opened what might have been the first, albeit crude, oyster bar in the country on Pleasant Street in 1866.

Recent Hyannis history may belong to the Kennedys, but there are other famous folks who have shelled out clams to make their homes here. Such notables have included writer Jack Kerouac, athlete John Havlicek (basketball) and Paul Stewart (hockey), and actress/singer Judy Garland. This captivating harbor may make you feel like a star, too.

Things to See and Do

It's hard to visit Hyannis without succumbing to the Kennedy mystique, so you might as well start there. The John F. Kennedy Hyannis Museum (508-790-3077) at 397 Main St., in the old Hyannis Town Hall, reopened in 2005 after several months of renovation. Its exhibits tell the story of JFK's Cape Cod years through a collection of family photographs and a video narrated by Walter Cronkite. The John F. Kennedy Memorial, a fountain that overlooks the water in busy Lewis Bay, has a plaque bearing this quotation from JFK: "I believe that it is important that this country sail and not lie still in the harbor." And, if you need to get a better view of the Kennedy Compound (impossible from land) take the one-hour narrated harbor tour from Hy-Line Cruises (508-790-0696).

Despite its rich seafaring history, Cape Cod didn't have a museum to celebrate it until 2005 when the Cape Cod Maritime Museum (508-775-1723) at 135 South St. opened its doors. The small museum, which has an active education program for both children and adults, overlooks the water. Its main gallery exhibit "For Those in Peril on the Sea" tells the story of ships wrecked along the Cape's Atlantic coast and the important work done by the U.S. Lifesaving Service. A fully restored 1930s surfboat forms the centerpiece of the exhibit.

Downtown Hyannis is a comfortably walkable city, but if you are moored or docked on the outskirts, you might want wheels. Guests at the full-service Hyannis Marina (508-790-4000) can use their courtesy car to get around. Rental cars, buses and local trolley service are also readily available. Contact the Hyannis Area Chamber of Commerce (508-775-2201) for information.

The Cape Cod Central Railroad (508-771-3800) offers two-hour scenic rides between Hyannis and the Cape Cod Canal, as well as elegant three-hour dinner excursions. Most popular of all shore sites are the premium Craigville and Long beaches, a few miles west of the harbor.

When the Cape Cod Mall and its 120 mid-price and upscale stores opened a few miles inshore, folks wondered if Hyannis's Main Street would keep its lively shopping ambience. It's survived pretty well with a mix of boutiques, restaurants, and nightclubs.

Massachusetts residents give Cape Cod Potato Chips rave reviews. You can make up your own mind if you take the self-guided tour at the Cape Cod Potato Chips factory (508-790-3900) at 100 Breed's Hill Road, off Iyanough Road. You'll need to get a ride from the harbor.

Music fans take note: the Boston Pops-by-the-Sea (508-790-2787) performs on the Village Green in August, and the Cape Cod Melody Tent (508-775-5630) on the west side of town is famous for its summer night shows.

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