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Head North for the Summer

Beaches and boardwalks on the Jersey Shore

BY JOAN TUPPONCE

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Looking for expansive white sandy beaches where you can bask in the sun? Let me recommend the Jersey Shore. Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? Most people don't think of going north to the beach, especially to New Jersey. In fact, my daughter's co-workers questioned her judgment when she announced her plans to do just that.

The Jersey Shore was one of my husband's favorite vacation spots when he lived in Philadelphia, and so it was a natural choice for us after a holiday weekend in Philly.

Our first stop was Ocean City, N.J. Our agenda: "Walk the boards" — that's Philly/Jersey lingo for a walk along the wide wooden-plank boardwalk — and check out the people, shops and eateries (thin-crust pizza and Italian ice are popular delicacies here). The boardwalk is straight from the '50s — a place where you can find saltwater taffy, homemade fudge, and every kind of T-shirt and tacky beach memento imaginable.

Thanks to an abundance of sun, the wide beaches were peppered with hundreds of beachgoers. Most Jersey beaches differ from their Southern counterparts in that one must pay for access to the beach. Those fees (generally about \$7) mostly affect day-trippers. The majority of rental properties, motels and hotels provide beach passes.

The southern part of the Jersey Shore stretches from Atlantic City to Cape May — about 38 miles. Leaving Ocean City, which is just south of Atlantic City, we drove south along Ocean Drive (Route 619). The picturesque route snakes along the coast, through small communities and over scenic inlets, and the ocean views are worth the occasional 50-cent toll. Our next destinations were Avalon and Stone Harbor, serene neighboring beach communities where life slows to an easy pace.

The Windrift Resort Hotel in Avalon served as our retreat. Its beachfront location and handsome pool with an upper sun deck overlooking the ocean made it a good choice. The noticeable difference between Ocean City and the beaches in Avalon and Stone Harbor is the crowds — there are none in Avalon and Stone Harbor, just calm ocean surf.

Not far from the Windrift is the Risley House Bed & Breakfast. Built as a residence in the 1900s, the Victorian-style house with wraparound

veranda has been renovated into a charming B&B.

Stone Harbor is home to Third Avenue, a shopping district with offerings ranging from designer labels at up-

scale boutiques like Sea Weeds by the Sea to souvenirs at

the five-and-dime store. I even spotted handbags by Poesis (headquartered in Richmond) at Bellanova, an upscale women's boutique.

Third Avenue is also home to a vintage movie house, the Harbour Five, and several excellent restaurants. We dined at the Italian Garden, a casual eatery/pizzeria, where I opted for one of the chef's specialties — Peasants Pasta, which consists of black olives, chopped tomatoes and onions, all sautéed in herbed garlic oil and served over penne.

For breakfast one morning, we drove to Uncle Bill's Pancake House & Family Restaurant in



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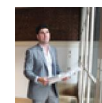
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Avalon, where we had a difficult time choosing from the 15 varieties of pancakes, everything from peach pancakes to peanut-butter pancakes with chocolate chips. But my favorite culinary treats came from Kohler's Bakery in Avalon, where freshly made doughnuts share shelf space with warm sticky buns and coconut macaroons. The tiny shop has been adding to the calorie count of its customers for the past 55 years.

On the last day of our vacation, we drove to Wildwood — halfway between Cape May and Stone Harbor — and walked the boards. The antithesis of Stone Harbor, Wildwood is known for its oceanfront boardwalk amusement parks with Ferris wheels, carousels, stomach-churning rides — think catapulting through the air in revolving cages dangling from the ends of a pole as long as a 10-story building — and carnival-like sideshows. Wildwood is a great place to people-watch, if only for the shock value. We saw everything from folks wearing spiked dog collars to families with small children in tow.

Before heading back to the hotel, we drove through Cape May, a charming resort by the sea that's filled with Victorian architecture — definitely worth another trip back. Maybe next year.

The Essentials

How to get there:

From Richmond, follow I-95 North to I-295 toward the Delaware Memorial Bridge. Turn off of I-295 to N.J. Route 49 (a scenic route that winds through small farming towns) to N.J. Route 50, then follow N.J. Route 9 into Avalon. The trip takes about six hours. (Air service is also available to Atlantic City.)

Where to stay:

Risley House Bed & Breakfast, 8421 First Ave., Stone Harbor, (609) 368-1133.
Windrift Resort Hotel, 80th Street and the beach, Avalon, (609) 368-5175 or www.windrifthotel.com

Where to eat:

Italian Garden, 9700 Third Ave., Stone Harbor, (609) 368-0656.
Kohler's Bakery, 2709 Dune Drive, Avalon, (609) 967-3694.
Uncle Bill's Pancake House, 32nd & Dune Drive, Avalon, (609) 967-8448.

What to do:

Bellanova, 222 96th St., Stone Harbor, (609) 368-0606.
Frank Theatres Stone Harbour Five, 271 96th St., Stone Harbor, (609) 368-7731.
Paisley Christmas Shoppe, 9512 Third Ave., Stone Harbor, (609) 368-7873.
Sea Weeds by the Sea, 9506 Third Ave., Stone Harbor, (609) 967-4242.

For more information:

Cape May County Department of Tourism, 4 Moore Road, Cape May Court House, (800) 227-2297 or www.thejerseycapenet.net.

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