

Small Island With Big Rewards

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Watch out for those bridges," a friend kidded when we told him of our vacation plans for Chappaquiddick.

Actually there's only one bridge, called Dike Bridge. It's at the eastern end of the small island of Chappaquiddick, which itself is considered part of the larger and better-known resort island of Martha's Vineyard. The bridge, closed now to motor vehicles, crosses the neck of a marshy pond to a thin barrier reef and narrow beach that break the Atlantic's surf.

For a few years after the summer of 1969, Chappaquiddick was a household word, to the horror of its residents and visitors. This obscure corner of the Vineyard had been the scene of a tragedy that shook American politics, when a young woman drowned after the car in which she was riding with Sen. Edward Kennedy ran off the bridge.

Chappaquiddick regulars still are doing their best to put back under wraps what had been the Cape Islands' best-kept secret. Martha's Vineyard is shaped like a tricorner hat. Chappaquiddick is the southeast corner, severed by the narrow channel that connects Edgartown Harbor and Katama Bay.

Each leg of a trip to "Chappy," as residents know it, begins with a formidable bottleneck. First you must get to Cape Cod through the gantlet of traffic on U.S. Route 6 between the interstate highways and the Bourne Bridge. Then there is the regulated ferry service to Martha's Vineyard, which requires late winter reservations for summer season car transport, thus limiting the volume of cars allowed on the main island.

A traveler who makes it to Martha's Vineyard in a car must then drive to Edgartown, inch forward in its summer traffic, and keep eyes peeled for a half-hidden sign for the "Chappy Ferry." After this comes a long wait,

because the "On-Time" flatbed ferries only accommodate three vehicles at a time. It's just a one-minute ride across, but it might as well be the English Channel.

For all the old-island charm of its architecture, Edgartown is a bit of urban chic with its shops and restaurants and upscale denizens. But the tiny ferry to Chappaquiddick brings one to a quiet island, with life like that of a half-century ago.

Chappaquiddick has one reluctantly paved road - the island's bow to modern life, perhaps. There is little sign of habitation. Most houses are hidden deep in the woods, at the end of rocky driveways off barely passable dirt roads. The paved road itself, narrow and with no bicycle paths, even discourages cyclists, whom you will find just about everywhere else on Martha's Vineyard.

The paved road - Chappaquiddick Road going east from the ferry, School Road when it turns south - leads to mile-long dirt roads that in turn lead to two ocean beaches. As if the wait for

the ferry and the bumpy ride were not enough deterrent, there are just tiny parking areas at both beaches. Most drivers do the best they can to pull to the side of the road and walk the rest of the way. And unless they're staying on Chappaquiddick, beachgoers have to face yet another long wait for the ferry back to Edgartown at the end of the day.

For all that, those willing to suffer this ordeal are rewarded for their effort. Those rattling dirt roads lead to a Holy Grail of unspoiled, uncrowded ocean beaches that stretch for miles around the eastern end of Chappaquiddick. For a pure beachgoing vacation, there is nothing like it on the whole East Coast.

The first dirt road extension, straight ahead where the main road curves as one drives from the ferry, is Dike Road past Tom's Neck Farm to the infamous bridge over a neck of Pocha Pond. (Some locally-produced maps and guides spell the road and bridge Dyke and the pond Poucha. Likewise, Cape Poge, at the northeast tip of Chappaquiddick, is also spelled Cape Pogue.)

The Dike Bridge takes the Chappaquiddick visitor past pristine dunes to East Beach. Cars are barred by a padlocked chain that children duck under as they head with their parents to the beach.

The scene from the bridge is one of tranquil life and wonder. Behind are the pine and oak trees and berry bushes of the island core. Below is a salt marsh and a pond teeming with sea life, vegetation and shore birds. From the bridge, barefoot boys cast baited hooks into the current below. Ahead the dunes crest on a perfect beach.

A rainbow of green lights the picture: the dark green hues of the island trees, the reddish-green grasses of the marsh, the pale green grass crowning the dunes.

Between the dunes and the beach is a jeep trail running north to Cape Poge and south to Wasque Point. An off-road vehicle is the only means of land access to the extremities of East Beach, except for those with the time for a long, loving walk along miles of unblemished Atlantic beach, some of the last in the Northeast.

For a hundred yards on either side of the point where the path from Dike Bridge ends, there is a family beach full of kites and sand castles and shouting kids. Just walking in either direction, though, will reward visitors more desirous of solitude and quiet.

If you turn left after crossing the bridge instead of heading straight to the beach, following a trail between the dunes and the arm of Pocha Pond for about a mile will bring you to a point across from the Tom's Neck part of the island, where the pond meets Cape Poge Bay. Here, looking across the bay, you can see some of the beautiful, hidden homes of Chappaquiddick.

A spit of beach from the dunes curls into the channel between the pond and the bay, mirroring a parallel twist from the main island just a few yards across the joining of the waters. At the tip, you are standing in the middle of an S-curve; with a slow turn against the current, you can imagine yourself riding on a carousel of sand and flowing water.

In the marsh grasses across the arm of the pond, a great blue heron stands at the water's edge with the sun at its back in late afternoon. With its bulbous body, long neck and legs and startled posture, the bird looks like a miniature giraffe, ill at ease in unfamiliar terrain.

But seeing a glint of fish coming near in the water, the heron starts wheeling neck and body forward until a fish is at hand. Suddenly what seemed an ungainly misfit curls its neck and darts its beak like a striking cobra into the water beneath, pulling out a wiggling eel. Now right at home, the heron takes a few flaps on its huge wings and settles in deeper grass, where its victim cannot escape even if it struggles free.

School Road ends in a dirt road even more rutted and rocky than Dike Bridge Road. A visitor might first think it's another of the dead-end dirt roads that seem to be Chappaquiddick's specialty. On the brink of discouragement, though, with the trees and bushes seeming to close in, a corner is turned and the curtain lifts on an expanse of dunes, marsh, ponds and beach. Here are Wasque Point and South Beach, favorites of surf fishers and beachgoers who want even more isolation than that of East Beach.

Turning right at the "Beach Parking" sign brings a driver to a cleared space in the dunes and a path to the beach, past a pond rich with waterfowl (children are especially delighted to see the mute swans). If you go straight at that sign instead, though, there is a space for a few cars at the end of the road where a longer, wilder, climbing path to the beach begins.

As ocean barrier beaches, both East and South Beach have serious Atlantic waves to contend with. Small children can play in the surf along the beach flats or wade to their chests when the water is calm, but they need watching. A visiting family can make a simple visit to Chappaquiddick by just taking the ferry from Edgartown and walking or driving a quarter-mile down the road, past the private Chappaquiddick Beach Club, to a public access beach on Edgartown Harbor called, no surprise, Chappaquiddick Beach.

There are two other "main" dirt roads on Chappaquiddick. Litchfield Road is a right turn from Chappaquiddick Road. (There are no street signs; all this has to be divined from the sometimes-contradictory maps.) Litchfield Road provides a shortcut to the other end of School Road, completing a triangle with the paved road, though the bumpy ride makes driving difficult.

The other long dirt road is an unmarked left turn off Chappaquiddick Road about a mile farther. What looks like just a driveway is really a long road out North Neck, a peninsula jutting into Cape Poge Bay. Like the dirt road to Wasque Point, North Neck Road seems to be going nowhere for miles when it suddenly opens onto, of all things, a golf course. Augusta National it is not; the holes are par-3 length and the greens look suspiciously like artificial grass. Still, this symbol of leisure is a surprising contrast to the studied undevelopment of Chappaquiddick.

There are no shops on Chappaquiddick. No offices. No galleries. No restaurants. No gas stations. There are no commercial establishments at all, with one extraordinary exception. A happily painted sign on the north side of Chappaquiddick Road about two miles after leaving the ferry announces the "Chappy General Store." If a hidden, half-size golf course is the island's bow to upscale, this half-hidden trading post is its play to down-at-the-heels.

The Chappy General Store is set in an auto junkyard. One supposes that, when a car goes its last mile, there is no point in taking it back on the ferry. On one side of the little cottage-style mart are a rusted overhead crane and engine blocks, compressed air canisters and five-gallon gas jugs. On the other side is a rickety fruit stand framed by abandoned soda machines and old, steel-cage milk crates. Two forlorn picnic tables occupy a little island between the road and the store's parking lot.

Inside the store are five racks of sundries, a soda cooler, a top-loading freezer for ice cream, a kitchen refrigerator for milk and eggs, and languid teenage clerks.

By all means, a visitor to Chappaquiddick should allow ample time for Martha's Vineyard's chronicled charms: the harbor towns with their historic homes and shops and galleries and restaurants and walking tours; the Vineyard's mix of ocean, sound and freshwater pond beaches, bikeways criss-crossing the island; the Gay Head Cliffs.

Still, it's difficult to leave this untrafficked island retreat, where the real rewards of a New England seaside vacation lie at the end of one of those mile-long dirt roads, along a deserted beach.