

TRAVEL

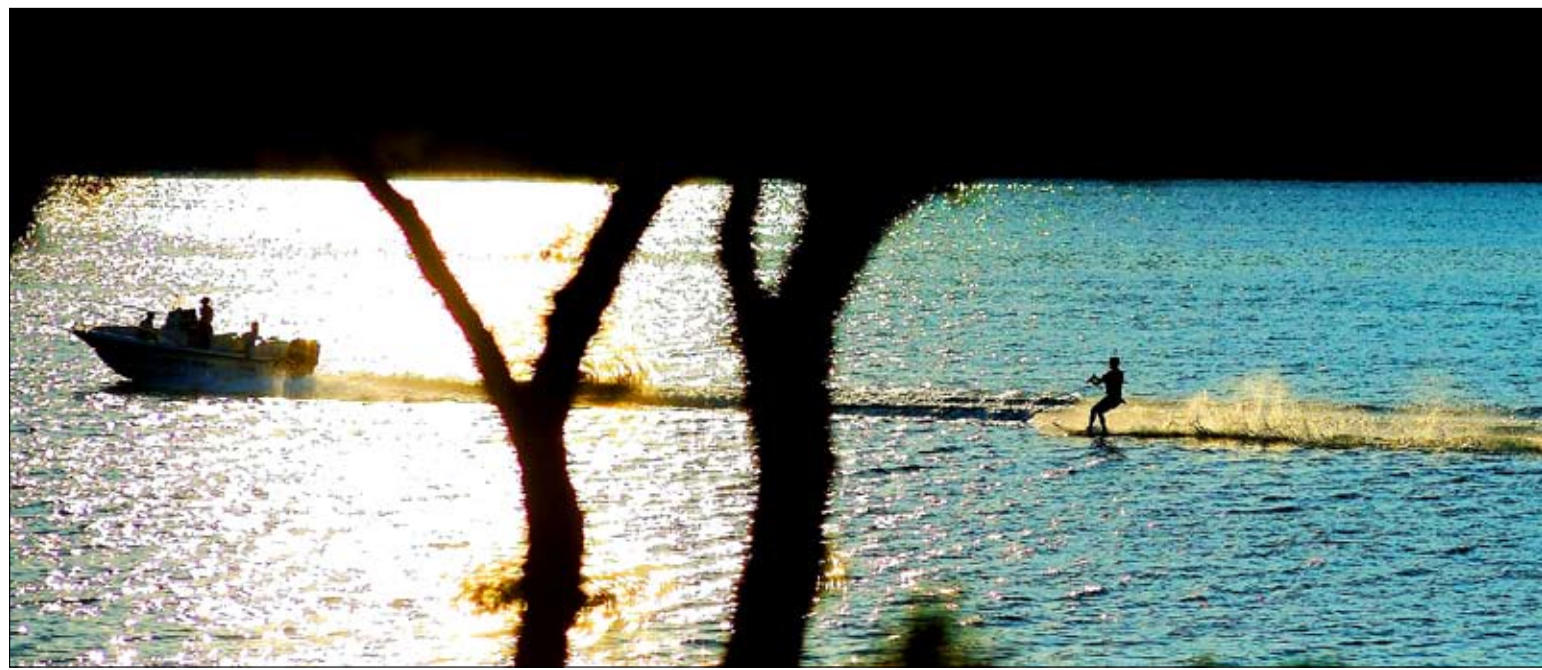
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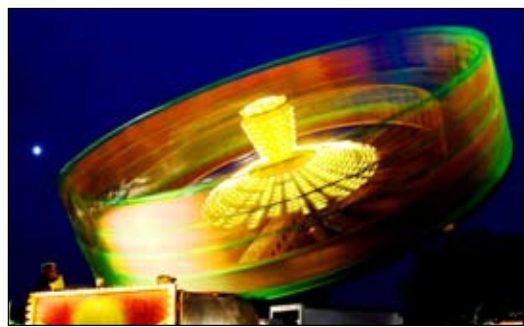
Above: A couple walk past stone sculptures built on Moshup Beach as the sun sets in Aquinnah, Massachusetts, on the island of Martha's Vineyard.
Below: A water skier skies across Lagoon Pond in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, on Martha's Vineyard.

PHOTO: REUTERS
PHOTO: EPA



It wouldn't do for the Obamas, but an old-fashioned boarding house is a homely and affordable way of staying on Martha's Vineyard

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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



Martha's Vineyard on a budget



Top: The shoreline of Edgartown, Massachusetts, on the island of Martha's Vineyard.
Above: Tourists walk past the Island Cinema in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, on Martha's Vineyard.
Right: The Round-Up ride spins fairgoers as the moon rises during the 2010 Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society Fair in West Tisbury, Massachusetts.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG
PHOTO: EPA
PHOTO: EPA

It has probably been the worst-kept secret on Martha's Vineyard that President Obama, Michelle, the girls and Bo the dog would, like last year, be renting a farm there this summer. They have been there this week but "The Vineyard," an island 10km south of Cape Cod in Massachusetts, has been attracting Democratic first families since John and Jackie Kennedy in the 1950s; the Clintons came seven summers in a row. And the coastal town of Oak Bluffs was one of the first US holiday destinations where middle-class African Americans were made to feel welcome.

But long before the politicians and the celebrities started to flock there, the island's pristine beaches and rugged beauty attracted teachers, writers and artists, including Jackson Pollock, who would dig in for the summer in cheap boarding houses.

That culture has all but disappeared but it is still possible to do Martha's Vineyard on a budget. I booked myself a few days in the Tashmoo Boarding House in Vineyard Haven. Owners, Roger and Elizabeth Hunt, an Anglo-American couple in their early 50s, took over in February last year. Roger, who is co-author of *Old House Handbook: A Practical Guide to Care and Repair*, couldn't resist an interesting old house in need of restoration and is gradually chipping away at the restoration.

The plan is to turn it into more than just a place to stay in the summer, but for now the Hunts split their time between London and the Vineyard. In the meantime, they employ a delightful, dynamic young couple, Jamie and Justin, to manage the place.

Singles start at US\$80 per night, doubles US\$100. Unless you're taking over the whole place, they have an over-21s rule, to ensure it remains peaceful, and the core clientele — artists, writers, social workers, nurses, grown-up groups — continue coming.

Elizabeth hit the nail on the head. "In the current economic climate," she said, "the traditional summer boarding house model has never been more appropriate."

I was told I wouldn't need a car to experience the island, which is good, because renting one would not be cheap. The ferry from Woods Hole on the mainland cost US\$15 return for foot passengers and glided across to

Vineyard Haven, the island's main port, in 45 minutes. Main Street, a pretty strip of boutiques, cafes and restaurants, is a two-minute walk from the ferry port. From there, it was a 10-minute stroll past clapboard houses with white picket fences to the pretty two-story boarding house, minutes from the town beach.

On a humid July day, it felt gloriously cool once inside. Windows open to the elements on all sides, the sea breeze providing natural ventilation. There is a vast, open-plan living area, with sofas, armchairs, a dining table and shelves stacked with vintage books. No TV. Heaven. Tashmoo sleeps 12 in seven guest rooms (each with its own washbasin), and guests share three bathrooms with clawfoot tubs.

Out back is an outdoor shower and a spacious lawn with a picnic table and chairs. My double bed was dressed with nice white linens, an antique bedside table, built-in wardrobe, chair and sink. The room felt serene, sunny and starched.

Other guests included a couple from Vermont on a cycling holiday and a nurse who had been coming every summer for the past 20 years — but our paths didn't really cross, because most of them were out all day.

I established a morning ritual of sitting out on the front steps to eat my breakfast, watching the world go by. No one passed without a hello or a smile. "That coffee sure smells good," said one neighbor, nodding at my cup. "Beautiful day," said about 12 more.

It felt like staying at a friend's rather basic summer house, but there was something relaxing about it. There are supermarkets and delis stocked with local produce, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays there's the brilliant West Tisbury farmers' market, where I stocked up on home-baked bread, honey and jam.

While Jamie and Justin did not intrude, they were always just a door-knock away to advise on where to rent a bike (Martha's Bike Rentals), where to eat "amazing lamb burgers with feta and balsamic onion rings" (the Art Cliff Diner) and who serves "the most delicious affordable seafood" (the Tuesday night lobster dinner at Coop de Ville in Oak Bluffs).

One day I went to investigate other affordable places to stay. None actually call themselves boarding houses but

several offer variations on this theme.

Kinsman House (278 Main Street, +1 508 693-2311; three rooms, from US\$125 including full breakfast) is a former sea captain's house run by the formidable Doreen Kinsman. This bed and breakfast is big on frills and character, with interesting antiques, a grand piano and a substantial front porch.

Capricorn House (capricornhouse.com; doubles from US\$125), a family-run bed and breakfast with a homespun feel, is right across the street from Inkwell beach in Oak Bluffs, so you fall asleep to the sound of the ocean. All seven rooms have bathrooms, and several have balconies and terraces.

Also in Oak Bluffs, the Nashua House Hotel (nashuahouse.com; doubles from US\$69) feels a bit like a cozy country cottage, with higgledy-piggledy staircases leading to narrow corridors and 17 bedrooms, from cozy one-beds to roomier doubles, and shared bathrooms. This is back to basics stuff, with no breakfast, but located right in the heart of the village.

There are bike paths all over the island and buses, which run all day, from town to town and to the island's numerous beautiful beaches and more remote spots. A day bus pass, with unlimited changes, costs US\$7. I explored the entire island by bike and bus.

My favorite route was the one heading west, or "up island," taking in sleepy West Tisbury, where I stopped at Alley's General Store (open since 1858) for a lime soda, before carrying on through increasingly wild pasture land, past crumbling farmhouses and dirt roads, ancient stone walls and wildflower meadows. Things got seriously vertiginous going up to the Abel's Hill Cemetery, where the actor John Belushi is buried. I stopped at Allen Farm Sheep & Wool, to pick up exquisite lamb chops for dinner (it also does great hand-knitted jumpers) and then at The Bite (thebitemenemsha.com), a quintessential clam shack in the fishing village of Menemsha. Finally, I reached Gay Head lighthouse, perched high up on red clay cliffs and surrounded by beautiful beaches, just beyond the town of Aquinnah, and part of the Wampanoag tribal lands.

There is so much to explore on this small island — I wish I could have fully embraced the Vineyard experience and stayed for the summer to write a novel.