



THE HAMPTONS: INNER CIRCLE

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TRAVEL / INTERNATIONAL

Each summer, as the temperature reaches unbearable highs in the city, New York's most affluent residents cool off in the Hamptons. Luxury London joined the 'inner circle' on a retreat to the seaside resort, and discovered that one need not own a Hamptons home to enjoy all that's on offer in this East End. Roll on the sunshine

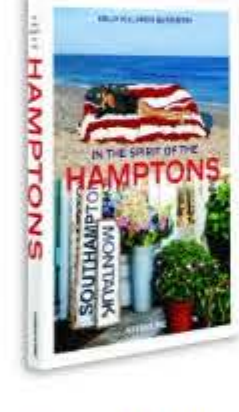
When New Yorkers want to get out of town they have several options: head north to the greenery of Connecticut, west towards Delaware, south west to Pennsylvania or east towards Long Island, the obvious choice for the ultimate beach escape, a stone's throw from the city.

Over the years, the elite of Manhattan have adopted a stretch of Long Island's 118-mile coastline as their very own bolthole, transforming the Hamptons into a slightly surreal, fairy-tale like place. Now synonymous with swish weekends away and slow summers on the sand, it's become a place of legend.

Reaching from Southampton via tiny Bridgehampton to East Hampton, some say, all the way to Montauk, on the island's tip, each village has its own story, and each offers its own attractions.



You'll find 50 miles of pristine shoreline, sweet boutiques, quaint antique stores, smart galleries – everything pretty as a picture. Jaw-droppingly beautiful homes with eye watering steep price tags go hand-in-hand with fine dining, hot nightlife and delis aplenty to pick up those essential organic goodies. There are golf courses too, of course, horse-riding at Deep Hollow Ranch and 3,000 acres of vineyards to visit.



The star attraction is the beach, with miles of unspoiled sand, as far as the eye can see.

Regularly featured on the USA's list of top 10 beach breaks, there's plenty to do beyond the dunes and the million dollar homes. Tiana, Peconic and Noyac Bays are the best for windsurfing, while Shinnecock is better known for diving. The bay was named after the local Shinnecock Indians who still hold their Annual Labor Day Powwow on their reservation. It's open to the public and a quirky highlight on the Hamptons calendar.

It's said that the Hamptons are so popular with New Yorkers, that during the summer, traffic can tail back all the way to 5th Avenue. Sadly, with just one road leading in, it's a case of one way in, one way out. The trick is not to leave when everyone else does.

The 90 odd miles from Manhattan, bumper-to-bumper can be a trial, so time your departure right. Another option for those conscious of their carbon footprint is taking the (rather slow) 'Hampton Jitney' bus or the (even slower) train. No time to waste? Charter a helicopter.



To avoid the crowds all together, make the trip during the low season, either before Memorial Day (end of May) or after Labour Day (early September) when Route 27 is blissfully quiet.

Southampton, established in 1640 by English colonists, has an impressive claim to fame as the very first settlement in New York State. Its historic red brick buildings and narrow leafy streets retain that quaint colonial feel, and enhance its reputation as a pristine, chi-chi 'old money' neighbourhood. Smaller than East Hampton, it still counts 200 odd stores ranging from antiques to art, designer clothing and food.

Stopping to refuel? Head to Tates for their legendary cookies and pastries. You'll find it easily, just follow the queue that winds down the road at 8am.

Moving on to East Hampton, the most fashionable of the Hamptons, is like venturing deeper into a surreal world of all things cute and beautiful. White picket fences are the norm, expensive cars line the streets and local signs point to appealingly named spots like Lazy Point or Gin Beach. It's ridiculously charming.

Originally named Maidstone, East Hampton was first settled in 1648 and secured its spot as a firm holiday favourite thanks to the advent of the Long Island Railroad in 1895.

Although the village is petite, it's brimming with social events, from the annual Artist-Writers Softball Game to the glitzy International Film Festival in October. Culture buffs should stop by the Home Sweet Home Museum dedicated to 19th-century poet, playwright and actor, John Howard Payne and the Pollock-Krasner House, a museum in the one-time home of legendary Abstract Expressionist painters Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner.



It's no wonder that Martha Stuart, Steven Spielberg, Billy Joel and countless other famous faces have fallen for the area's golden sands and the relaxed New England style vibe that defines this little piece of paradise.

East Hampton really only consists of a couple of streets: Main Street and Newton Lane, where big brands like Tiffany & Co., Ralph Lauren and Gucci sit alongside independents like Steph's Stuff or Bonne Nuit and the crucial Starbucks, all set in flawless white clapboard houses. There's a little cinema, a chic supermarket but no tacky souvenir shops to be seen. To be honest, its perfection is almost disconcerting.

It's so much little like a movie set that bumping into Gwyneth Paltrow, Apple in tow, at the very sweet Dylan's Candy Bar on Main Street, won't have you batting an eyelid.

Indeed, celebrities are a dime a dozen in these parts. At the Indian Wells Tavern, in nearby Amagansett, an inconspicuous pub style restaurant, Patty on reception enthusiastically shares her tales. Rensner Zellweger and Jodie Foster came in (albeit not together) she beamed, whispering: "Ethan Hawke came back all summer for more". Hardly surprising, if he tasted the New York 14oz boneless strip steak.



The Hamptons are full of great places to eat. New Yorkers know their food, and expect the finest, especially on vacation.

Fresno in East Hampton is another great find. The contemporary, dimly lit bistro restaurant has an extra-friendly, family-run atmosphere, with jovial owner Michael Nolan mingling with his customers. Try the salmon tartare with scallion, radish and jalapeno followed by pork porterhouse and butternut squash or the rigatoni with braised veal, shaved pecorino and truffle oil. Save a space for dessert: a heavenly Vahlrona chocolate cake with Nutella fluff centre served warm alongside a cool hazelnut gelato. Wonder if Robert Downey Junior had it too?

An integral part of the experience, is the local seafood. It's all about the lobster roll, clam chowder or fresh crab cakes.

Stop at one of the many roadside dinners or crab shacks for the real McCoy, or, for the perfect setting, take a picnic to the beach. Feeling adventurous? Take a scenic coastline drive and get lost, safe in the knowledge that you really can't – and explore the hidden nooks and crannies to get a real taste of the Hamptons, finding that elusive empty beach, that coastal path or just cruise the residential streets for some serious property envy.



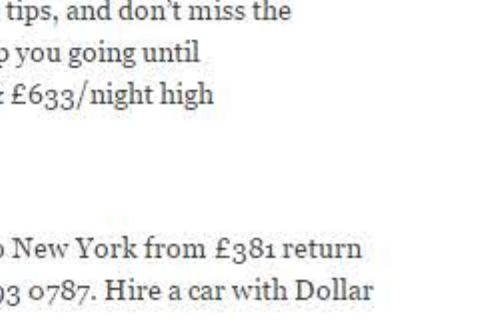
Officially, East Hampton stretches over Amagansett, Wainscott and on to Montauk, though locals beg to differ. Each village is fiercely proud of its differences, destinations within their own right. In Montauk, on the far end of the island, it's clear the atmosphere is radically different.

Despite its boutique hotels and natural 'up-scaling', Montauk is a bit rougher around the edges and keen to retain its low-key, laid-back surfer's-haven-feel with its original carefree soul. Heading down to Turtle Point, don't miss The Surf Lodge, a hotspot for beautiful people, all whitewash and driftwood with oodles of style, where Elle Deco would be proud of the seaside chic décor.

Montauk might be the last 'last frontier' but it's clearly the next spot to be colonised Manhattan style...

Where to Stay

Stay at the Historic Mill Inn Bed & Breakfast with its beachside theme. Chic but cosy, the B&B is a luxurious bolthole, ideally located to discover the Hamptons. There's all you need to relax: from the ultra comfy beds to the jet bathtub with its organic soaps, wireless internet, DVD players, flat screen TVs and even iPod docks in some of the all-white suites. Chat to owners Gary & Sylvia who will gladly recommend places and share insider tips, don't miss the legendary breakfast, a veritable feast which will keep you going until evening. Rooms start from £145/night low season & £633/night high season, +16313249766, www.millhouseinn.com &

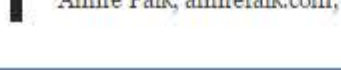


Getting There

British Airways offers 17 daily flights from the UK to New York from £381 return including taxes. To book visit ba.com or call 0844 493 0787. Hire a car with Dollar Rent a Car, 0800 25 28 97, www.dollar.co.uk &

For more information contact the Long Island CVE, www.discoverlongisland.com & Spirit of the Hamptons, published by Assouline: 196A Piccadilly, Saint James, W1J, 020 3327 9370 and 49 Brook Street, Westminster, W1K, 020 7493 8032, www.assouline.com &

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Hero image: Sebonack panorama featured in Hamptons Entertaining (Image courtesy of Annie Falk, anniefalk.com, © Jerry Rabinowitz)