

Exploring NJ's Southern Shore on a budget

What's better than free? These days, there is nothing better than free, regardless of the balance in your checkbook. Everyone is looking for a bargain – free or low-cost events to stretch their vacation dollars with extras that add fun without breaking the family budget.

How about free beaches? In the Wildwoods – that massive beach that stretches from the Crest to North Wildwood and eastward almost as far as you can see – the beach is free. That's right F-R-E-E! Even in towns with beach tags, there are a few bargains – Sea Isle City has a tag free day, Stone Harbor and Avalon have a reciprocity deal – one tag, two beaches. Buying your beach tags early is another way to save. Beaches on the bayside have always been free – plus no parking meters and you can surf, kayak or even jet ski.

Spend an entire day at the zoo –in Cape May or Cumberland County – both are free! The Cape May County Park and Zoo is filled with hundreds of animals from all over the world, and as the name implies, there's a park with picnic areas, a playground, trails and biking paths. Stroll the walkway to the savanna to see the zebras and giraffes roaming in their own little piece of Africa right here in Cape May County. Spread out a picnic lunch, watch the kids enjoy the playground and end the day with another loop around the zoo to say goodbye to the birds, the animals and even those amazing snakes in the reptile house.

The Cohanzick Zoo, located in the 2,100 acre Bridgeton City Park, is New Jersey's first zoo and is home to more than 200 birds and mammals from around the world plus the favorite attraction – white tigers!

Historic Cold Spring Village in Lower Township, just north of Cape May, offers visitors a glimpse of a 19th-century village with working trades and

craftspeople. There is a small admission fee to the village, but it's well worth the cost to have children sit in a class at a one-room schoolhouse; watch a blacksmith create shoes for one of the village's horses or pet the farm animals on the Village grounds. On weekends throughout the summer the Village has special events -- antique car shows, Civil War encampments, craft shows and more.

Naval Air Station Wildwood puts a great spin on history that the kids – and adults, too! – will actually enjoy. Big planes – jets, helicopters and more – fill the cavernous Hangar No.1 at the Cape May County Airport.

Simply browsing is totally free at Dutch Neck Village. Just outside Bridgeton is a unique and charming collection of country shops and a boutique. Enjoy shopping in The Holly Hut and Hope Chest, Perk & Pantry and the Village School Teacher. The Country Rose Restaurant serves up home-cooked meals and the village setting provides a restful and relaxing opportunity to enjoy the Strawberry, Peach and Fall Festivals, Walk of Lights and other special events.

In nearby Millville, walking around the Glasstown Arts District on High Street in Millville won't cost you a dime. This growing arts district with galleries, several upscale restaurants and unique shops is a perfect place to spend an afternoon or evening getting to know the local artists and their works. Third Fridays in downtown Millville are exciting with everyone enjoying the Glasstown Arts District, a nice dinner and an evening in one of the area's nightspots with offerings to suit every pocket book.

At the Wheatonarts and Cultural Center in Millville, visitors can watch artisans create works made of glass right before their eyes. There is a cost for entering the Center's grounds, but the experience is definitely priceless if you are a lover of glassware. The Arthur Gorham Paperweight Shop has one of the largest collections of traditional and contemporary paperweights or watch hot,

molten glass transformed into amazing works of art. The Glass Studio is fully functioning and modeled after an original 1888 structure and the Down Jersey Folklife Center has information about that legendary creature, the Jersey Devil.

At the southern tip of the Cape is Sunset Beach with plenty of Cape May Diamonds and what remains of the USS *Atlantus* just a few yards from the beach. The ship was one of several concrete ships built during World War I and was intended to be the beginning of a ferry dock years ago until it broke loose and ran aground. Not much is left of the massive ship but it's still worth a visit. The quartz pebbles on the beach, known as Cape May Diamonds, are free for the taking for anyone who wants to pick them up. Each evening, May through September, the American Flag is lowered at sunset, a tradition that has been going on for 40 years. Each of the American Flags used for the ceremony are the casket flags of veterans and have been donated by families.

Gazing at historic architecture in Victorian Cape May is absolutely free. Use your imagination to envision what it must have been like to vacation here in the 1800s when most of these ornate "cottages" were the summer homes of the well-to-do. The Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts, housed in the Physick Estate on Washington Street, has a variety of walking and trolley tours for a nominal price.

Strolling the "boards" to absorb the sights and sounds of the seashore at its best is still free and every Friday night on the Boardwalk, The Wildwoods put on a spectacular fireworks show.

The Wetlands Institute on Stone Harbor Boulevard is an educational – but fun – treasure with turtles, marsh tours, Fabulous Family Nights, special events and more. Think about joining some of these non-profit attractions for deeply discounted admission fees plus the support that memberships provide to these organizations.

The Cape May County Historical Museum on Route 9 in Cape May Court House has no admission fee and has a large collection of documents and

artifacts that trace the county's history from pre-Revolutionary War times into the 20th century. Nearly every seashore town at the Jersey Cape has a historical society or historical museum to add a little local history to every vacation. Don't think of history as boring – did you know that most of the big names in rock and roll played night clubs in the Wildwoods in the 1950s, the Michael Jackson's flamingos now live in the County Zoo and pirate treasure might be buried in places around South Jersey?

In Ocean City – a community loaded with special events and activities for the family – the Music Pier offers a full schedule of family entertainment. Sunday nights feature performances by the Ocean City Pops Orchestra, a perfect way to end a leisurely day at the beach and early evening on the city's boardwalk.

Both counties –Cape May and Cumberland– have thousands of acres devoted to parks, recreation areas, bike paths and hiking/walking trails – all well maintained and free. The same goes for summer entertainment – most communities provide outdoor concerts, art shows, arts and crafts fair and a host of special events – free for your family's enjoyment.

Check out Southern New Jersey Vacationer's "101 Things To Do" and calendar listings to learn just how many offerings the region has that will leave visitors great vacation memories – and just maybe with a little money leftover.

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