

# Fodor's Choice Ocean City



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Stretching some 10 miles along a narrow barrier island off Maryland's Atlantic coast, Ocean City draws summertime crowds to its broad beaches and the innumerable activities and amenities that cling to them, as well as to the quiet bay side between the island and the mainland. "O.C." is a premier mid-Atlantic leisure-travel destination, at once big and small, old and new, historic and hip, noisy and quiet, expensive and not, and everything in between

The town grew into a city south to north. On the older, southern end of the island a restored 19th-century carousel and other traditional amusement park rides churn near a long fishing pier along the inlet connecting the Atlantic and Assawoman Bay. On the opposite side of the inlet is the northern tip of the pristine 37-mile-long Assateague Island, federally and state-protected land devoid of man-made elements beyond the most rudimentary.

From this southern end, O.C.'s renowned and brilliantly maintained 3-mile-long boardwalk reaches northward as far as 27th Street, nothing but sand to one side, and everything else—hotels and eateries and shops—crowding the other. Beyond 27th Street, the cross streets climb to 145th at the Delaware state line. High-rise condominium complexes prevail farther to the north, interspersed with more hotels and shopping complexes. While it seems a little less hectic toward O.C.'s northern end, beaches there may be less or more crowded, depending on the season and on the presence of condominium residents. The western side, along the bay, is home to smaller enterprises, including cruise- and fishing-boat firms.

Late July's **Pony Swim and Auction** (☎ 757/336-6161 [www.chincoteaguechamber.com](http://www.chincoteaguechamber.com)) is the renowned annual roundup of wild ponies from Assateague Island, Virginia, which are then herded to Chincoteague, where select foals are auctioned off to support the volunteer fire department. This tradition is the basis of the 1947 classic children's book *Misty of Chincoteague*, by Marguerite Henry. Ocean City celebrates the quest for endless summer in mid-September with **Sunfest** (☎ 800/626-2326

[www.ococean.com](http://www.ococean.com)), a four-day blowout with all sorts of entertainment and a craft show.

## EXPLORING

Eleven miles south of Ocean City, **Assateague Island** contains Assateague Island National Seashore on the northern two-thirds of a 37-mile-long barrier island and a small portion operated as Assateague State Park. "Assateague" means "a marshy place across." Although most famous for the small, shaggy, wild horses (adamantly called "ponies" by the public) that roam freely along the beaches and roads, this stunning island is also worth getting to know for its wild land, wildlife (including the beautiful Sika deer), and pristine ocean-side environment.

In summer the seashore's mild surf is where you can find shorebirds tracing the lapping waves back down the beach. There are three self-guided nature trails behind the dunes that encourage exploration of the island's forests and bay-side marshes. Driving is permitted the length of—and several miles south of—the state park. Remember that the animals here are wild: follow the signs about not feeding or trying to pet the horses (or ponies). Swimming, biking, hiking, surf fishing, picnicking, and camping are all available on the island. The visitor center at the entrance to the park has aquariums and hands-on exhibits about the seashore's birds and ocean creatures as well as the famous ponies. ☎ 7206 National Seashore La., Rte. 611, south of Ocean City, southeastern extremity of Rte. 611 ☎ 410/641-1441 [www.assateagueisland.com](http://www.assateagueisland.com) 📧 7-day pass MD/VA section \$3-\$10 per

### WORD OF MOUTH

"We have never failed to see wild horses as well as a variety of other wildlife [on Assateague]." —mhc

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## WORD OF MOUTH

"In 'Old Ocean City' there are some charming older properties and there is a long boardwalk filled with cotton candy, bumper cars, 'boardwalk' fries, stores...an evening there is part of the vacation, walking the boardwalk, eating junk food, going on rides, buying t-shirts, etc."  
—BlueSwimmer

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vehicle; \$2 per person for bicycles and pedestrians  
☺ Visitor center daily 9–5, park daily 24 hrs.

With year-round leisure-time opportunities—mid-summer for 24/7 activity and unparalleled people-watching, mid-winter for bracing coastal solitude, or during the idyllic months in between—Ocean City's **boardwalk** starts near the Inlet and reaches to 27th Street. Take your pick of the many bicycle-rental shops, ice cream stands, and arcades.

Jacob Fussell began a wholesale ice-cream business in Baltimore in 1851, the first in the United States. Today privately owned and operated ice-cream parlors abound along Maryland's Eastern Shore, but **Dumser's Dairyland**, established in 1939, takes ice cream to new heights at its vast "factory" and parlor (601 South Atlantic Avenue), open in the summertime from noon to midnight. They also operate branch locations at 49th Street and Coastal and 124th Street and Coastal, as well as three smaller outlets on the boardwalk.

On the southern tip of the island, the **Ocean City Life Saving Station Museum** traces the resort to its days as a tiny fishing village in the late 1800s. Housed in an 1891 building that once held the U.S. Lifesaving Service and the Coast Guard, the museum's exhibits include models of the grand old hotels, artifacts from shipwrecks, boat models, five saltwater aquariums, an exhibit of sands from around the world, and even itchy wool swimsuits and an old mechanical laughing lady from the boardwalk. Press the button, and you can be laughing with her. ☒ Boardwalk at inlet ☎ 410/289-4991 🌐 [www.ocmuseum.org](http://www.ocmuseum.org) 📧 \$3 ☺ June–Sept., daily 11–10; May and Oct., daily 11–4; Nov.–Apr., weekends 10–4.

**Trimper's Amusement Park**, at the south end of the boardwalk, has a "boomerang" roller coaster; the terrifying "Zipper"; and the Hirschell Spellman Carousel, from 1902. The park has been owned by the Trimper family since it opened in 1890. ☒ Boardwalk at

S. 1st St. ☎ 410/289-8617 📧 Pay per ride or attraction ☺ Memorial Day–Labor Day, weekdays 1PM–midnight, weekends noon–midnight. Labor Day–Memorial Day indoor portion only, weekends noon–midnight.

## WHERE TO EAT

"Fresh catch" is the magic phrase here, and crab is king. Don't leave the Eastern Shore without sampling the slightly sweet taste of Maryland's trademark crustacean, the Chesapeake renowned blue crab, at a down-home eatery, cracking shells with your own wooden mallet. Or join in the perpetual arguments over who prepares the best crab cake and who serves the most succulent soft-shell crabs. Many diners like to time their meals with the view: don't forget that the sun rises over the Atlantic and sets behind Assawoman Bay.

**Fager's Island.** This fine-dining restaurant adjacent to and operated by the same owners as the Lighthouse Club and the Edge hotels, gives you white-linen treatment and views of soothing wetlands and the bay, and stunning sunsets through its large windows. In addition to ubiquitous fresh-catch seafood, Fager's is renowned for its prime rib. There's an outside deck for more informal dining and a raw bar with lighter fare. ☒ 60th St. at bay ☎ 410/524-5500 🌐 [www.fagers.com/restaurant](http://www.fagers.com/restaurant) 🍷 Reservations essential ☒ AE, D, DC, MC, V. \$21–\$36

**Fish Tales Bar and Grill.** When the children need a break from the standard boardwalk fare, take 'em to this incredibly family-friendly restaurant where children are part of the action. They can play on an awesome pirate ship or on the soft beach with the Frisbee that comes with their meals. The food is as easygoing as the atmosphere, from a fried-chicken-and-barbecued-ribs combo to skewered surf and turf. There's also a slew of economical offerings "From the Dock"

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## WORD OF MOUTH

"You can go parasailing, rent wave riders, and try your hand at boogie boarding or body surfing. Definitely have some crabs (yum!) or at least crab cakes while you're there."  
—althom1122

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and "From the Farm" as well as an extensive menu for "L'il Skippers." At night, a bit of a rowdy (yet civilized), older bar crowd likes to congregate on the waterfront benches. ☒ *Bay side between 21st and 22nd Sts.* ☎ 410/289-7438 🌐 [www.ocfishtales.com](http://www.ocfishtales.com) ☰ AE, D, DC, MC, V. \$17-\$29

**Galaxy 66 Bar & Grille.** This unusual watering hole is a welcome breeze of creative cuisine. Appetizers, like seared foie gras and asparagus-shrimp risotto, are light and delicate. Equally innovative mains include homemade manchego-cheese gnocchi, seared duck with sun-dried cherries, and pistachio-encrusted rockfish. The second and third floors open up to outdoor seating and views of the bay. The cosmic Star Bar is a hot spot for local celebs and those looking for creative cocktails in a dark hideaway—and it serves tapas until midnight. ☒ *66th St. at bay* ☎ 410/723-6272 🌐 [www.galaxy66barandgrille.com](http://www.galaxy66barandgrille.com) ☰ AE, D, DC, MC, V. \$19-\$36.

**Phillips Crab House & Seafood Buffet.** Feast on crab cakes, crab imperial, or stuffed and fried shrimp at the 1956 home of an O.C. institution that is the original of three Phillips locations here and has since grown into a regional chain. Considered the city's most popular dining site, the dark-panel dining area has decorative stone floors, Tiffany-style hanging lamps, stained-glass windows, and funky wall art. A seafood buffet is served in an upstairs dining room. Phillips By the Sea is at 1301 Atlantic Avenue, and Phillips Seafood House is at 14101 Coastal Highway. ☒ *21st St. at Philadelphia Ave.* ☎ 410/289-6821 or 800/549-2722 🌐 [www.phillipsseafood.com](http://www.phillipsseafood.com) ☰ AE, D, MC, V. \$14-\$33

**The Shark on the Harbor.** Don't let the name scare you: The namesake shark is meant to be your dinner, prepared any way you like. This upscale place takes advantage of sweeping views of the harbor. Other dishes experiment with unusual flavors like the tuna with wasabi-cream sauce and pineapple meringue. Go for the Eggplant Tower stuffed with layers of shrimp, lump crab, and wild mushrooms with fresh-shaved Parmesan. There is live music on select evenings. ☒ *12924 Sunset Ave., West Ocean City* ☎ 410/213-0924 🌐 [www.ocshark.com](http://www.ocshark.com) ☰ AE, D, DC, MC, V. \$17-\$25

## WHERE TO STAY

Ocean City's narrow barrier island means that no lodging is far from either the ocean or the bay. With some 10,000 rooms to offer, the scope of lodging options includes modern chain-affiliated high-rises with tiny angled balconies, older hotels with ocean-front porches filled with wooden chaise longues and rocking chairs, myriad sleepy motels, and two B&Bs (including one on the boardwalk). To help narrow the choices, consider how important it really is to be



directly on the beach as opposed to staying a block or so away, and thus near the bay and its wetlands, a decidedly quieter sector. Another criterion is the appeal of the older, busier southern end of the island, versus the newer northern end, dominated by high-rises, condominium blocks, and hotels.

## NIGHTLIFE & THE ARTS

In summer Ocean City provides enough entertainment for everyone, ranging from refined to rowdy. Some bars and clubs close in midwinter, but most of those with live music remain open.

Open since 1976, the large sports saloon known as the **Greene Turtle** (☒ *Coastal Hwy. at 116th St.* ☎ 410/723-2120) is a beach landmark and a must for casual drinks to soothe the afterburn. The waterside **Secrets Bar and Grill** (☒ *49th St. at bay* ☎ 410/524-4900) often presents four live bands at four different entertainment venues. The crowds range in age from those in their early twenties through baby boomers, proving that you're never too old to sip a piña colada while on an inner tube.

## SPORTS & THE OUTDOORS

Although Ocean City is primarily a beach resort, there are ample outdoor activities once you feel like getting off your beach towel, many of them offering classes for first-timers. In addition to fishing, power-boating, and sailing opportunities, there's kite-boarding, parasailing, and jet-skiing. For the less adventurous or perhaps just more quiet, kayak or canoe through the gentle bay wetlands. Back on land there's biking, tennis, volleyball, and (especially) golf.

## BICYCLING

A portion of Coastal Highway has been designated for bus and bicycle traffic. Bicycle riding is allowed on the Ocean City boardwalk from 2 AM to 11 AM

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## ISLAND NAMES

This area's place-names can be confusing.

**Assateague Island** is a long, slim barrier island stretching roughly north-south between **Ocean City**, Maryland, and **Chincoteague** (itself an island), Virginia. It is divided into two national parks: the sector north of the boundary—over twice as long as the southern sector—is protected as the **Assateague Island National Seashore**. A small section of the AINS just south of the main Route 611 entrance is **Assateague State Park**. The sector south of the Maryland-Virginia boundary is the **Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge**.



from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day. Riding is unrestricted the rest of the year, except during Springfest and Sunfest, when riding is allowed Thursday through Sunday 2 AM to noon. The bike route from Ocean City to Assateague Island (U.S. 50 to Route 611) is a 9-mile trek, and Assateague itself is crisscrossed by a number of clearly marked, paved trails.

Bikes (for adults and children) and pedal-driven surreys are available for rent throughout Ocean City.

## BOATING AND FISHING

Assawoman Bay, between the Ocean City barrier island and the mainland, is lined with enterprises for all manner of waterborne activities. No fishing licenses are required in Ocean City. Public fishing piers on the Assawoman Bay and Isle of Wight Bay are at (south to north) 3rd, 9th, 40th, and 125th streets and at the inlet in Ocean City. Other fishing and crabbing areas include the U.S. 50 bridge, Oceanic Pier, and Ocean City Pier, at Wicomico Street and the boardwalk. Crabbing is especially good at Northside Park.

**Bahia Marina** (☎ 21st St. at bay ☎ 410/289-7438 or 888/575-3625) is a great venue for sportfishing enthusiasts. It has spotless charter boats, live bait and tackle, and opportunities for bottom fishing. **Ocean City Fishing Center** (☎ U.S. 50 at Shantytown Rd., West Ocean City ☎ 410/213-1121) is Ocean City's largest deep-sea charter-boat marina, with some 30 vessels and Coast Guard-licensed professional captains. In addition to catering to preformed groups, the Fishing Center will form fishing groups of individuals who are on their own.

## GOLF

Now rivaling premier golfing destinations around the United States, Ocean City is within easy driving distance of more than 21 golf courses. The Web site **Ocean City Golf Getaway** (🌐 [www.oceancitygolf.com](http://www.oceancitygolf.com)) provides thorough information about courses.

## SHOPPING

Ocean City's 3-mile-long boardwalk is lined with retail outlets for food, souvenirs, more food, and more souvenirs, with a smattering of surprising specialty stores. Side streets are filled with still more shops, as are the avenues parallel to the beachfront in the older, southern end of the island. Farther north, the atmosphere changes; the beaches a block away become almost incidental. Shopping plazas vie for attention behind acres of parking; West Ocean City has factory outlets.

**The Kite Loft** (☎ 5th St. at boardwalk ☎ 410/289-6852 ☎ 45th Street Village ☎ 410/524-0800 ☎ Coastal Hwy. at 131st St. ☎ 410/250-4970), with its dazzling line of kites as well as banners, flags, wind socks, hammocks, sky chairs, whirligigs, and wind chimes, is more than just a store. It's symbolic of Ocean City. Their kites, thriving on the ocean-side winds, flying high over the boardwalk all day long, and visible for long distances, are an iconic welcome to the beachfront.

—Updated by Pete Nelson

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