

On the Way to Cape May

Nothing puts me in the holiday mood more than an overnight in Cape May, the country's oldest seaside resort. Below is an itinerary Vincent and I developed over the years.

Where to Stay: Congress Hall

Congress Hall, voted New Jersey's Best Hotel by *Travel & Leisure*, celebrated its 200th anniversary in 2016. During its long history, Congress Hall has hosted five presidents as well as concerts by renowned composer John Philip Sousa. From the rocking chairs overlooking the Grand Lawn and the Atlantic to the bunting on the balconies, Congress Hall is an American original. While I never stayed at Congress Hall during my childhood, my parents always seemed to find weekly summer rentals within blocks of the grand hotel. Not a week went by that we didn't explore the charming lobby filled with black and white photographs of vacationers in modest Victorian era bathing costumes. From walking along the Promenade (not a boardwalk) to spotting a family pedal in a surrey, a stay in Cape May makes me wax nostalgic.

1:00 p.m. Saturday: Lunch at Beach Plum Farm

After checking in to Congress Hall, drive to West Cape May where Beach Plum Farm serves casual lunches until 3:00 p.m. The vegetables, herbs and even the eggs for all of the restaurants I mention below are grown on this 60 acre plus farm. Enjoy a pulled pork sandwich from the farm's own Berkshire pigs, then browse the market for produce and other foodie items. For future reference, if you go on a Saturday earlier in the fall, you will encounter a festive pig roast and hay rides.

After Lunch...

While on the western side of Cape May, drive to the lighthouse and walk off your sandwich by climbing the 199 steps to its top. On a clear day you can see up to Wildwood in the north and Cape Henlopen, Delaware, in the west. Hop back in the car and drive just a bit farther to Sunset Beach on Cape May Point. There you will find Cape May diamonds — don't get too excited, they are just quartz pebbles — as well as the wreck of the S.S. *Atlantus*. This concrete ship that carried cargo and troops across the Atlantic during World War I was docked in Cape May in 1926 when a storm ran her aground. If you stay until sunset, you will experience a dramatic one.

6:30 p.m. Saturday: Drinks at The Brown Room

After a rest and freshening up, head to Congress Hall's lounge for a cocktail. Find a spot in front of the fireplace or at the wood and marble bar to enjoy the live jazz music. While I am a fan of the zebra skin carpet and palm tree decor, my favorite accessory in this historic meeting place is a classic Negroni.

8:00 p.m. Saturday: Dinner at The Ebbitt Room

Just a short stroll from Congress Hall is the Ebbitt Room, a consistently excellent farm to table experience. In the elegant dining room, you can hear the sounds of the live piano music drifting in from the bar area. Some of our recommended dishes include: starter — Beach Plum Farm Deviled Eggs (preparations change daily); appetizer — Charred Octopus with Smoked Yogurt, Chorizo, Corn, Cucumber and Salsa Verde; main course — 14 Oz. Creekstone Ribeye with Caramelized Shallots and Hand-Cut Herb Parmesan Fries. The drink menu takes you back in time by featuring Prohibition era cocktails from The Bee's Knees to a Blood and Sand.

10:30 a.m. Sunday: Breakfast/Brunch at Blue Pig Tavern

Choose among many comfort food options to begin your day of strolling. Whether you are seated on the bright porch or near the dining room's fireplace, you will feel cozy and warm. It is no surprise that all egg dishes feature the vivid yolks from Beach Plum Farm. Our favorite is the Eggs Blackstone of two poached eggs, freshly made cheddar scallion biscuit (delicious!), crispy bacon, tomato, wilted greens, black pepper hollandaise and home fried potatoes. Also fuel up on lots of coffee.

Before heading out for your day of exploring, make sure to visit the "Winter Wonderland" on Congress Hall's lawn, open late November to December. There you will find a mini shopping village and Cape May's largest Christmas tree.

Begin your stroll on Washington Street Mall where The Whale's Tale — a great spot for greeting cards, shells and unique gifts — has stood for over 40 years. Just off the mall is Louisa's, a little nook filled with interesting chocolate bars from around the country and beyond. For footwear, visit Casales, a family owned business offering an extensive selection for men and women along with attentive service. Continue to wander the blocks beyond the outdoor mall to see the many, many Victorian homes decorated for the season. Other not-to-miss gems in Cape May are the antique stores — many within walking distance and others on nearly every road out of town.

Enjoy your time Walkin' in the Winter Wonderland of Cape May, a national treasure. 🍷



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