

Long Beach Island, NJ

Kids play safely and happily at this low-key, family-friendly beach.

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Destination Guide:

When you think of the beach, do noise, crowds and high prices seem to come with the territory? Welcome to Long Beach Island, New Jersey!

This 18-mile-long barrier island is fun, without being touristy, and it's chock full of affordable vacation homes you can rent by the week. A bike lane that runs almost the entire length of the island is perfect for biking and rollerblading. And there are plenty of places to rent beach cruisers, too. And because LBI measures just one-half mile at its widest part, you'll never be farther than two blocks from the Atlantic Ocean or Barnegat Bay -- a bonus for families with tiny tots.

The island has its own historical attraction -- popular Barnegat Lighthouse. And there are ice cream parlors, miniature golf, and Ferris wheel rides in nearby Beach Haven, LBI's "entertainment capital."

Most important, LBI is safe and quiet. People come here mainly to relax -- or as one local put it, "to do nothing." It's the kind of place where you can feel free to toss a Frisbee on the beach or lose yourself in a good paperback book -- without worrying where the kids are.

Beach Blanket Bingo:

On LBI, the beach is the main attraction. But before you plop down that blanket, it's a good idea to brush up on the local laws. LBI is made up of various towns, each with its own beach patrol (lifeguards are on duty 9 to 5) and beach badge requirements -- which can be confusing to first-timers. Here's how it works:

To sit on a beach you need a badge, which you can get from your motel (most offer complimentary badges). Or you can buy a badge from the town itself. Badges cost \$10 a week for each person 12 and up (everyone under 12 suns for free) or \$5 a day.

Badges are only required from 10 am to 5 pm, June 23 to Labor Day. Note that a badge only allows you to sit on that town's beach.

If you want to beach hop, you'll need to purchase additional badges, so it's best to do some location scouting ahead of time, and settle on a favorite beach for the week. Families with little kids may prefer one of the calmer Bay spots, such as the popular 68th Street Beach in Brant Beach.

If your pleasure is walking the beaches, you won't need a badge at all, and you're free to walk across the borders.

Barnegat Light:

When LBI regulars refer to "Old Barney," they aren't talking about a big purple dinosaur, but rather the historic lighthouse. Located in Barnegat Island State Park on Long Beach Island's northern tip, the 165-foot lighthouse was decommissioned in the 1920s.

Today you can climb its 217 steps to the top for magnificent sea, bay and island views (the winding metal staircase has landings with porthole windows and written commentary, where you can pause for a breath along the way).

The park also offers covered picnic areas, a beach for sunbathing (swimming is not allowed) and a 1,033-foot concrete jetty where you can catch more views, fish for bass and flounder, or watch brown pelicans land and take off. (The jetty's a great place for older kids to rock scramble.)

On hot summer days, cool off on the park's shaded, 1/5 mile Maritime Forest Trail. The self-guided loop takes you through one of the last remaining patches of maritime forest in New Jersey, where you can view sassafras plants and yellow-rumped warblers, to name a few species that call LBI home.

Indulge Your Fantasies:

While most LBI towns have their own restaurants, shops and amusements, the "place to go" is Beach Haven, on the island's southern end.

This is where you'll find Fantasy Island, a small amusement park with 13 rides (half are for little kids), including a 65-foot Giant Ferris Wheel, Tilt-A-Whirl, a historic carousel and outdoor carnival games. On rainy days, check out the indoor Family Casino Arcade with video games, Skee Ball and, as the name implies, real slot machines that pay tokens you can redeem for prizes (both kids and adults can play).

The park also hosts free entertainment throughout the summer, including magicians, mimes and live reptile demonstrations.

Rainy Day Diversions:

Nothing can put a damper on a beach vacation like rain. Fortunately, LBI offers plenty of alternatives including:

Surflight Theatre. The island's professional theater offers children's productions of such classics as Cinderella, Snow White, and the Wizard of Oz (in addition to a full line up of shows for adults).

Show Place Ice Cream Parlour. The same actors and actresses from the Surflight perform nightly in a cabaret -- with a lot of audience participation -- at the Show Place Ice Cream Parlour, just across the street. They add special performances on rainy days. Be prepared to sing for your dessert.

Paint a Pot. At this craft shop you can paint a pot, coffee mug, plate, or any other item. The owner then fires the bisque-ware for you to pick up later.

Just Bead It. At two island locations, this make-your-own-jewelry company offers children's classes in basic bead stringing, making a beady animal or creating macrame with hemp.

Dashboard:

Type of trip: Beach, outdoor sports, history, nature

Best for ages: 3 and up

Ideal trip length: One week

Distance: Philadelphia (89 miles), New York City (100 miles), Hartford (217 miles)

Best time to go: September, when the ocean is still warm, summer crowds have disappeared and lodging rates come down.

Weather: Highs average 80 degrees in summer, 50 to 70 degrees in fall. Bring sweaters or light jackets for evening; a prevailing ocean breeze makes it feel chillier than it really is.

Lodging: Rates range from \$130-180/night for a no-frills motel room in high season (late June to Labor Day). After summer, rates drop to \$60-\$100/night. House or apartment rentals may be a better deal. They typically range from \$700 a week for a 2-bedroom apartment sleeping 4-6 people, a few blocks from the water to \$10,000 for 6-bedroom house on the ocean (sleeping 8-14).

Squirm factor: None

If You Go:

Barnegat Lighthouse State Park
Broadway and The Bay, Barnegat Light
Phone: 609-494-2016

Parking: Free. Admission to the lighthouse: \$1 ages 12 and up, children 11 and under free.

Fantasy Island Amusement Park
320 W. 7th St., at Bay Ave., Beach Haven
Phone: 609-492-4000

Admission: \$2 to \$3.50/ride. Unlimited ride pass: \$15 (Fridays only from 2-7 pm). Open April to October (indoor arcade open weekends year-round).

Surflight Theatre
Beach and Engleside Aves., Beach Haven
Phone: 609-492-9477

Admission \$8. Children's theater productions Wednesday through Sunday at 6 pm (June 20 to September 9, 2001).

Favorite Elegant Candlelit Restaurant THE GABLES

A small, refined Long Beach Island hotel and restaurant, The Gables is a meticulously restored Victorian inn combining the charm of a fine 1890s home with contemporary comforts and the finest food and service. Our award-winning restaurant is a destination in itself, at any time, as we serve breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, and after-theatre suppers. The Gables ~ No. 212 Centre Street, Beach Haven, NJ 08008 Reservations 888-LBI-GABLES

Show Place Ice Cream Parlour
Center St. and Beach Ave., Beach Haven
Phone: 609-492-0018

Minimum \$2 food purchase (sundaes run \$4.50 to \$6). Open Memorial Day to Labor Day, 6-11 pm, and rainy days (call ahead for schedule). Seating every hour.

Paint A Pot Shop
2807 Long Beach Blvd., Spray Beach

Phone: 609-492-7300

Completed ceramics cost \$10 to \$50. Open Wednesday to Sunday.

Just Bead It

Two locations: Bay Village, Beach Haven, 609-492-2323 and 17th and Long Beach Blvd., Surf City, 609-494-8177.

Pay per bead or sign-up for one-hour kids' classes (advance registration is required), weekdays at 9 a.m. Class prices range from \$7 to \$10.

For More Information

Contact the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce

Phone: 800-292-6372

Side Trips:

At Tuckerton Seaport, take a walk back in time, to the days when this mainland city, 15 miles south of Long Beach Island, was once a major American port.

A half-mile boardwalk through this recreated maritime village winds by oyster houses, a saw mill, a boat works and more. Interpreters in each building offer educational tidbits as well as hands-on activities (touch tanks with sea creatures are being added this summer). It's especially neat to watch resident duck decoy carvers do their thing.

A kids' favorite: The exhibit on Blackbeard and his fellow pirates in the recreated Tucker's Island Lighthouse.

Route 9, Tuckerton; Phone: 609-296-8868; Admission: \$8 adults, \$4 ages 6-17, children 5 and under free.

The Inside Scoop:

Favorite Local Spot

Morrison's, 2nd St. on the Bay, Beach Haven, 609-492-5111. Ask for a table by the big picture windows at this casual seafood restaurant on the bay. Specialties include clam chowder (both Manhattan and New England) and crab cakes. The kiddie menu includes PB&J sandwiches.

Howard's Seafood Restaurant, 33rd St., Beach Haven, 609-492-2319. This popular seafood spot is famous for its fried lobster.

Mustache Bill's Barnegat Light Diner, 8th St. and Broadway, 609-494-0155. Good chowder can be had at this casual eatery across from Barnegat Light.

Local Food

Crab, clam chowder, saltwater taffy and homemade fudge.

Best Souvenir

A Barnegat Light souvenir box of taffy and crafts by local artisans including wind chimes and duck decoys.

Annual Events

Chowder Festival, weekend before Columbus Day Bayfront Park, Beach Haven. 609-494-7211. Includes end-of-season merchant's clearance sale, chowder cook-off and musical entertainment. Admission is \$15 adults, \$4 ages 3-12, for the chowder tasting (other activities are free).

Traffic Alert

Long Beach Boulevard (called Bay Avenue in Beach Haven) is the main island thoroughfare and can get quite backed up in summer. An alternative to driving: rent a bike or self-pedaled surrey from one of the many vendors on LBI. You can ride in safety in dedicated bike lanes that run the length of the island.

Also, beware of Saturday gridlock. Most of LBI's vacation home rentals start and end on that day, creating a huge traffic jam along the boulevard, as well as the causeway connecting LBI to the mainland. Plan to arrive early in the day.

Lodging Tip

LBI doesn't have a hotel strip. If you want to be near the most popular family attractions, stay in Beach Haven, on the island's southern end. But be forewarned, this is probably the noisiest part of the island (which, relatively speaking, is not an ear-splitter).

Loveladies, Long Beach Island, NJ 08008 or Beach Haven, Long Beach Island, NJ 08008

Review our Calendars and Reserve your Choice week(s).

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