Fun in the sun close to home

Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard

Editor's note: Travel is said to broaden minds as well as horizons. Far off, exotic sounding places are great to visit and experience but when the budget calls for something a little closer to home and more realistic, the would-be vacationer can find hundreds of places on the home shores to visit.

One such place is Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. From time to time, DAWN will feature such places far and near in hopes of stimulating your travel wanderlust.



POPULAR SPOT: The Flying Horses Carousel is a popular spot for young people who summer at Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard. Pictured are Grace Jette, in the Hard Rock tee shirt, Blythe Coleman and young Robert Jette and Janelle Blake. Photo by Cindy Loo

According to Massachusetts residents, who assuredly must be biased, there is no place in the world like Martha's Vineyard, a 20-mile long island off the state's coast. It possesses a distinct character and atmosphere — you either like it or you don't.

The Islanders, however, those who live there year around extend a guarantee.

"You come once, if you don't like it you don't come back. Come twice and you're hooked for life," said Dorothy West, author, newspaper writer and sole survivor of the famed writers group during the Harlem Renaissance.

Like most island resorts with their abundance of sun, sand and warm water, the Vineyard issues a call to romantics and those looking for summer fun.

The island is divided into six townships, each with its own Vineyard charm. But one of the additionally appealing aspects for many visitors to the town of Oak Bluffs is its very old established community of people of color — a combination of year-round and summer residents.

In addition to the year-round residents, a few thousand more people from up and down the East coast are added to the residential number in the summer.

"The attraction is perhaps because there was an original colony of blacks and it's a free and open place. There are a lot of families who live here. They come, then their friends come, then friends of friends come. It's a nucleus, a family circle," Ms. West said.

Although the black community per se is in Oak Bluffs, there now is a larger community spanning the entire island in all of the townships. And once you visit the Vineyard, according to Ms. West, you become part of that community.

This is what is extremely important to the many black professionals who populate the East coast. "There are a lot of role models there and it's a healthy environment socially, environmentally and economically," said Duane Jackson, a Boston resident. He refers to the large black population from Washington to Boston who vacation during the summer on the island.

"Particularly for black people, that's a very pleasant experience — that camaraderie shared on an annual basis," he said.

Escaping the city, on a temporary or permanent basis, is a good reason to come to the Island and if a sense of community is added to your agenda, you can even stay at one of the black-owned establishments. One of the more popular places to stay is Shearer Cottages.

"The Cottage has been open since 1903, that's when my grandfather, Charles Shearer, a former slave, bought the Cottages and my grandmother, Henrietta, an Indian, lent her support as well," said Liz White, who manages the family trust-owned Cottages with her sister.

The Shearers began the boarding house around 1910. At the time, black people were not welcome in the hotels or boarding houses, so the Shearers opened their large sprawling cottage to blacks and added dining for guests.

Shearer has housed many famous blacks, including Paul and Eslanda Robeson, Ethel Waters, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell and Harry T. Burleigh, the famous soloist/composer. Most of his work was setting the Negro spirituals down in manuscript form.



SUNBATHERS: This leisurely beach scene at Oak Bluffs captures a typical day in the sun where families can enjoy the sunny weather and warm temperatures. Photo by Cindy Loo



RUNNING: Running along the beach intent on her pleasure is little Lisa Bee from Vineyard Haven, MA. Oak Bluffs is one of her favorite spots to play. Photo by Cindy Loo

For more information about Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard or other Massachusetts vacations, contact the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, 100 Cambridge Street, 13th Floor, Boston, MA, 02202, (617) 727-3201.