

Shore thing

As New Jersey ramps up its trade engagement, **Cathy Toogood** discovers the state's famous coastline is perfect for a family road trip

As we jump over a wave, holding hands, an osprey swoops down in front of us to pluck a fish from the sea. It flies away and we can see its glimmering, writhing catch held between sharp talons. Minutes later, my nine-year-old daughter May spots the fins of a pod of dolphins slicing playfully through the waves, around 30 metres away from us. "Where will they pop up next?" her six-year-old brother Zac asks, scanning the water and squinting in the sunlight.

We're paddling in the sea in Cape May on New Jersey's southern tip, on a pristine white-sand beach dotted with red-and-white lifeguard chairs and decorative wooden boats. Behind the beach is a row of grand Victorian mansions in pretty pastel colours with rocking chairs on ornate porches, mansard roofs, white picket fences and perfectly manicured gardens.

Cape May is America's oldest seaside resort, having attracted holidaymakers since the late

1700s. Its historical district with postcard-perfect Victorian buildings was designated a National Historic Landmark district in 1976 and a stay in the handsome city is one of the highlights of our family road trip on the Jersey Shore.

The New Jersey coastline is not a typical destination for Brits, but that could be set to change, as the state's tourist board increases its focus on marketing to international visitors and plans more trade engagement, including hosting fam trips. As it is still relatively under the radar and because none of our friends or family back at home had visited anywhere on this stretch before, we had no idea what to expect when we landed at Newark Liberty International airport three days earlier to drive south, away from New York's dazzling skyline.

Our first stop is the Wildwoods, about two and a half hours from the airport, where we also spot wildlife in the form of huge horseshoe crabs

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Mia2you

DESTINATIONS

THE US | NEW JERSEY

ASK THE expert



Jeff Vasser
executive director,
New Jersey Tourism

"New Jersey boasts 130 miles of spectacular shoreline, vibrant cities and many parks and natural wonders to explore. We have an endless choice of attractions for UK visitors, including the world's longest boardwalk and first US seaside resort, plus many world-class museums, historical sites, parks, casinos and resorts. "As well as all the fantastic things to see and do, ease of access is a great selling point, with 11 daily direct flights into Newark Liberty International airport. The state also has accommodation offerings to suit most budgets."

SELLING TIPS



By Julie Greenhill, UK account director, New Jersey Tourism

✿ For holidays to south Jersey Shore, advise clients to fly into Philadelphia because the drive will be shorter than from Newark Liberty International.

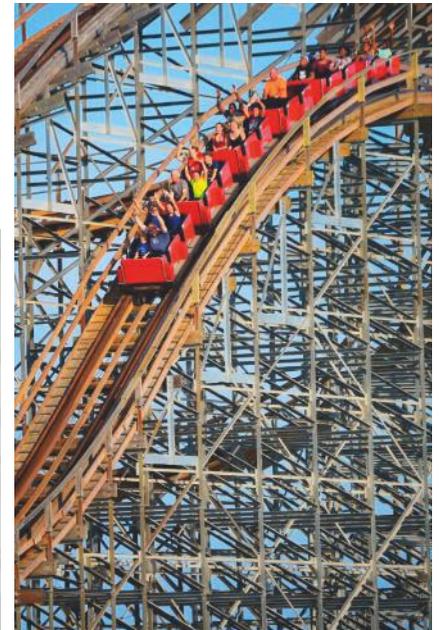
✿ Remind customers looking to bag a bargain that shoes and clothes are tax-free throughout New Jersey.

✿ For those looking to tick off another state, quaint city Lewes in Delaware is an easy day trip by ferry from Cape May.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Cape May Lighthouse; Wildwoods rollercoaster; Mainstay Inn, Cape May

PICTURES: NJ Department of Tourism/Cape May County



on its enormous beaches. Like Cape May, a stay in the Wildwoods feels like travelling back to a different era because it's home to the largest concentration of mid-century 'Doo Wop' architecture in America. Arriving at dusk, we are greeted by streets aglow with attention-grabbing neon signs, angular motels, kitsch plastic pine trees and colourful ornamental beachballs.

The preservation of the 1950s and 1960s character here is the result of a movement set up in the late 1990s to prevent original motels being knocked down and replaced by condos. To find out more about this and the area's history, we visit the small Doo Wop Experience Museum. Here, the museum's president, and owner of the nearby Daytona Inn & Suites, John Donio, tells me how important it is for the Wildwoods to keep its historical character, both for tourists and locals. "Once it's gone, it's gone," he says. "Not only is it preserving history, it's a way of branding."

One part of the Wildwoods that is like stepping into old-fashioned Americana is its fun-filled boardwalk. This two-and-a-half-mile stretch is home to three Morey's Piers, featuring more than 100 rides and attractions. Here, Zac and May ride their first-ever rollercoasters. "They are so exciting, not at all scary!" Zac declares after stepping off his favourite ride, Rollie's Coaster, which has three hills and a helix. It made me scream more than him.

The easy-going feelgood fun on offer here, from family bike rides and beach time to rollercoasters, feels like the perfect antidote to our busy lives at home. It is hard not to relax. The kids are reluctant to leave when we pack up the car to head seven

miles down the road to Cape May, but the city's beaches – and dolphins – soon woo them.

A trolley tour with Cape May MAC is an excellent introduction, teaching us all about the resort's high-profile visitors over the years, from Henry Ford to various presidents, as well as its architectural styles. Heading out for a three-hour sailing with the Cape May Whale Watcher is a highlight too, as bottlenose dolphins show off and a brown pelican flies above us.

But what we will most fondly remember about our trip are the simple pleasures that punctuate each day. One afternoon, our main task is to collect Cape May Diamonds – clear quartz stones that wash up on Sunset Beach – before watching the sun put on a show as it slowly slips away. Another is our wave-jumping session with added drama.

We all board our flight home with an extra spring in our step. "There's just everything here, Mummy," May says, protesting that we only stayed for a week. "Dolphins, rollercoasters, big buildings, sandcastles... Let's go back and do it all again." **TW**

BOOK IT

Jetset offers a five-night trip to the Wildwoods and Cape May from £4,083 for a family of four (two adults and two children) based on travel in June 2024. This includes flights from Heathrow to Philadelphia, car hire, a three-night stay in Wildwoods, a two-night stay in Cape May and baggage. Deposits start from £30 per person. jetsetflights.co.uk