

# The Secret Lives of Lighthouse Hoppers

Our intrepid author shares experiences visiting these historical wonders alongside her inspector husband.

Each time, it's the same. Walking inside a cramped, narrow tower, we climb up a steep, spiraling blend of architecture and history. Our breaths, heaving on the precarious climb, suddenly catch upon reaching our destination—especially if it's a clear, blue-sky day. We're stunned into silence, awed by the seagull's-eye view of the ocean and surrounding area.

Finally, we exhale. As lighthouse hoppers, we've "bagged" another. While I gaze out onto the 360-degree-span of ocean and land, snapping pictures, my husband is eyeballing ceilings, walls and floors for cracks and crevices like a hawk. Lighthouse hopping—a unique, nautical hobby for me and many lighthouse lovers—has been, for the most part, my husband's job. As a U.S. Coast Guard construction inspector for over 30 years, he oversees the surveying and inspections of various Coast Guard buildings and facilities—including the restorations of lighthouses dotting the coastline throughout New England.

Upon discovering his career, people immediately gush. "What a unique job!" they say. "You're so lucky, going to the beach for work." To which he quickly retorts, "You should try this job in January!"

BY KATHY SHIELS TULLY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN CUTRONA

Lighthouse hoppers usually note the direction of a light's spiral staircase. Race Point Light's weaves clockwise.



Sweeping 360-degree vistas or targeted porthole views? Race Point boasts vistas, while Nauset Light offers portholes.

Even though his job is unique, we can't ever seem to get away from it—even on our honeymoon. While driving Ireland's Ring of Kerry 15 years ago, we stopped in Kinsale, a coastal village in County Cork. Spotting the 17th century Old Head of Kinsale, famous for being the closest land point to the sinking of the RMS Lusitania in 1915, we made our way over, only to find out it was roped off for reconstruction. "He is a lighthouse inspector from Boston," I boasted to two construction workers. Next thing we knew, the rope was lifted and the four of us walked up the stairs, the three men swapping technical construction stories.

Today's technology—Long Range Navigation (LORAN) and Global Positioning System (GPS)—has rendered lighthouses obsolete. A strong sense by some lighthouse lovers to preserve them as an integral part of America's history

has increasingly led the Coast Guard to lease lighthouses to interested public groups, offloading the cost and responsibility for maintaining the public service. Like castles in Europe, they are increasingly just historical attractions.

Getting my husband to go hopping like a pedestrian tourist isn't always easy. "This is like going to work!" he grumbles. Last summer, I managed to persuade him to layer a few lighthouse hopping excursions onto various Cape trips we had scheduled from June through October. Since he loves sharing his knowledge of lighthouses, he was happy that interested friends or family would be along for some of the ride.

The tour began late June with a family reunion (mine) at the Lighthouse Inn in West Dennis, followed one week later with an overnight stay in Provincetown, then various day trips through the summer and fall with friends to



Architectural framing around a tower's windows is an important description to note.



Highland Light



Nauset Light



Nobska Light

## Lighthouse characteristics to note

Like lighthouses, hoppers vary. Hailing from around the world, some are interested in the history or physical details, others merely for the view upon reaching the summit.

Notebooks and pen in hand, gung-ho "hoppers" log dates and details of each visit in their lighthouse journal: the architecture; materials used in construction (wood, brick, steel, etc.); date built; location; type of light; history of the light and lighthouse keepers; whether they are open to the public; and if they have admission fees.

Location is one unique characteristic. My husband differs from hoppers in that, with some lights, he's had to be helicoptered onto the island. Most hoppers have some transportation available to them. While some lights are acces-

sible only by 4WD like **Race Point**, many are a scenic drive or bike ride, like Nobska Light in Woods Hole/Falmouth, just steps off the road and a small parking lot, or **Chatham Light**, with a large, public parking lot across the street.

The experience of "summitting" a lighthouse varies. Light or dark? Stuffy or breezy? Cool or steamy hot? It all depends. Does the top have all windows, like Highland Light or the Lighthouse Inn's **Bass River Light**? If it does, you're rewarded with a blinding, 360-view. The porthole windows at Nauset, by contrast, provide a cool, dark landing with targeted views of the surrounding area and Atlantic. If it's foggy, it doesn't matter how many windows there are.

Some hoppers race from lighthouse

to lighthouse, trying to collect as many as possible in a day like **Martha's Vineyard Lighthouse Challenge**, held each June (this year on June 11; for more information go to [www.mvy.com](http://www.mvy.com)). Photographers, whether amateur and professional, love to capture these towers of history against sea and sky, the symmetry of the steep steel spiral stairs, and the exterior designs.

## Hoppers we met along the way

Meeting fellow hoppers—finding out where they're from, what lighthouses they've been to—is one of the things I like best. At **Nauset Light**, we met Curt and Karen Nix of Shreveport, Louisiana, about 2,400 miles into their 17-day vacation. They divulged their "strategy" for hopping around the Cape. Curt drove, he said, while Karen navigated, using *The Lighthouse Handbook: New England: The Original Lighthouse Field Guide* by Jeremy D'Entremont (Cider Mill Press Book Publishers, 2008). At Nauset, we also met Kate Beningessner and Maude Paradis two young Canadian women from Montreal, planning to surf, not hop. "But when in Cape Cod," Beningessner said in broken English, "you have to

see lighthouses!" Why Nauset? Beningessner laughed, "I wanted to see a red lighthouse." (Nauset's top half is painted nautical red, the bottom white.)

At **Nobska** (painted solid, blinding white), Megan Miller and Andrew Tappan, from D.C., denied being hoppers, then started listing the lighthouses they've seen, together and separately—in places as disparate as Chatham, St. Maarten, Ireland, Bermuda, Lake Erie and California. Miller, a Massachusetts native, admitted she's visited lighthouses on the Cape through Boston, saying, "It's kind of what you do when you live in New England."

At **Highland Light**, we met the Myhres, a lighthouse-hopping family from Hudson, Wisconsin, including Karl and Paula, Erin,

10, and Lindsey, 7. "We've seen a lot of lighthouses," Paula said, planning to "hit a couple more lights," including Chatham, Nauset, and Three Sisters.

But it was at Nobska, where we met the youngest, most exuberant hopper of all, Mikala "Mia" Palumbo. A 2 1/2-year-old granddaughter of Sarah Joslin and David Bird, North Falmouth residents, Mia had commanded her grandparents that morning to take her to Nobska "now." Intrigued by a limited print of Nobska, by local Cape artist Jan Collins Selman, hanging on her grandparent's kitchen wall, Mia inquired constantly about Nobska, Joslin said, "since she began talking." Seeing her first lighthouse up close, the toddler began dancing around it with pure delight.



Race Point is located in the dunes of Provincetown, accessible only by a winding sandy path.

Nauset, Three Sisters, Chatham, Highland (Cape Cod) Light, and Nobska.

### RACE POINT LIGHT, PROVINCETOWN

We return to the Cape the following weekend to drop off our daughters at a Girl Scout sleepover camp in Brewster, then race to Race Point Lighthouse in Provincetown where we'll have our own one-night sleepover. Owned by the U. S. Coast Guard, Race Point is leased by the Cape Cod Chapter of the American Lighthouse Federation (ALF). Billed as a "guest house," Race Point is accessible only by a 2-mile drive by 4WD vehicle over a sandy path through low-rolling dunes—unless, of course, you want to walk.

While booking our one-night reservation, I blurted out my husband's job, hoping to get a chance to speak to Jim Walker. Walker, a retired Coast Guard general foreman, is a rock star in the lighthouse community. His indefatigable passion and legendary knowledge motivated many fellow light-

house lovers and master craftsmen to painstakingly restore this building to its current historically correct and comfortable status, preventing it from destruction in 1996.

Instead of a chat over the phone, Walker surprises us with a personal

visit, driving in from his Hyannis home. Though they know of each other, Walker and my husband have never met. Within minutes—just like on our honeymoon—the two men regale each other with lighthouse tales only a few could appreciate. It went on for two



A view of the lighthouse looms large in the windows of the four-wheel drive SUV that transports lighthouse hoppers to its out-of-the-way location.

hours, while we pleasantly sipped iced tea at the keeper's kitchen table.

"I think my grandmother might have had the same table," I interject into animated conversation. Walker beams with pride. "Our goal is to make [the keeper's house] feel lived in, not be a museum," Walker says. Renovating and decorating the interior of the keeper's house, he tells us, is guided by one question only: "What would it have looked like in the mid-50's? That's our goal."

At Race Point, trained volunteer keepers like Tom Miller insure the running and maintenance of both the light and keeper's house. An enthusiastic, 10-year veteran volunteer from Buck's County, Pennsylvania, Miller gives us, and all guests, a personal, guided tour inside the 45-foot high, cast iron light built in 1876.

Leading us through the beautifully restored door, inside to the brick-lined tower, My husband and I follow Miller, carefully marching up about 35–40 steep, spiraling narrow stairs—I admit losing count—to the watch room with its picturesque, porthole windows. From there, we climb several more, even steeper steps up a ladder to a hatch door which leads us into the lamp room. A tight space circling the optic lens centered in the middle, it's immediately clear why most lighthouse tours only allow a few people up at a time.

One detail my husband always notices immediately is which way the stairs spiral. The reason why some lights' stairs turn to the right, and others to the left, perplexes him, however. His only guess? The stairs twist in a direction to afford the best views.

After noting Race Point stairs spiral to the right, we reach the top where my husband notes the type of lens. Race Point had a fourth order Fresnel lens, but replaced it with a 190 mm optic, a modern-day plastic light, when the light

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The old Bass River Light is wrapped within the Lighthouse Inn, a popular restaurant and resort in Dennis.

KATHY SHIELDS TULLY

was automated in 1972. Fresnel lenses, glass prisms made in France in the 1860s in six sizes (first order, second, etc.), have mostly been removed from lighthouses and either destroyed or moved to museums. With the automation of lighthouses, there's no keeper to take care of these priceless, 150-year old works of art. According to my husband, maintaining them is "a lost art."

Another discovery? The beam has been solar-powered since 1994. Proudly "off the grid," Race Point generates all the electricity it needs through an array of solar power and a wind turbine. The solar-powered beam can be seen 16 miles out to sea, a towering twist of history and alternative energy. Even my husband is impressed.

**BASS RIVER LIGHT,  
WEST DENNIS**

Originally lit in 1855 as Bass River Light, it is the only privately owned, privately maintained working lighthouse in the country. Dark for 75 years, it was relit in 1989 (with a one-second flash every six seconds), and renamed West Dennis Light.

Unlike most lighthouses, typically built separate from the keeper's house, West Dennis Light is wrapped within

the Lighthouse Inn. Guests can stay on the second floor, exactly where the keeper and his family used to sleep. Walking up fifteen stairs to the second floor, we climb another twelve to the third floor, then eight more up a ship's ladder to the light, and finally, another five to get into the building from outside. All worth it for the spectacular, miles-long view of Bass River, which divides Dennis and Yarmouth; Great Island in Yarmouth; the discontinued lighthouse at Point Gammon; Bishop and Clerk Lighthouse (rebuilt a few years ago); and Rock Island. Turning to the southeast, we can see Monomoy Point off the south tip of Chatham, and the mouth of the Swan River.

My family and I revel in those sun and surf hobbies, yet we always make sure to spend time on a unique nautical hobby which has brought us to coastal edges and forced us to walk—not out on a plank—but up and down steep stairs. ☀

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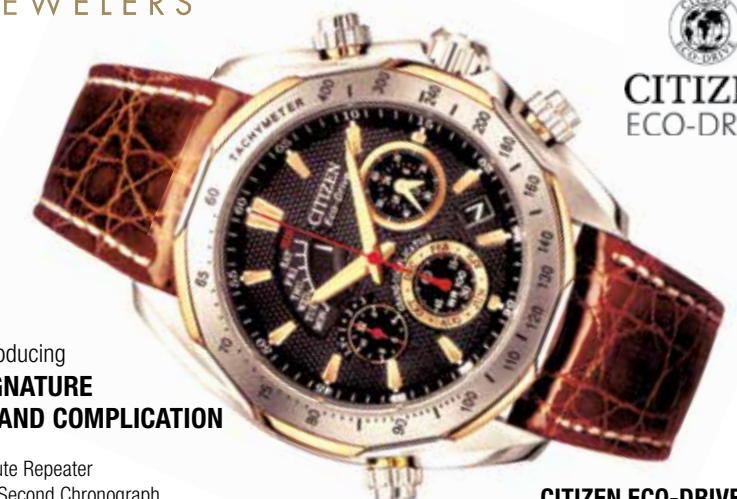
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