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Pictures: 10 secrets of the Jersey shore

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun

Who knew the serene beaches in Cape May County, N.J. - The Jersey Cape - are laden with downy white sand that rivals the sugar-sand beaches on exotic tropical islands? You don't learn this stuff from watching Snooki and her gang, who hang out on those taupe-colored dense sand beaches 100 miles north.

A gleaming, 30-mile ribbon of powdery-white sand beaches connects the resorts of Ocean City, Sea Isle City, Avalon, Stone Harbor, the Wildwoods, and Cape May. Each town radiates a distinctive vibe, while abounding with superb beaches, fabulous foodie indulgences, boundless outdoor pursuits and exquisite accommodations. Whats more, New Jersey's southern shore is an eco-paradise, teaming with unspoiled wildlife refuges, natural hiking and biking trails and indigenous gemstones buried in the sand. Whether you are a veteran of the southern Jersey coastal-scene or considering visiting for the first time, you will surely want in on some of its best-kept secrets.



1. Bird-watching

(Jerry Jackson, Baltimore Sun / May 17, 2011)

North America's premier bird-watching perch is Cape May, N.J. Really! With 239 (and counting) recorded species, including the migration of peregrines, merlins, ospreys, and sharp-shinned hawks. It's no wonder that the area hosts the annual World Series of Birding in May and is favored by such globally renowned naturalists as Tory Peterson. (Info: birdcapemay.org)



2. More rides than Disney?

(Photo courtesy of The Wildwoods Convention Center / May 17, 2010)

According to the Greater Wildwoods Tourism Authority, there are more rides and attractions than Disneyland, including a really cool Insectarium, along Wildwood's 2.5-mile boardwalk.



3. Hank Sauce

(Photo courtesy of HankSauce.com / May 17, 2012)

Hold the ketchup -- slather that cheesesteak in Hank Sauce (8605 Landis Avenue, Sea Isle City, 609-486-5132, hanksauce.com), a handmade concoction created by a Sea Isle City, N.J., man who craved a savory hot sauce. Now locals can't get enough of it, so Hank (Chef Brian Ruxton) launched a Hank Sauce Restaurant in March serving "Florida-Latin" fare. Try the Ahi Tuna Roll, with Hank's mango salsa, wrapped in a burrito.



4. Dogs have it

(Maui's Dog House Photo / May 17, 2012)

Local residents declare America's best hot dogs to be the homemade franks at Maui's Dog House (806 New Jersey Ave., North Wildwood, mauisdoghouse.com), offering 29 different toppings for their dogs and sausages.



5. Quiet beaches

(Colleen McCloskey, Baltimore Sun / August 26, 2010)

Prefer those hidden, little-known natural beaches? Corson's Inlet, a strip of protected, undeveloped beachfront and sand dunes is nestled between Ocean City and Sea Isle City. It is lifeguard-protected but lacks crowds, ensuring prime fishing and surfing conditions. Careful -- those dunes serve as nesting

sites for the endangered piping plover, the least tern and black skimmers.



6. Diamonds

(Photo courtesy of CapeMay.com / May 17, 2012)

Eureka! Free diamonds wash ashore on Cape May beaches. Cape May Diamonds are native translucent quartz stones that, when polished, resemble diamonds. Believed to have been discovered by Kechemech Indians and used for trading with early European colonists, they are still abundant in the sand on Higbee Beach and Sunset Beach. Cape May's Sunset Beach Gift Shop will even polish and set them for you.



7. Marbles mania

(Mel Evans, Associated Press / June 23, 2005)

Kids lose their marbles, and win new ones (and a scholarship!), at the annual National Marbles Tournament (June 15-18) on the beach by Scalanger Avenue in Wildwood. This year marks the 89th annual competition. Wannabe shooters practice year-round in the oceanfront open rings.



8. Doo-wop and rock

(Handout / May 17, 2012)

The largest concentration of mid-century architecture in the U.S. is in the Wildwoods -- featuring the vibrant "doo-wop" style, including exotic themes, kitschy signs, and jutting rooflines popularized in the 1950s and '60s in films featuring Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon. But doo-wop isn't the only pop culture here. The song "Rock Around The Clock" was first performed by Bill Haley on the stage of Wildwood's Hot Brau Hotel on May 29, 1954. It quickly topped the charts and is credited with bringing rock 'n' roll into mainstream culture.



9. Dolphin sightings

(John and Suzanne Cook Photo, Special to The Baltimore Sun / May 22, 2012)

The Northeast's largest concentration of bottlenose dolphins is known to flip around the shores of Wildwood Crest. Many are born here, just off the coastline.



10. Sugar sand

(Photo courtesy of The Wildwoods / May 16, 2012)

What beach erosion? Wondrously, Wildwood's five-miles of powder-sand beaches continuously expand. Reportedly inward tidal currents wash ashore finely-ground sugar-sand from neighboring beaches, increasing the sand mass each year while creating a natural sandbar playground for youngsters.

—*Stephanie Citron*

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