

# BEACH, WITH BLANKET

Sometimes You and the Sea Need  
To Be Alone. Well, the Coast Is Clear.

By Jeannette Belliveau  
Washington Post Staff Writer

*"Recreational forecasts, Maryland beaches: Today, partly sunny, flurries. High 38-46. Wind west 11-22 mph. Ocean temperature 40-43."*

**A** PERFECT forecast for a weekend at the beach. That is, if you want a good look at Ocean City's nine miles of off-season sand with about 300,000 fewer partiers than usual. Before driving east on an unclogged U.S. 50, I canvassed people for suggestions of things to do.

"Sleep," my neighbor Rich offered.

"I pack sweats, knitting and a book," said my sister Sharon. "Then wonder if it's too much."

"A lot of books are read," said Martha Clements of the Ocean City Visitors and Convention Bureau.

The advice boiled down to:

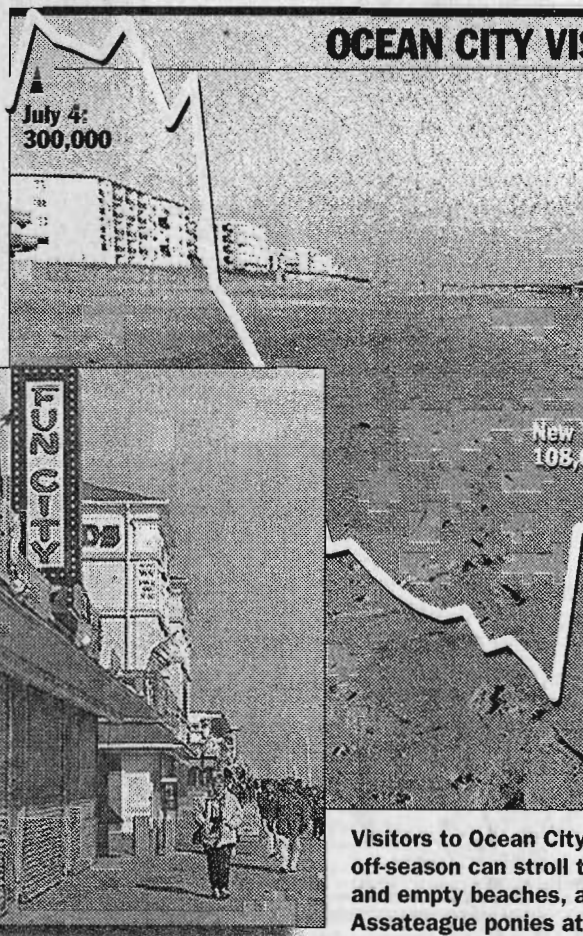
Take walks. Eat. Read. Blob. Repeat.

The beauty of Ocean City anytime is that there are plenty of activities, yet no must-sees. Especially in the off-season, this is one escape where you don't have to rush at all.

A simple pleasure: strolling beaches as deserted as Western Australia's, yet lined with enough condos behind the dune grass to house the entire population of Norfolk or Tampa.

Sharon jogged ahead, logging her standard three miles. I walked behind, with my Shetland sheep dog, Beau. I counted a total of eight people in either direction, as far as the eye could see. At the high-water mark lay scoured seashells and carcasses of horse-shoe and blue crabs, but no human litter. Gull congregations gaggled at the water's edge like penguins. It was the first time I'd seen these magnificent beaches virtually empty, and I felt like an explorer stumbling on a secret hideaway. Maryland's boom resort seemed deserted and wild, more like the rocky Caribbean edge of Cozumel in Mexico.

A stiff west wind, crashing surf and big cloudless sky sent Beau into crazed raptures. He barked maniacally, attacked my shoelaces, snatched my glove and pranced off. Mind-reading his little dog thoughts was easy: Cold weather! An environment like my ancestral home! Another best day of my life!



Visitors to Ocean City off-season can stroll the boardwalk and empty beaches, and Assateague ponies at

Later on the boardwalk, Beau greeted his mirror image, Saber the Sheltie, part of a mini-throng lending a hint of summertime liveliness to O.C.'s main drag. Strollers bundled in parkas and scarves ambled past open game arcades and shuttered eateries. Vendors passed buckets of Fisher's caramel popcorn directly onto the boardwalk, through a window somewhat protected from the cold by hanging plastic sheets. T-shirt shops threw their doors open to the elements. A man added more layers of glitter and tackiness to the exterior of the Ocean Gallery. A policeman on horseback purchased funnel cakes.

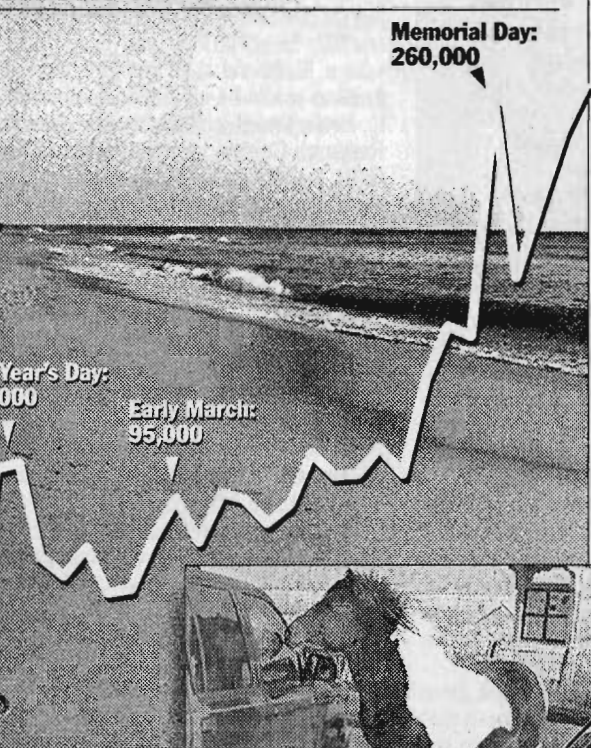
A trio of Washington experts on the off season—Angie, Richard and Rob—met us for delicious pancakes and home fries at Rayne's, in a 1926 building near the base of the boardwalk. Wooden floors, flowery curtains, a 1950s green Hamilton Beach shake blender and loads of philodendrons reminded Sharon of our grandmother's house.

Three local young people looking a bit worse for the wear took the next table. "Mountain Dew is good for hangovers," the waitress counseled, with near-papal authority no doubt gained on numerous other Sunday mornings.

Angie, Richard and Rob shared their insiders' secrets on things to do in the off season: "Sleep late. Get up, read the paper, and sometimes not speak until noon. Swim in the condo's pool. We

# Types

## VISITORS BY WEEK



...y in the  
...the boardwalk  
...and view  
...close range.



BY JEANNETTE BELLIVEAU—THE WASHINGTON POST

Angie led us for our first visit to the Life of the Marsh nature walk. Two marsh deer peered, probably in astonishment, at our quintet of wind-lashed humans tromping along, studying placards about palmyras grass and the remaining scars of mosquito drainage ditches.

Assateague's wild ponies proved about as elusive as K Street squirrels. Squadrons of them surrounded autos on the roads and in the parking lots, smearing car windows with their noses, begging for food like Yellowstone bears in the '60s. The ponies looked particularly rugged and healthy with their woolly winter coats. A long wild forelock curled across the eyes of a piebald stallion, while a dark chocolate mare had a copper-blond mane and tail, an eye-catching photo-negative effect.

Let us not give a wrong impression of ourselves as highbrows who only take nature walks. Something about the very atmosphere of Ocean City permits grown adults to savor without guilt:

1. Reading People magazine for content. Discussing the article on the Prince Charles/Camilla/Tiggy the nanny triangle.
2. Watching the Beavis and Butt-head "Moron-athon" on MTV.
3. Blowing \$20 of quarters on Terminator 2 and arcade football.
4. Pouring sand out of our shoes at night.
5. Going to see "Dumb and Dumber." Due to beach maturity regression syndrome, laugh contagion spread to us from the 10-year-old contingent.
6. Watching (dumbest) the Ricki Lake show.

"I started at Ocean City, went up to Dewey, then up to Rehoboth, and now I'm back at Ocean City," said Sharon. "If you're really sophisticated, you reach the stage of, I don't care, I don't have to go to the right places."

That's how everyone's favorite summer beach at 16 becomes a winter favorite at 40.

rode the tram behind Northside Mall to look at the Winterfest Lights, but we nearly froze."

Mainly they go almost daily to Assateague Island National Seashore, a nature reserve that acts as both Ocean City's polar opposite and perfect complement.

## WAYS & MEANS

Many people prefer Ocean City's "second season" for the solitude and the bargains; rooms are typically half price or less. Incredibly, almost half of Ocean City's 8 million visitors per year arrive *after* Labor Day and *before* Memorial Day, with New Year's Eve drawing 100,000 visitors.

**WHERE TO STAY:** For visitors seeking bay views, luxury and a hint of the Caribbean, there are two hotels on Fager's Island, 60th Street at the Bay—**The Coconut Mallory** (410-723-6100), with a Haitian art gallery and winter rates starting at \$69 for doubles, and the smaller **Lighthouse** (410-524-5500, reservations 800-767-6060), with rates starting at \$89.

If you have a pet, try the **Fenwick Inn** on 138th Street (410-250-1100, reservations 800-492-1873), with rates starting at \$49, or the **Sheraton** on 101st Street (800-638-2100), with rates starting at \$60. Dogs are permitted on the beach in the off-season.

Numerous bargain places post rates on their signboards, or ask for brochures from the Ocean City Visitors Center (see below).

**WHERE TO EAT:** Fager's Island Restaurant (410-524-5500)—We won't spoil the musical surprise for first-timers. But try to arrive well before dusk (call for a recommended time) and sit

near the bay-side windows to experience a surprisingly impressive ritual. **B.J.'s on the Water** (410-524-7575) offers an alternative venue for the same lovely bay sunset, good steaks and plenty of televisions for sports fans. **Rayne's** (410-289-9141) has home-style food, homestyle setting, local flavor.

**WHAT TO DO:** Among the possibilities—**Assateague Island National Seashore**, Route 611, 7206 National Seashore Lane, Berlin, Md., 21811, 410-641-3030 or 641-1441. **Old Pro Golf**, 6801 Coastal Highway, 410-524-2645, with year-round indoor miniature golf with a dinosaur theme and arcade games. **Northside Park**, a local favorite on the bay at 125th Street featuring a marsh walk—here, right behind Northside Mall, I spotted a blue heron.

Special events include a **St. Patrick's Day Parade** (this Saturday); an **Arts and Crafts Fair** at the Convention Center, 40th and Coastal Highway (March 24-26) and a wildfowl carving competition (April 28-30).

**INFORMATION:** For more information, contact the **Ocean City Visitors Center**, 4001 Coastal Highway, Ocean City, Md. 21842, 800-OC-OCEAN (800-626-2326).