

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Sunset at Sunset Beach: If you look closely, you will note atop the hull of S.S. Atlantis a cormorant in silhouette, spreading its wings to dry. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Diamond of a Sunset

Sunset Beach at Cape May Point is a great place to watch the sun dip below the horizon.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River.

Summer is certainly winding down and for many the end is marked by the start of school. From the middle of Southern New Jersey our beachfront resorts are only a short ride away, but I've always preferred to visit our rivers and inland lakes, rather than

join the evening and morning parade of cars carrying loads of people who venture to the beach in the middle of the summer season.

It is the shoulder season that beckons me to head eastward to our sandy shores. The days are not as blisteringly hot, the water is still warm, and most of the crowds have dwindled as the shoobies have returned to their hometowns. Many of our former summer visitors are now focused on getting children prepared for school each day. And so we the natives get to have our seashore destinations back for ourselves.

On a Friday afternoon, after Labor Day weekend, we headed south to Cape May, ending up at Andrea's Trattoria Italiano where we had a wonderful meal. Afterwards the sun had not yet set and we decided to wander over to one of the most iconic spots to witness the day's end. We are blessed to live on the east coast where we get to view captivating ocean sunrises, but to see the sunset we must head west on our barrier islands to the inland waterways and bays. In Cape May that means the Delaware

Bayshore. Sunset Beach at the tip of Cape May Point is a mecca of sorts; even in the off season, people flock there to watch the sun set.

Visitors of all ages were converging at the Point to see what nature's skies held in store. Deep oranges, reds, and blues looked as if a giant had had his way with the canvas of dusk. The famous cement ship jutted out of the surf and cormorants dotted its sharp edge. One held a heraldic pose as he dried himself before taking his evening nap. With his wings outstretched he looked as if he were directing the other seven cormorants in a symphony, commemorating the end of the day and the sun's plunge into the bay.

Little did he know he and his comrades were perched upon the S. S. Atlantis, an experimental concrete ship – one of twelve built during World War I. The experiment failed because the weight of the ship proved impractical for trans-Atlantic voyages. In 1926 Colonel Jesse Rosenfeld decided to employ the ship as a ferry dock in Cape May.

However a June 8th storm caused the vessel to escape its mooring and become firmly planted 150 feet off the coast of Sunset Beach, where it remains a tourist's focal point and avian rest-stop to this day.



A circa-1930 post card of the S.S. Atlantis at its watery graveside spot off Sunset Beach at Cape May Point, NJ.



A 2007 photo of the S.S. Atlantis hull in the Delaware Bay, with a black backed gull perching on the highest point of its sunken remains. Photo: public domain, Wiki commons.

Seeing the cormorants reminded me of how people, like flocks of birds, come to appreciate migration at the Point. Be it birds or butterflies, these fall migrations are celebrated by many birders and wildlife enthusiasts.

When we arrived an elderly couple was leaving the beachfront with their metal detectors outstretched ahead of them. We inquired about their presumed booty. They said they had found lots of gold doubloons. "I'm sure you did," I replied cheerfully.

Couples of all ages walked hand in hand to the surf's interface with the beach. Some made it no further than the park benches that line the parking lot. Of special note was what I assumed to be bridal bachelorette parties; in a few of them a young women wore a bridal veil leaving little doubt about the event's purpose. Others simply included a woman festooned in white. These groups were conservative in both their dress and manner, but the night was young.



A couple takes a moment to enjoy the sunset. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

You may know that each resort town in New Jersey has its own vibe and Cape May is normally thought of as historic and conservative: "The Nation's Oldest Seashore Resort." Wildwood, as its name suggests, is considered "Wild as you want to be," essentially for its Doo Wop culture, rides, and party scene. Ocean City's label is "America's Greatest Family Resort," with its absence of bars and liquor stores. Atlantic City is known for its gambling and casino shows. The list of characteristics is lengthy, and I suppose sometimes the resort makes its motto and sometimes the motto makes for a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, a group that selects to have a bachelorette party in Cape May might be looking for a venue that is a bit classier and more conservative, with a throwback to earlier times.



What the author presumes to be a bachelorette party poses at Sunset Beach as they embark on a night of celebration prior to nuptials. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

In any event the festivities reminded me of the seaside town of Carlingford, Ireland, famous for its “hen parties” (the Irish name for a bachelorette party). The village has ties to the United States, a sister town so to speak, because former President Biden’s ancestors hailed from this Cooley Peninsula location. Like Cape May, the large number of restaurants and variety of lodging attract celebrations of all kinds to its establishments and shores.

Sunset Beach is known for a number of characteristics. My friend reminded me that

it is the home of the Cape May Diamonds, and in fact folks often confuse it with Diamond Beach just south of Wildwood Crest in Lower Township. Both areas are famous for the presence of the naturally clear quartz pebbles that get rolled in the surf. If clear enough and sufficiently rolled they can be cut and polished to resemble a genuine diamond. Beachcombing Magazine notes that a true diamond is 10 on the Mohs scale of hardness whereas a Cape May Diamond scores only 7 to 7.5.

In 2009 New Jersey Monthly author Doug Hunsberger wrote, "The largest concentration of Cape May Diamonds is found in the booty on the sands of Sunset Beach." The Cape May Gift Shop at the Point says the Kechemeche Indians were the first to discover these stones and further suggests that the quartz crystals hold supernatural powers, bringing success and good fortune to those who possess them. The pebbles are said to originate at the Delaware Water Gap, from where they tumble 200 miles to the beaches of Cape May. The gift shop sells the quartz after it has been polished and faceted. Often it is set

in jewelry such as rings, earrings, and pendants.

During most sunsets the sky becomes most spectacular after the sun has fallen beneath the horizon. Too many people leave the moment the golden orb sinks out of view. But the painting of the sky improves with time until it fades. We waited it out, and it was well worth our patience.

I watched a mother play with her two children along the beach and asked if I might take a few photos to share with you the readers. When I see a family investigating the lapping of small waves in the edge of the sand it reminds me of my own childhood, and then of my own motherhood with my two daughters. The circle of our life lines continues as so many people are drawn to the shore's edge. The women embarking on married life remind me of the possibility of future families enjoying the shorelines of New Jersey, and of our responsibility to guard our future and our planet for those who come after us. It's funny how simple pleasures can evoke complex thoughts about

what we, the living, owe to future generations.

Sources

S. S. Atlantus, interpretative beach side sign.



A mother enjoys the beach with her two children as the sun sets on Cape May Point. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Cape May's Sparkling Stones, Cape May diamonds are not diamonds at all, but they have been known to fool the most discriminating eyes, by Doug Hunsberger May 5, 2009.