

Ocean City: A Guide to Maryland's Seaside Resort A Tourist Town Guide

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isbn: 978-0-9767064-6-5

Introduction

In the late 1800s, Ocean City was conceived and built as a tourist destination, the end of a long journey across hours and miles of flat, empty land, a place to escape from real life and celebrate the summer. It didn't evolve from earlier settlement, and has no roots as a city of trade or industry. Its purpose is to delight vacationers.

Over a hundred years later, that principle is still what gives Ocean City its magic. The trains are gone now; most people visit for a week now rather than a month or a summer; and off-season activities extend Ocean City's draw further and further into the cool months. However, this jumble of buildings, noise, and lights perched at the edge of the sea still stirs up that giddy feeling of summer vacation happiness.

Over eight million people visit Ocean City each year—as many as 3 million in the “off season.” Some try to compare the merits of Ocean City with the smaller, more exclusive Delaware beaches, but that exercise is like comparing apples to oranges, or perhaps surfboards to margaritas. The size and incredible density of Ocean City, coupled with its cheerfully democratic appeal to people of all ages and walks of life is completely unique.

Ocean City's Boardwalk on a July evening is a study in contrasts. Families, hordes of teenagers, aging bikers, grandparents, blue-collar couples, and folks who just moored their pleasure boats in the commercial harbor all wander up and down the boards. Every possible demographic is here, eating Thrashers Fries and listening to guitar-strumming buskers, taking a spin on the giant ferris wheel and trying their hand at Skee-ball, in the same arcade and perhaps at the very same machine where their parents whiled away a summer evening, decades ago.

Across in West Ocean City, the newer development at the commercial fishing pier sets a newer, more monied tone in that part of town. High-end restaurants, million dollar condos, and national chains are muscling their way into what was once a town of local family ventures. Some worry that Ocean City is getting too upscale and its funky, salt-of-the-earth flavor is fading.

Yet it's hard to cultivate much pretentiousness here. “Exclusive” multi-million dollar houses have sprung up in a field behind a popular dinosaur-themed mini-golf park. A high-end day spa shares a parking lot with a Hooters Restaurant. The Hilton is right next door to the Thunderbird Motel. And most of Ocean City's finest restaurants are located in strip malls. The contrasts between the sublime and the ridiculous are everywhere. This is precisely what gives Ocean City its enduring, irresistible charm.

Families come back every summer, year after year and generation after generation, because Ocean City is not like real life. It is here to make people happy, and it just keeps working its magic.