



The Elegant “Beach Shack” Keeping Quiet Watch on Martha’s Vineyard

By Mary Forgione



Martha’s Vineyard already murmurs, but Aquinnah lowers the volume to a whisper. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

Martha’s Vineyard doesn’t need to make noise. Quite the opposite. On the affluent Massachusetts summer retreat, nature performs its quiet wonders: the hush of the sand

dunes, the lapping of the ocean, the ripple of the tide, the sky's pink and orange blush at dusk.

Sure, there are places like Edgartown or Oak Bluffs, where some people go to get noticed. But Aquinnah, an outpost on the island's western end, isn't one of those. The tight-knit town possesses a rich history. It's here that descendants of the Wampanoag people who settled the area 10,000 years ago continue to preserve their culture and their homeland.



Half a century ago, fishermen rolled their shacks right to the tideline—rules now insist on a respectful step back. Historic image courtesy TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

The ocean provided sustenance for the tribe, many of whom were skilled whalers more than 300 years ago. In his 1850 novel *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville included a character named Tashtego, a fictional harpooner from Aquinnah. Half a century later, a real-life local named Amos Smalley did what Captain Ahab could not: harpooned and caught a white sperm whale.

Aquinnah is a place where the do-nothing crowd and the athletic do-something crowd co-exist nicely, each seduced in their own way by sand dunes and sea. And it's quiet.



With neighbors scattered at postcard distance, the 1,300-square-foot beach home feels almost like the sole occupant of its own private island. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

Traces of the island's pristine past linger in remote properties such as a beach house on the equivalent of four lots. The property fronts rolling sand dunes that give way to white-sand beachfront on Dogfish Bar, one of the island's top fishing spots for striped bass in spring and bonito in fall.

At [29 Oxcart Road](#) there's a three-bedroom home that started out as a rustic beach shack. In the 1980s, it was owned by Jeanne and Hugh Taylor, the latter the brother of singers Livingston and James Taylor.

The property was the site of impromptu outdoor parties and concerts back then, one apparently involving a piano on the beach. Likely enough, given that James Taylor and Carly Simon built a home on another part of the island, which the *New York Times* once described as a “musical Camelot, a shabby-chic Bohemia bedazzled with rock star mementos.”



History frames the setting, yet renovations are recent—a freshly widened deck included. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

The Taylor-era shack gave way to a contemporary house in 2009. Light floods in and frames scenic views. Bedrooms are located on the first floor, kitchen and common areas on the main level. An expanded deck adds an indoor/outdoor touch. The rest of the land, especially the native dunes that connect to the beach, remains protected. New owners may change the home’s interior but not expand the footprint.

It's an easy walk down dune paths to Dogfish Bar, one of the few beaches on the island that's growing instead of eroding. Sediments washed in from the south side of the island build up the beach. Half a century ago, fishing shacks were located much closer to the water than what's permitted today. Still, there's easy access from the house to the water for kayaking, fishing, beach walks and of course sunset viewing, quite the celebrated island pastime.

Not far away is the seasonal ferry to [Menemsha](#), a beloved fishing town on the island. Locals ride their bikes to the ferry, make the short crossing and find a coffee shop or hang at the beach before heading back.



At \$3.95 million, the price tags the deed to one of the Vineyard's loneliest, loveliest horizons. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

In many ways, Aquinnah still belongs to the Wampanoags. The legends and history of the area echo through the ages, amid the still unspoilt dunes and beachfront on the quiet side of the island. The famed Aquinnah Cliffs are a spiritual touchstone. They were once the playground of a key figure in the tribe's origin story, a benevolent giant credited with creating the Vineyard and surrounding islands. In the legend, he dragged his foot into the earth and cut out the shape of the Vineyard as water filled his behemoth footsteps.

The stunning rock formations in reddish orange, yellow and gray have become one of the most visited sites on Martha's Vineyard. The cliffs share the ocean overlook with the Gay Head Lighthouse, which was built by the state of Massachusetts in 1799 to guide whaling ships and other maritime vessels.

If fiction were fact, Ahab may have passed this way.
