

# SOUTH JERSEY MAGAZINE



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## PEOPLE + NEWS

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### Paid Vacation

by Jennifer L. Nelson; Photograph by Jerry Magusto  
Heading to the Jersey Shore in the summer is a tradition; just don't forget those beach tags.

Between parking fees for tourists and property taxes for residents of the Jersey Shore, a day at the beach comes at a premium. Regardless of whether you shell out for pricey beachfront property or simply want to dip your toes in the sand once or twice this season, South Jerseyans and tourists alike will have to cough up the cash for beach tags to earn the privilege of sitting along the state's coastline.

Reportedly the only coastal region in the country to charge for beach access, New Jersey's beach tags are available in daily, weekly and seasonal increments—ranging from \$5 daily to upward of \$35 seasonally—in most shore towns. Ever since their widespread inception in the 1970s, New Jersey's beachgoers have begrudgingly been paying to sit on the beach from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day. However, according to local government officials, it's all for good cause.

Though the history of beach tags is unique to each town, Jay Gillian, mayor of Ocean City, explains that after a state law was passed that allowed municipalities to charge for beach tags, many coastal communities, including Ocean City as of 1976, followed suit.

The idea, he says, was to give South Jersey's municipalities the option to offset the cost of maintaining their beaches through a user fee, as opposed to raising taxes for locals. "We look at beach tags as a necessary evil ... we all want a clean beach that's protected by lifeguards, and it's not fair for taxpayers to have to pay for it all," says Medford resident Tom Ellis, who has owned a home in Ocean City for more than 20 years.

Gillian estimates the 2012 season will bring in \$4 million through the sale of beach tags in Ocean City, which will be fully invested to cover expenses like beach grooming, trash removal, police and EMT services, and the cost of the taggers themselves. "Beach fees provide a means for residents and visitors alike to share in the cost of the beaches ... a cost that would otherwise be strictly absorbed by Ocean City homeowners through property taxes," he adds.

According to Cape May City Mayor Dr. Edward J. Mahaney, the user fee really does go a long way in keeping South Jersey's beaches clean and safe for visitors and residents. Incepted in the late 1970s, Cape May's beach tag program is responsible for funding everything from beach cleaning and replenishment to maintaining beachfront restrooms.

Last year, the city took in upward of \$2 million in revenue from its beach tag program, which Mahaney notes barely exceeded the year's beach-related operating costs—remaining funds are held for beach replenishment. The revenue from beach tags is also allocated to pay the city's 150 seasonal employees, in addition to investing in safety and rescue vehicles.

"Not only do I think [beach tags] are responsible for how clean and beautiful the actual sand and beach are, I'm confident that the fee has resulted in the beaches being perhaps the safest anywhere in the world," says Scott Kerschbaumer, a Pittsburgh resident who has been vacationing in Cape May every summer for the past 25 years. "I've watched the guards patrol the beaches, row the boats, man the towers, and even interact with the common citizens after hours ... and to get access to such a clean, beautiful, safe and well-maintained beach

for [\$5] bucks a day, or much less when you buy a multi-day or seasonal tag, is the best deal on the planet ... or at least the best deal at the beach.”

“Everyone complains about beach tags, but I love them,” agrees Sea Isle native John Caulfield. “I have no problem handing over my money—it’s worth it for everything we get in return.”

Still, a handful of municipalities have managed to avoid slapping a price on their beaches; shore towns like Atlantic City and Wildwood have become coveted for their free beach access. Though rumors have flared about the possibility of Wildwood instituting a beach tag program, the city’s mayor, Ernie Troiano Jr., insists beach badges will not become a reality in Wildwood in the near future. “I’ve never been a big fan of beach fees. Would they provide revenue that we need? Absolutely. Would they keep the beaches friendly? Absolutely not,” he says, alluding to the need for beach patrol staff to issue and consistently check for visitors’ beach tags, which are supposed to be worn on their person at all times.

“I definitely wouldn’t care for the hassle of people coming up to me to check for my beach tag,” agrees Barbara Gawrysiak, a Washington Township resident who has owned a home in North Wildwood for 13 years. “I don’t know if it’s the cost that bothers people, or having a beach tag patrol creating a less pleasurable experience for everyone.”

Medford’s Angelo Cataldi, a Philadelphia morning sports radio talk show host, infamously moved from Avalon to Sea Isle after a run-in with beach tag patrol in 1999. Cataldi recalls leaving his family’s beach tags at his shore house one afternoon, and when asked to retrieve them, found the door locked. “My parents had gone out to lunch, and the beach patrol wouldn’t allow me to wait 30 minutes for them to return with the keys ... they told me I had to leave the beach right away,” he says. Cataldi refused, and was arrested.

The incident spiraled into a two-year court skirmish over the legality of beach tags, which Cataldi ultimately lost—albeit not without keeping listeners updated every step of the way. “I buy beach tags every year with a frown on my face ... because I know it’s a scam. It’s a way to police the people that come down to visit South Jersey’s beaches,” he asserts. “It makes you wonder how towns like Wildwood have managed to keep that massive beach clean for all these years without charging tourists 10 bucks for the day.”

Troiano says Wildwood is currently in the process of implementing other revenue-generating options to help keep beach tags out of the city. As early as this summer, visitors will have the opportunity to rent cabanas and storage boxes, as well as access a beach park featuring a variety of activities. “It’s nice to say, ‘Come enjoy our free beaches,’ but the thing is, the beach has never been free to residents. They’re the ones who are paying for it,” Troiano said. “That’s why our bottom line is about generating a comparable amount of revenue that will allow us to alleviate taxes and avoid having to require beach tags.”

In the meantime, beachgoers should get used to having to pay for a day at the Jersey Shore. Jill Gougher, borough administrator for Stone Harbor, confirms that beach tags are here to stay. “Without the beach tag revenues, the borough would be forced to shift the expense into its tax base ... and with the new levy cap regulations, that would be impossible,” she explains.

“There’s a lot of work involved with running a beach ... and all of it costs money,” concludes Katherine Custer, spokeswoman for Sea Isle City. “Beach tag fees help us maintain clean, strong beaches, and they’ve proven very useful for a lot of communities in southern New Jersey.”

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