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In Oak Bluffs, Strangers Become Family

A first-time visitor to this Martha's Vineyard town, long cherished by generations of Black travelers, finds that after a devastating year, warm welcomes, a strong sense of pride and the spirit of family remain constants.



Members of the Jackson and Thompson families outside C'est La Vie, on Circuit Avenue in Oak Bluffs, in August. "The beauty of the Vineyard is the tradition of generations," said Zita Cousens, owner of the nearby Cousen Rose Gallery. Lauren Justice for The New York Times

By J. Nailah Avery

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Approaching Inkwell Beach on Martha's Vineyard on a midsummer day, you feel a magnetic energy in the air. Before you can even see the ocean, familiar melodies waft through a set of speakers, everything from Beyoncé to Earth, Wind & Fire. Once on the small beach, steps from the main strip of Oak Bluffs, you are surrounded by Black beachgoers proudly wearing the insignia of Shaw University, Morgan State University and other historically Black colleges and universities. Members of the "Divine 9" — historically Black sororities and fraternities — glide about in their respective paraphernalia, and revelers of all ages socialize and take photos in the spirit of unfettered kinship. I feel and see Black joy everywhere.

This scene that I encountered is a regular summer occurrence in Oak Bluffs, where Black vacationers have flocked for more than 100 years. Zita Cousens, the owner of Cousen Rose Gallery, grew up summering in Oak Bluffs; her great-aunt owned a house there. "Every summer, everybody in the family would have their weeks that they would spend with Auntie," she said. "Black people have always come to the Vineyard. We've always been here. The beauty of the Vineyard is the tradition of generations."

Yet younger generations of Black travelers face new challenges, like the rising cost of [island real estate](#) and the devastation of the coronavirus pandemic, which has [disproportionately affected](#) the Black community nationwide. Is Martha's Vineyard still a place of solace for young Black people, as it has been for previous generations? To find out, last month I went to Martha's Vineyard for the first time, to explore Oak Bluffs, the heart of its Black community.



Loretta Smith-Hardy, left, and her cousin Iris Haastrup on Inkwell Beach this August. Black vacationers have flocked to Oak Bluffs for more than 100 years. Lauren Justice for The New York Times

Strangers becoming family

Walking through Ocean Park, I passed children on bikes and people walking along the trails, occasionally stopping to take photos at the park's ornate gazebo. Weaving through the charming, pastel-colored gingerbread cottages, I saw people gathered on every porch I passed, chatting over glasses of wine, playing cards, reading or simply enjoying the day. Everyone says hello to everyone, and I often stopped to chat with strangers. I would come to find that this was common; the spirit of the Black family reunion rests over Oak Bluffs, as strangers become family. On my three-day visit, I joined a tour on [the African American Heritage Trail](#), attended the [Martha's Vineyard African American Film Festival](#) and experienced a jubilant Sunday church worship service.

While standing in line for homemade fudge at [Murdicks](#), I met Christina Davis, 36, a software developer in Raleigh, N.C. She was laid off two months into the pandemic when her company shut down. "Sitting at home listening to the news as it unfolded was crushing," she said. "When I started my new job, one of the first things I did was to put down my deposit for the summer house on the Vineyard.""

This was Ms. Davis' first visit to Oak Bluffs. "We didn't grow up going to the Vineyard," Ms. Davis said. "My sister started going only two years ago, and kept telling me that I should come just to experience the sheer camaraderie, the delicious food and the major annual events, like Black Greek Week. She was right. It was restorative and healing to be there with other Black people and check in on each other over drinks and the ocean breeze."

Before my trip, I'd read up on the history of the area. Many of the first Black families who spent the summer on Martha's Vineyard were domestic workers, hired to clean the homes of wealthy white Vineyarders. As word got out, wealthy African Americans began to flock to the island. "This small and select group of successful Blacks knew each other in Boston, and followed one another to the Island," the historian Dr. Adelaide M. Cromwell wrote in her research article, "[The History of Oak Bluffs as a Popular Resort for Blacks](#)," published in 1984. Today, Black travelers from all over the country vacation on the island.

High occupancy, despite a rising cost of real estate

Erik Albert, owner of [The Oak Bluffs Inn](#), home to one of the liveliest front porches in Oak Bluffs, spent his childhood on the Vineyard. He moved to the island after college and purchased the inn in 1998. Seasonal nightly rates aren't inexpensive, starting at \$550, but he said he was booked at 96 percent occupancy this summer.

Mr. Albert has noticed that visitors are staying longer and returning to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas. Guests have stayed at his inn to experience the Vineyard, and then purchased property themselves. “People are buying because they want to have a more permanent attachment to the island. The Black presence is only increasing.”



Erik Albert is owner of The Oak Bluffs Inn, home to one of the liveliest front porches in Oak Bluffs. Lauren Justice for The New York Times

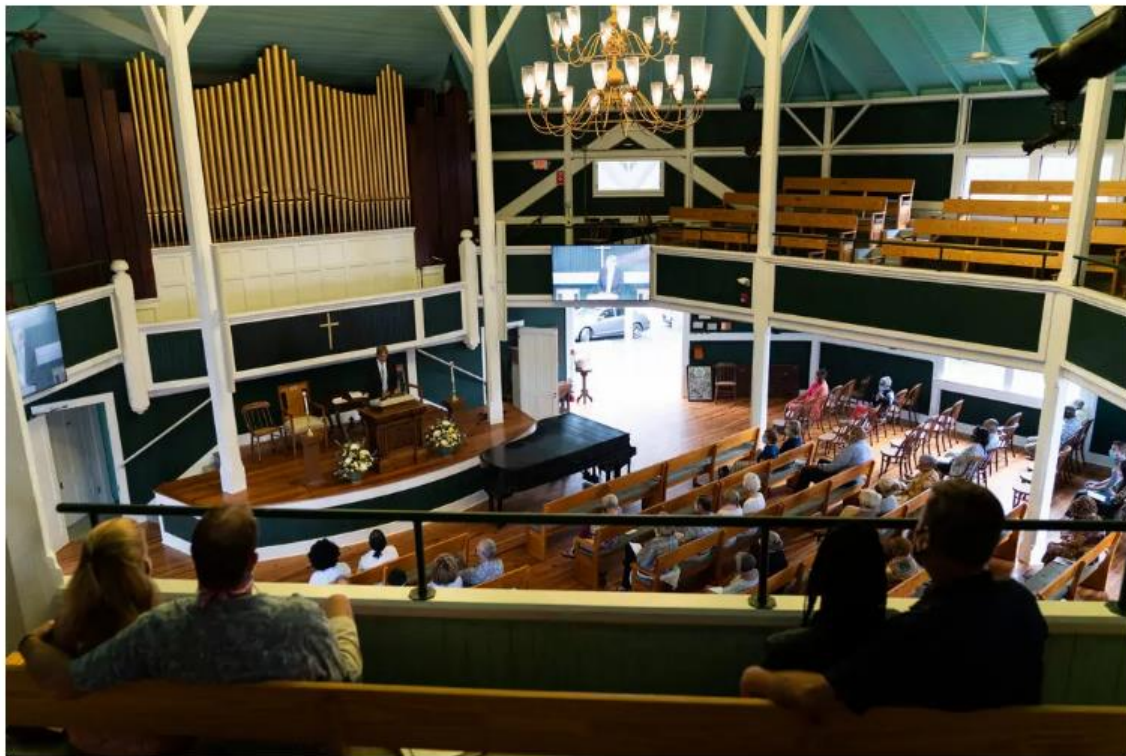
According to [an annual compilation of home sales](#) by the Vineyard Gazette, 108 properties in Oak Bluffs exchanged hands in 2020. But demand is increasing the cost of real estate. In August, the median sales price for a single-family home was \$885,000, a 37 percent increase over the \$640,000 reported in August 2019. One of the famous Oak Bluffs gingerbread cottages, the brilliantly fuchsia home known as The Pink House, [sold this April for \\$635,000](#), an increase of 135 percent over its last sale price of \$268,000 in 2002.

That price is in line with what Jillian Joseph is seeing. A real estate lawyer in Brooklyn, Ms. Joseph told me that homes in Oak Bluffs were selling for closer to \$400,000 a few years ago, but “small cottage ranch level one-floor homes are now in the \$600,000 to \$700,000 range.”

Ms. Joseph, 42, partners with a local brokerage firm to help Black families purchase property in Oak Bluffs. “I’ve been coming here for seven years, and I’ve seen older generations of Black people pass away, leave or retire elsewhere,” she said. “We have to become the next generation of Black homeowners.”

Today, although Black families remain more concentrated in Oak Bluffs, many are spreading out over the island, including President Barack Obama, who notably purchased a home in Edgartown in 2019.

Raevyn Moore of Middletown, Del., a junior at Hampton University, rents a large home with her family every summer. She told me that she believes that the kinship in Oak Bluffs plays a key role in her current, and future, success. “Visiting the Vineyard is a time when I get to spend two weeks with Black folks who are all doing amazing things,” Ms. Moore, 20, said. “The amount of love and support that you get on that island is hard to find in other places. I had someone help me with an internship in architecture, my major, just because they want to see me succeed.”



The 150-year-old interdenominational Union Chapel hosts a summer series each year, inviting preachers and speakers from all over the country. Lauren Justice for The New York Times

The importance of worship and social justice

A few doors down from the Oak Bluffs Inn, the 150-year-old interdenominational [Union Chapel](#) hosts a summer series, inviting preachers and speakers from all over the country. Being invited to preach is considered a huge honor, and I met many people who traveled to Oak Bluffs to support their home-church pastors on their assigned Sunday. This summer, visitors had to show proof of full vaccination to enter the chapel, masks were required and chairs were spaced out. Still, churchgoers spilled out of the building and onto the lawn, listening to the morning message through open windows and doors.

Rev. Dr. Kevin R. Murriel rents a home in Oak Bluffs each summer, visiting from Atlanta, Ga. He served as a guest preacher at Union Chapel this year, the youngest on this summer's program. Though he describes the island as a balm and an oasis to Black visitors, he nonetheless cautions against viewing it as paradise.

"No matter where you travel as a Black person in the United States, we always have to deal with systemic injustice," he said. "Just because we go to the Vineyard doesn't mean that we escape the realities of being Black in America." Rev. Murriel, 35, feels that Black Vineyarders were more eager this year than ever to worship, after more than a year of mourning the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and navigating the broader social reckoning brought on by the Black Lives Matter protests. "When people come to the Vineyard, and they come to worship, they're coming for hope."

One thing that has not changed throughout the generations among Black visitors is their commitment to social justice. [The Martha's Vineyard Museum](#) is filled with anecdotes and memorabilia from Black Vineyarders who, during the social unrest of the mid-20th century, traveled South to deliver supplies, assisted the Freedom Riders and were active throughout the era of the Civil Rights Movement. Today, in the era of Black Lives Matter, younger generations of Black Vineyarders are also working for equality.

Jelani Williams, 22, of Washington, D.C., is part of the fifth generation of his family to summer on the Vineyard, in a house purchased by his great-great-grandmother in 1944. He serves as a chair of Black Student Athletes at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is entering his senior year, and believes that his time spent on Oak Bluffs has helped instill a sense of identity and resilience that he carries in his everyday life, including playing college basketball.

“I was part of the social justice task force that pushed our athletic department to look more into hiring practices,” Mr. Williams said. “We also pushed for antiracism sensitivity training for our coaching staff and players. It’s all about community, and what I feel on the island, I try to create in other spaces.” Meanwhile, the spirit of activism on the island continues, with events held this summer for Juneteenth, receptions supporting the campaigns of Black political candidates and supply drives to benefit college students.

But things on Martha’s Vineyard are not always idyllic. On July 29, at a summer camp run by the Chilmark Community Center, [an incident took place](#) in which two white children wrapped a tent strap around the neck of a Black child, eerily reminiscent of a noose. The center’s investigation determined that “we have not found any evidence of overt racial motivation,” but noted that “the act itself and the races of the three boys involved are significant.”

Sophia Hall, of Lawyers for Civil Rights in Boston, represents the family of the Black child. “We are still very much a country that is trying to figure out how to deal with racism,” she said. “The report issued by the community center indicates their belief that, because there was no overt racism, this could not have possibly been a racialized incident.” When contacted, the center declined to comment further.

Nicole Groves, a lawyer from New York City began coming to the Vineyard 10 years ago, when her parents bought a place on the island. I caught up with her outside C’est La Vie, a Black-owned apparel store. This summer in particular, she was reassured by the prevalence of faces that look like hers, and the presence of Black Lives Matter banners flying from homes and stores along the main streets of town.

This summer, Ms. Groves, 42, was pregnant with her first child, a boy. She said the prospect of raising a Black male child in the current era is “scary,” but that Oak Bluffs provides a respite.

“To have a place where you feel at home, and people walk down the street and give you ‘the nod,’ you always feel safe here,” she said.