

## Embrace The Good Life On The Great Ponds Of Martha's Vineyard

By Mary Forgione



Slender strips of barrier beaches divide the “great ponds” from the Atlantic Ocean, forming a unique ecosystem where saltwater and spring-fed freshwater meet—and an idyllic spot to relax by the sea. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

Islands, by definition, are shaped by water. On Martha's Vineyard, that's doubly true.

People living or vacationing on the island seven miles off the south coast of Massachusetts love the ocean, but it's not the only desirable waterfront around.

“Great ponds” dot inland coastal areas and draw big interest from people who prefer lazy backwaters teeming with wildlife to the roar of the sea. [The Obamas, for example, own a 28-acre compound](#) that sits on a finger of land on a great pond near Edgartown, the Vineyard’s main hub for stores and restaurants. From their spread, they can see or paddle to the Atlantic Ocean, close enough for a morning beach stroll.

What makes these ponds so “great”? Technically, their size. At least 10 acres was the bar set in the 1640s, though some are as large as lakes. Those same early regulations guaranteed access to all seeking “fish and fowl,” which today translates to swimming, boating, fishing, kayaking, bird-watching, canoeing and paddle-boarding right out your back door.



In this coastal corner of New England, luxury is defined less by square footage and more by an uninterrupted connection to nature. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

The ponds hold a mix of saltwater and spring-fed freshwater—ideal conditions for osprey and kingfishers, river otters and fish, and especially oysters, quahog clams and scallops. The local coastal commission

counts “27 saltwater and brackish ponds that are vital to the island’s health and beauty,” according to its website.

Great ponds have been sought-after locations for generations, a quiet retreat where families could gather and connect with nature. The remote lifestyle may not be for everyone —living on the backwaters comes with fewer conveniences. But for those drawn to cleaner air, a slower pace of life and nature on the doorstep, it’s a more than fair exchange.

People who love the ponds tend to stay put, says [Elle Lash](#) at Martha’s Vineyard brokerage [Tea Lane Associates](#). Take [Tisbury Great Pond](#), which covers 600 to 800 acres on the north side of the island. Some current homes for sale haven’t changed hands since they were built, says Lash, and each retreat has its own personality and back-story. Here are four to consider:

## **Go Off-Grid In West Tisbury**

The compound at [201 Thumb Point Road](#) in West Tisbury (above) has been a family camp-style retreat for the past 50 years. Sandy beaches and waterfront views on both sides make the five-bedroom main house



and two-bedroom cottage a rustic refuge. Life here has been off the grid. Solar panels generate electricity and access to Wi-Fi (though electrical hookups in the area are nearby). The potential for buyers can go a few ways: new owners could update the character of the existing buildings and/or build a new home entirely on the 4-acre site.



Bordered by Thumb Cove and Deep Bottom Cove, this solar-powered getaway invites endless carefree days of water activities and exploration. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

## **Sail Away From 600 feet Of Water Frontage**

A large farm once stood in West Tisbury on the great pond, with the land now split into parcels that include a home at [104 Pond View Farm Road](#). The existing six-bedroom house and guesthouse (which may be modified or rebuilt) comes with 600 feet of water frontage and a dock for anyone who wants to hop into their boat and head out to the ocean.





Seafaring is accessible through an opening on Tisbury Great Pond Beach, located just two nautical miles from this tow-home estate. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

## **Choose Your Pond In Chilmark**

The house for sale at [146 Quansoo Road](#) in Chilmark stands between two great ponds (Tisbury and Black Point) and is within five minutes of the ocean. You can hear the waves, watch the wildlife on the ponds and settle in for some serious sunset viewing. The three-bedroom main house attached by a walkway to a two-bedroom guest house may be renovated or rebuilt.

The “not fun” component of the design addressed regulatory restrictions—those that apply across the island and to the 38 Fire Tower Road site specifically—ensuring square-footage requirements and height

restrictions informed the parameters of the three-bedroom, two-story plan.



Pristine meets even more pristine: Sheriff's Meadow conservation land flanks this shoreline property on two sides.

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## **Embrace Acreage Near Edgartown**

A [35-acre spread](#) on Edgartown Great Pond combines privacy with proximity to Edgartown, the first colonial settlement on the island and current seaport village. The home, guest suite and pool house at [32 Boldwater](#) fronts 1,000 feet of brushy waterfront where you can keep boats. Designed by Andrew Flake, who has shaped the look of residences on Martha's Vineyard for more than three decades. Additionally, more than 14 acres may be subdivided and built on.





A panorama of coastal landmarks unfolds before this 35-acre estate near Edgartown, showcasing Lyles Bay, Swan Neck Point, the main pond, the barrier beach and the ocean beyond. TEA LANE ASSOCIATES

## **The Privilege Of Stewardship**

Naturally, new buyers will need to work within local building codes and regulations designed to protect the land and pond habitats of the island, which have benefited from care-giving stewardship for centuries.

For example, the ancient Wampanoag people relied on the ponds for sustenance. They understood the importance of keeping salinity levels—and therefore algae levels—in check, hand-digging cuts in springtime to access tidal waters that would flush the ponds. The reward was healthy waters yielding shellfish such as the quahogs, scallops and herring that became a staple in their diet.

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Healthy waters, long stewarded by the Wampanoag people of Martha's Vineyard, continue to yield scallops, herring and the famed quahog clams, a nutritionally rich island delicacy. SHUTTERSTOCK / CHRISTOPHER SEUFE

Native Americans also harvested cranberries from wild bogs near the ponds, gatherings that continue to take place today among the Wampanoag of Aquinnah who live on the island.

The Wampanoags continue to fiercely defend the ponds that fed their ancestors while seeking to reclaim their indigenous values and land taken from them after European colonists arrived in the 17th century.

The carefully hand-dug cuts nowadays are typically done by machines. But the effect is the same: a regeneration of life-giving water. During the spring ritual, some take a moment to celebrate the resilient and remarkable ponds, and the outsized role they play in life on the island.