

CABIN FEVER

'Voracious' Vacationers Poised to Consume Cape Rentals

After Nearly Cratering, Demand Up Across All Properties

By Heather Beasley Doyle | Special to Banker & Tradesman | Jul 5, 2020 | [Reprints](#) | [Unlock Link](#) | [Print](#)



Despite COVID-19 fears, only a few homeowners are keeping their properties off the vacation rental market this fall as demand from tourists sharply recovers after its spring collapse.

Cape Cod's short-term rental brokers have suddenly found themselves grappling with a flood of business mere weeks after the coronavirus demolished demand for seaside vacations.

After a strong start over the winter, short-term summer rental bookings sank to a quarter of their historic levels in April, and Sagamore and Bourne bridge traffic decreased 48 percent from April 2019.

"Everything screeched to a halt" when the pandemic hit, said Blake Decker, whose company Pretty Picky Properties manages 150 units, mostly in the lower Cape. "We had zero bookings and all cancellations for about a month, so we were just bleeding revenue until mid-April."

For Atlantic Bay Sotheby's International Realty in Provincetown, that trend continued into May. At the same time, many owners pulled their rental properties off the market.

At the same time, said brokerage co-owner Emily Flax, a different “frenzy” took place.

“Simultaneous to the cancellations, we were being inundated with calls for long-term rentals...from New York, from Boston, and other cities,” she said. “We would have people say, ‘We want to get out of the city; we’ll take a month, we’ll take two, we’ll take up to six if you have it.’”

Demand Across the Spectrum

Things began shifting at Pretty Picky Properties in late April; in mid-May, phase one of the state’s reopening began.

“The appetite to be on the Cape has been voracious. I’ve just never seen demand this high,” Decker said, adding that about 60 percent of their owners’ properties are now booked.

While Pretty Picky features high-end rental homes, Decker, who leads the Cape Cod and Islands Association of Realtors’ vacation rental planning group committee, said that the demand includes all types of properties.

“As people stay at home longer, the interest to take a vacation has grown and grown,” said association CEO Ryan Castle.

Castle thinks Gov. Charlie Baker’s June 6 confirmation that short-term rentals could reopen June 8 drove new bookings.

As they plan Cape vacations, people are booking longer stays than in recent summers.

“The travel industry has shown a trend to less-than-a-week rentals,” Castle said.

With July here, those “who have the means to get away for a long time have already done that,” he said; other vacationers are now booking one- or two-week stays.

Amid the interest, beach alternatives have proven particularly popular. Pretty Picky Properties’ offerings with private pools sold out by April 15, Decker said.

“Now, having a private pool is almost paramount to waterfront [access] for a lot of people,” he said.

With interest up, only two of Decker’s property owners have kept their homes off the vacation rental market. Castle sees “small amounts of each inventory,” withheld, either because property owners want to use their rental homes, have friends and family using their properties and don’t want renters in between, or because they don’t want “potential COVID in their house.”

Booking Sites Less Popular

The pandemic has brought other changes, largely with an eye on health and safety, thanks in part to new state guidelines for short-term rentals and other lodgings.

Castle noted more contactless or curbside check-ins. Pretty Picky, which provides linens and cleaning between renters, created a website page addressing cleaning questions.

While the company already complied with most of the new rules, disinfecting high-touch surfaces such as remote controls is one key difference. The company now also uses duvets rather than bedspreads; the covers are washed before each check-in. Property owners whose management or booking company doesn’t provide these services are responsible for adhering to the new guidelines.

Moreover, potential renters are now calling property managers directly, rather than booking through online booking sites such as Expedia, Castle said.

Renters “need to have the therapeutic session of us telling them the boots–on–the–ground report, and just want to have a human to talk to,” Decker said, adding that Pretty Picky’s direct bookings are increasing up to 10 or 15 percent.



As vacationers look to escape their now-all-too-familiar homes, managers of vacation rental properties are taking extra steps to accommodate clients’ coronavirus concerns.

Pandemic’s Long-Term Impacts

Looking ahead, Decker foresees some Cape Cod property managers changing their cancellation policies. Pretty Picky’s policy was only to give renters a full refund if the company could re-book the property for that specific time frame – Decker described this as strict.

“There are very few other markets that can get away with that,” he said. “We are going to have to modernize our cancellation policies and offer more leniency and control to guests in order to be competitive with other destinations.”

The uptick in Cape Cod vacation rentals has also paralleled a strong home sales market, auguring sustained interest in the area. Since late May, “the real estate market has been on fire,” Flax said. “Properties are flying off the shelf.”

The Cape Cod market’s strong showing is a bright spot in a dismal national economy, and its resilience doesn’t surprise Decker.

“The Cape is seen as a safe refuge during this, and luckily we are uniquely located between New York and Boston,” he said.

The desire to be on the Cape “has transcended a financial crisis, and now a pandemic crisis, natural issues like the sharks and tornadoes,” he said. “So, it’s always going to be a perennial destination for people, despite a lot of these crazy factors, which are ... once-in-a-lifetime types of events.”

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