

LOFTY PERSPECTIVE



PHOTOS ANN WOOD

To see the Cape as it really is, it's best to be airborne

By Ann Wood

BANNER STAFF

It's hard to remember while dodging tourists on Commercial Street in Provincetown or fighting for a parking space at the beach that this peninsula known as Cape Cod is an anomaly, a work of art formed by glaciers.

That is, until you're in the air.

Race Point Aviation, located at the Provincetown Municipal Airport, uses its two Cessna Skyhawks to take passengers on a scenic flights they won't soon forget. But the flight doesn't just provide a breathtaking view or photo shoot opportunity; pilot Roger Putnam gives passengers what he calls "the pitch," a sort of lesson about Cape Cod geology throughout.

The small white plane lifts into the air and cruises to between 1,500 and 2,500 feet above the ocean. It's a clear day, and the first thing we see on take-off is a distant Plymouth Harbor.

Then we see that curve of the arm, that shape of Cape Cod people typically only notice on maps.

"That's my favorite view of the Cape, the one that's in front of us right now. It really is a great big hook," Putnam says through his microphone. The noise of the four-seat aircraft drowns out voices, requiring the pilot and his passengers to wear headsets.

He points to a dark mass moving underwater that must be a whale, he shows us the elliptical dunes formed by the North West breeze.

"This is all eroded material off the base of the Cape," he says.

As we fly by Head of the Meadow Beach, Putnam points to the red clay cliffs, from which Cape Cod pottery is made. Beyond that is brush — what would be considered simply trees on the ground. The dark green areas were once used as pasture lands, he says, the gray matter is wood lots.

The Pamet River creeps across the peninsula, ready to break it in half. From the air it looks like a small stream of water flowing from the bay and nearly into the ocean. It gives

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us a look at how narrow Truro is, how close Provincetown is to becoming its own island.

The flight takes us over Wellfleet's kettle ponds, fresh water ponds formed by melted glaciers which are overseen by the National Seashore. We cross the peninsula to Cape Cod bay and head for Billingsgate Island, an area off Wellfleet once inhabited by more than 100 families "until somebody brought the sheep out." The sheep ate the vegetation, Putnam says, causing sand migration.

"When we get over there we can see where the island blew to," Putnam says. "It literally just blew away. It took it about 10 years but it blew."

Ruffles of sand under the water are a reminder of what Billingsgate once was. It's low tide and small spits of dry sand — sand that was the island itself — peek out from the water.

The plane cruises over Great Island, Griffin Island and Bound Brook Island. Putnam points to an area by Great Island, a bay beach in Wellfleet affectionately called The Gut.

"You can really see where The Gut is starting ... to blow out again," he says, and we fly over Corn Hill. "That's where the Pilgrim's stole the corn."

Back in Provincetown, Putnam points out that only in the air can we see that the shapes of the roofs on Commercial Street are different from those Bradford Street.

"They're older than each other. The roofs on Commercial Street and the beach [were built first because that's] where the original town was. Bradford Street was the suburbs," he says, adding that the houses on the two streets were built at different times and thus the roofs have different pitches.

The plane begins its descent.

"Right along here is the deepest water in Cape Cod Bay," Putnam says, adding that this time of year, there aren't too many scenic flights to clog up the sky. In fact, we see no one.

"There's something about being able to function in three dimensions. There's something very satisfying about it," he says. "The whole thing is so extraordinary. You hate to use [those] words about it [but Cape Cod is] an extraordinary piece of geology. It's so satisfying to the eye to be able to see the whole thing."

Scenic photo flight rates for one to three people are \$140 per hour or \$80 for a half-hour. A scenic flight to Chatham is \$140, and \$100 for Wellfleet Harbor, the Outer Cape dunes and Cape Cod bay. Call Putnam at (508) 776-5623 or his partner Russ Kimball at (508) 873-2342 to make a reservation or for more information. □

