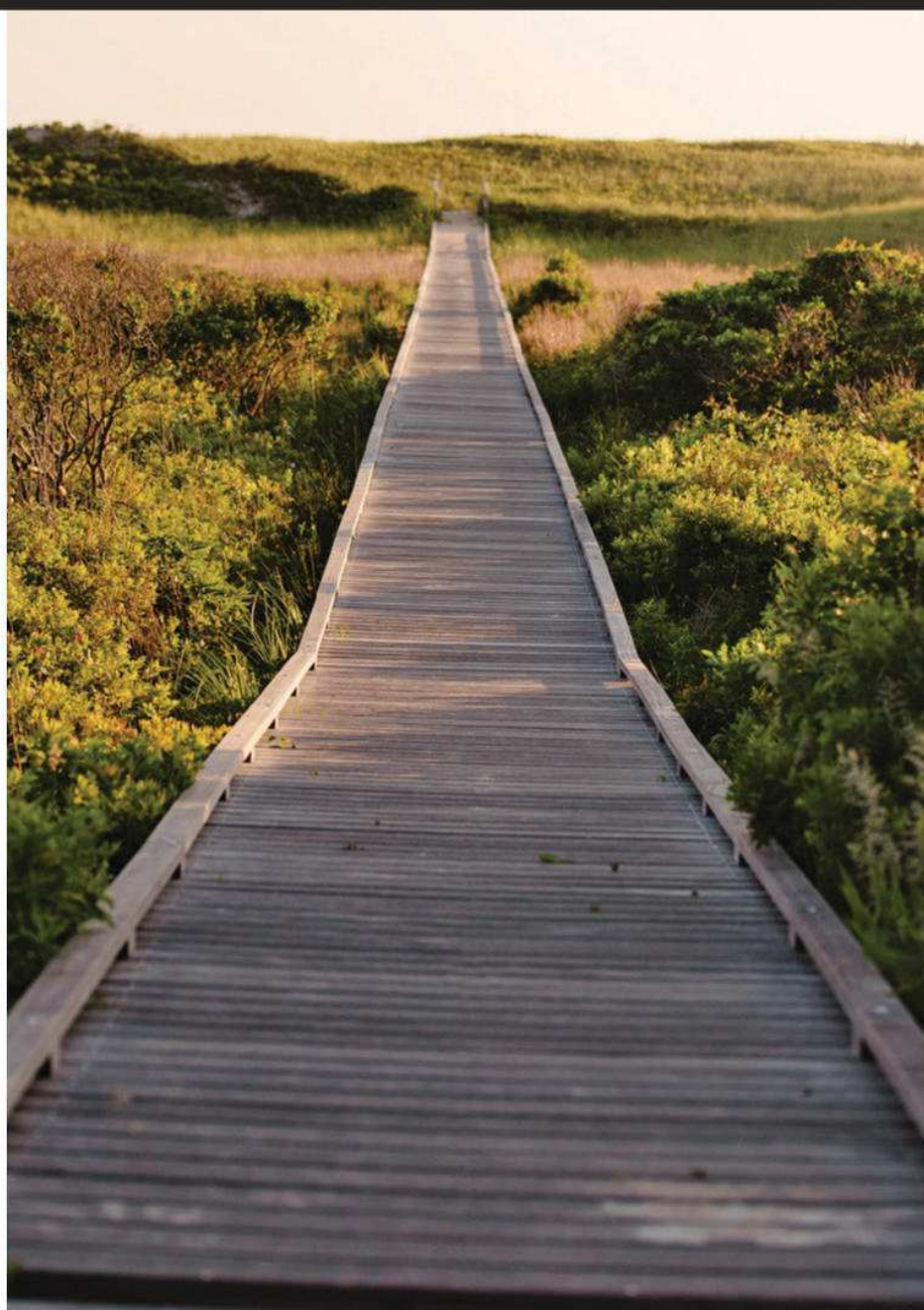


A TIME IN

**Oak Bluffs has been a shimmering island getaway for Black families
Martha's Vineyard to witness the enclave celebrate Juneteenth for**

Photographs by

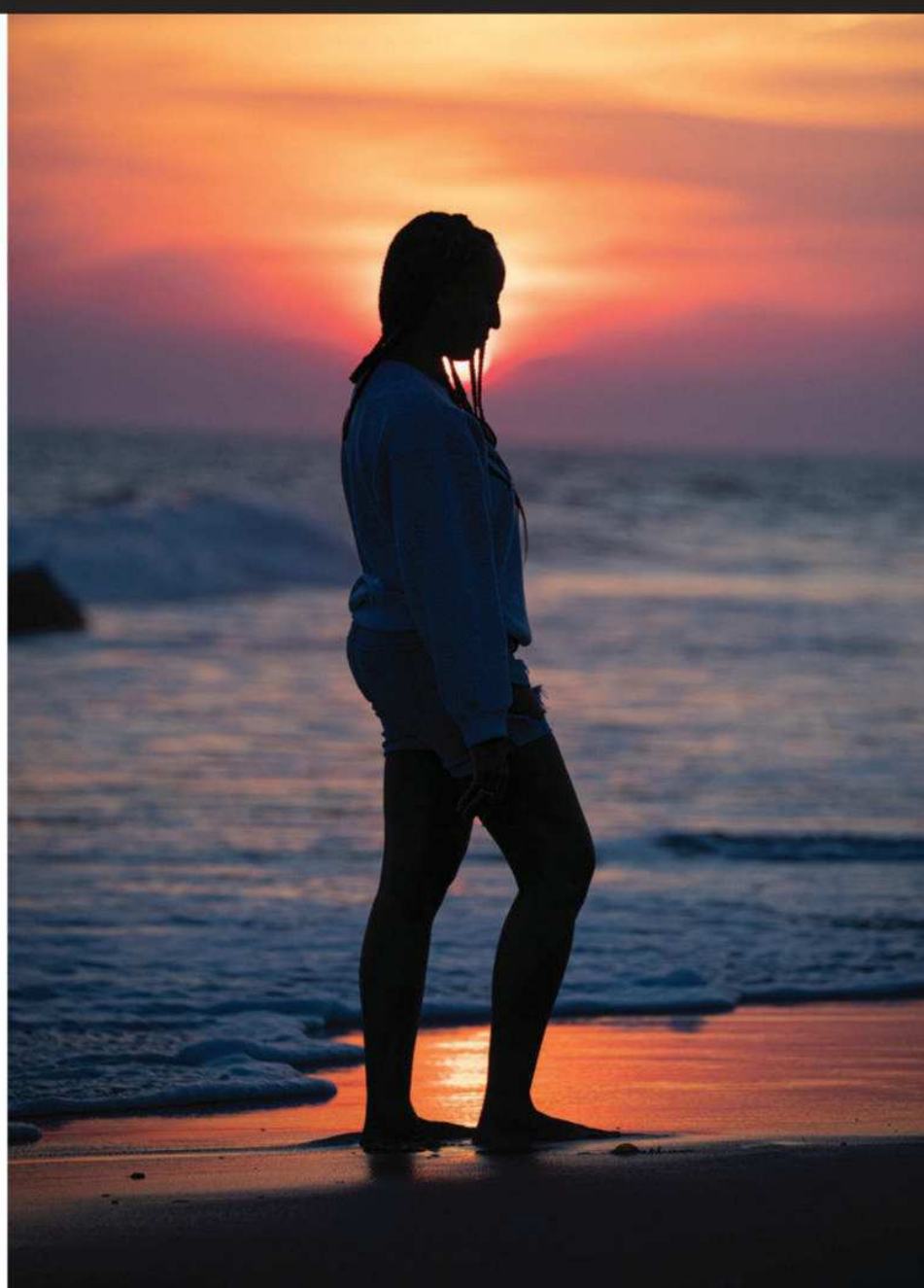




THE SUN

for more than a century. SHAYLA MARTIN returns to the first time and look forward to its next 100 years

AUNDRE LARROW







“This is a story about determination,”

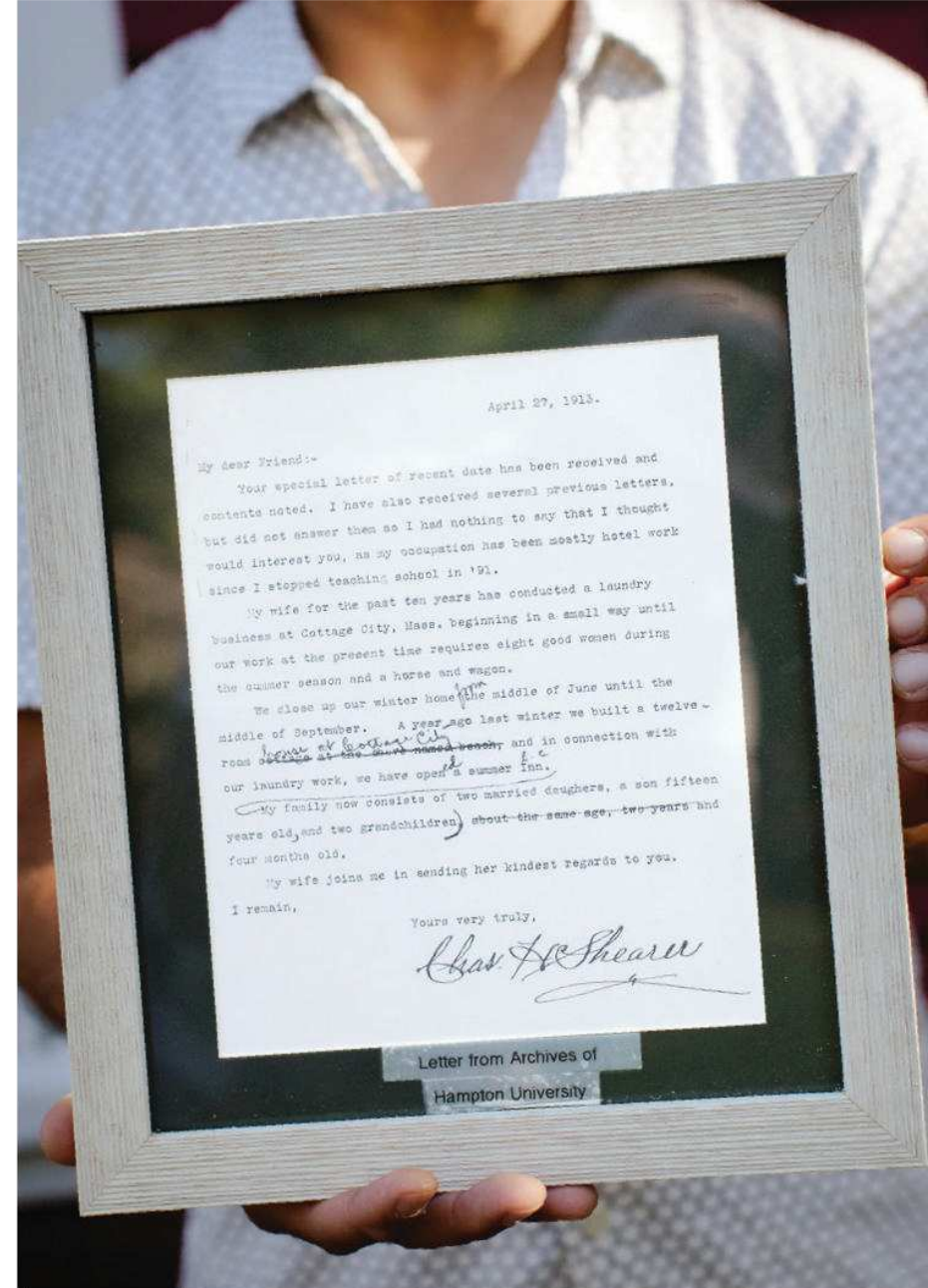
says Eric Van Allen, “a family’s determination to keep an important legacy alive.” An easy smile crosses his bearded face as he guides me through a small multipurpose room of the original Shearer Cottage, the oldest Black-owned inn on the island of Martha’s Vineyard. The room is deep, with a serving hatch to pass plates from the kitchen at dinnertime, and served as the main dining room of the original 12-room, Cape-style wooden cottage built and opened in 1912 by Van Allen’s great-great grandparents Charles Shearer and Henrietta Merchant Shearer. It has come to be regarded, by all accounts, as one of the most renowned Black-owned inns on this famed New England island, and perhaps in all of America.

Its magnitude is well-earned: Shearer Cottage is credited with being among the first, and few, places that African American travelers could vacation in a country where it was rarely safe to do so. After operating Shearer Cottage for more than 100 years, the family closed the inn during the summers of 2020 and 2021, completing extensive renovations to modernize and turn the property into a year-round destination—planned to reopen by summer 2023 and ready to host visitors for the next 100 years.

Dappled sunlight filters through massive oak trees as I stroll the grounds, pausing to inhale the floral aroma from various rose bushes that dot the property. It’s easy to envision visitors like Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and actor Paul Robeson—typical of the elite Black vacationers who’ve summered here over the years—sitting on the porch reading a book or playing a game of badminton. Tucked away in the enclave of Oak Bluffs, the historically bright and buzzy warren known for its gingerbread cottages, picture-perfect Ocean Park, and bustling shops and restaurants along Circuit Avenue, Shearer Cottage is remarkably peaceful. So much so that as I felt my own ever-present tension leave my shoulders, I could only imagine the sense of relief Black travelers felt when arriving here in past decades.

The same can be said for Oak Bluffs itself. The town has been a summer destination for Black families since the early 20th century, a place often met with a mixture of intrigue and wonder. I first visited Oak Bluffs in the early 1990s at the age of 6, having no idea of its reputation as the vacation spot of choice among Black well-to-do families from major cities like Boston, New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. All I really remember is

Moshup Beach



Juneteenth on Martha's Vineyard

As Juneteenth celebrations grow in popularity, events and discussions are sure to pop up across the island. But for now, Oak Bluffs is the hub. The biggest event scheduled thus far is the 2022 Juneteenth Jubilee Weekend held in partnership by the Narragansett House and the Tabernacle in Oak Bluffs. The keynote speaker is acclaimed journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, Pulitzer Prize winner for *The 1619 Project*, with additional speakers to be announced. A driving or walking tour on the African-American Heritage Trail is a great way to celebrate, or simply patronize the various Black-owned shops and restaurants on the island.



Clockwise from top: Oak Bluffs Inn; a letter from Charles Shearer; beachgoers on Inkwell Beach; marker on the African-American Heritage Trail; mudslides at Nancy's. Pages 52-53, clockwise from top, left: Leon Van Dyke; historic architecture; June Stewart and daughter Alyssa; local clams; Charles Bradley and family; Orange Peel Bakery; the author at Moshup Beach; Van Allen family photos; vacationers on Inkwell Beach; walkway to Moshup Beach; lobster at Nancy's



spending all day at Inkwell Beach, the just barely 100-yard-long stretch of sand that for decades was the only beach on the island where Black visitors felt safe and welcome, and riding the circa-1876 Flying Horses Carousel every single day, trying my darndest to snatch the elusive brass ring from the ring arm in the hopes of a free ride. But what remains crystal-clear in my memory is seeing so many other families that looked like mine, enjoying their time in the sun without a care in the world.

Growing up in the D.C. area, I heard tales of “the Vineyard” from my private school classmates whose families owned homes there. They casually dropped names like Vernon Taylor, Oprah, and Spike Lee, which transformed Oak Bluffs in my mind to an exclusive place for Black celebrities and wealthy Black families. Somehow while growing up, I completely missed the Kennedy connection, so much so that when a White friend invited me to Martha’s Vineyard with her in 2011 (my first trip since childhood) I replied, “White people go there?” Although we stared at each other equally dumbfounded, my naivete over the fact that people of all backgrounds do in fact vacation on Martha’s Vineyard was innocently grounded in the stories of happiness and pride I heard about the destination so beloved by African Americans.

While place is about geography, it’s also about where culture is made and where traditions and histories are kept. Too often for Black Americans, those histories are lost. Perhaps that’s what’s so unique about Martha’s Vineyard and, more specifically, Oak Bluffs. For one, it was a rare place where Black families could vacation and go to the beach in safety. Segregation laws prevented Black and White people from sharing the same ocean, with the fear that shared waters could instill a feeling of equality among Black beachgoers. Black entrepreneurs continually sought to develop coastal places of refuge with varying success, building communities like American Beach on Florida’s Amelia Island, Sag Harbor on Long Island, and Highland Beach in Maryland. (It’s worth noting that in 2021, Los Angeles County officials announced that the once Black-owned Bruce’s Beach in Manhattan Beach will be transferred back to family descendants after 97 years.)

Second, Oak Bluffs was one of the only places in the United States in the late 19th century where Black Americans could purchase land, meaning domestic workers for wealthy White families could save their earnings to purchase plots. For the families of those early-arriving ancestors, Oak Bluffs holds family legacies that defied all odds.

The themes of Black American legacy, freedom, and respite define my return to Oak Bluffs, intensified by arriving for Juneteenth, a newly established federal holiday commemorating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans. Although celebrated in various parts of the United States since 1865, the holiday was thrust into American consciousness in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the uprisings that followed in 2020. Across the country, communities of all types came together to celebrate a day that honored the end of a horrific institution in American history. As it is the first Juneteenth since the 2020 awakening, I come to Martha’s Vineyard with a desire to hear stories of Black history and joy I’d never deeply



investigated before as a fellow vacationer.

“What people don’t really know about Shearer Cottage is that Henrietta signed the deed for this land in 1903,” says Lee Van Allen, Eric’s mother and co-owner of the inn. Lee managed inn operations here for more than 20 years. Now in her late 70s, the matriarch of the family is excited to pass the torch to the next generation. “A Black woman signed the deed for this land in 1903 to start her petticoat laundry service, and had Henrietta not bought this land and had a successful business for over 10 years, there would be no Shearer Cottage,” she says. This narrative of multigenerational mobility comes back again and again in conversations with beachgoers in Oak Bluffs.

“My great aunt bought our home in 1913 and willed it to my grandmother, who willed it to all her grandchildren,” Massachusetts-based architect Charles Bradley III tells me as we watch his teenaged children skip rocks at Inkwell Beach. “My parents always told us, ‘You must hold onto this home; this is an asset.’” And while discrimination did invade Oak Bluffs—in the 1940s, for example, his grandmother and mother weren’t allowed to eat downtown—Bradley is proud his family held onto their slice of the enclave. “I always tell my kids, ‘Your great aunt bought this house by cleaning people’s homes, and today we get to enjoy it.’ This is our family legacy.”

On the actual Juneteenth holiday, I find myself sipping lemonade in front of the circa-1870 Narragansett House, where I stumble upon a holiday event in full swing. Guests in straw hats lounge in folding chairs and listen to the inn’s owner, Kahina Van Dyke, interview her father, Leon Van Dyke, a civil rights activist in his late 80s. As they sit in rocking chairs,

Shearer Cottage matriarch Lee Van Allen (second from left) stands with her children Eric, Loren, and David Jr. The family plans to reopen their historic inn in the summer of 2023.



Kahina Van Dyke owns Narragansett House and Dunmere-by-the-Sea. “This is in honor to our ancestors. We want to redefine the future of what it means to be Black,” she says.

Kahina holds the mic to her father’s lips while he recalls his time as the leader of The Brothers, a nonviolent civil rights group in Albany that fought employment discrimination, police brutality, and slum landlord abuses in the 1960s. Cars

passing along Narragansett Avenue slow to catch Leon’s recountings, from hosting fellow civil rights leader Stokely Carmichael to being shot at by assailants who were never caught. Afterward, Kahina walks me three blocks to Dunmere-by-the-Sea, a Victorian inn that she purchased in late 2020. The inn, along with Shearer Cottage, was listed in *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a travel guide published for more than 30 years that provided listings of safe places for African Americans to eat and sleep as they traveled the United States.

Now divided into three multibedroom apartments, Dunmere features an inviting wraparound porch set with wicker rocking chairs. The artwork inside each apartment is inspired by Black history, from portraits of female African warriors to paintings honoring Black whaling captains—a rare example of meritocracy—from the 18th and 19th centuries.

But the mission of Dunmere goes beyond the decorative. The inn is designed to honor the sacrifices and humanity of Black people, Kahina says, particularly in a destination so synonymous with Black joy and safety. “This is in honor to our ancestors, and it’s also a message and a path for our children to redefine and claim our humanity and power,” she says. “Everything in this house is connected to that. We want to redefine the future of what it means to be Black.”

As I witness Kahina tie heritage to future, I realize that here in Oak Bluffs, it seems to be equally important to Black travelers that some things change while others stay the same. There’s a deep sense of history and nostalgia, with much of that Black history chronicled by the African-American Heritage Trail of Martha’s Vineyard, a 30-site, island-wide

trail of bronze markers detailing the contributions made by people of African descent. Founded by Elaine Cawley Weintraub and Carrie Camillo Tankard after discovering that there were no local educational materials about Black history, the trail’s first site, Shearer Cottage, was dedicated in 1998. Last summer the pair won a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund to expand their research and outreach team, including hiring a public historian.

Of course, having a strong sense of history is the key to defining the future, and for the Black community of Martha’s Vineyard (both seasonal visitors and year-round residents), that seems to be grounded in a resurgence of Black-owned businesses and a high demand for them. India Rose, founder of digital platform Experience Martha’s Vineyard, created an online listing of Black-owned businesses in 2019 after fielding inquiries for years. Summer 2021 brought the inaugural print edition of the *Martha’s Vineyard Black-Owned Business Directory*, with an updated version arriving this summer.

I use the directory to guide my stay, buying all my island wear at C’est La Vie boutique on Circuit Avenue, the only shop in Martha’s Vineyard licensed to sell paraphernalia of the nine historically Black fraternities and sororities. I stand in line for breakfast sandwiches at Christopher Arcudi’s Biscuits. And I spend several nights at Oak Bluffs Inn, home to one of the liveliest porch vibes around.

Over lunch at Lee Van Allen’s house, Eric spreads out the blueprints for the renovations underway at Shearer Cottage while his brother, David, grills fresh clams they dug up that morning at Sengekontacket Pond. The property will triple in square footage, and the mix of 12 suites will be named after Shearer family members as well as famed guests including Madam C.J. Walker, Paul Robeson, and Ethel Waters.

Eric knows he has not only big shoes to fill but also a big legacy to uphold. “We are Black-owned, but the inn has always welcomed vacationers from all backgrounds and all walks of life,” he says. “At one point, Shearer Cottage was the only establishment in town that catered to African Americans. My family is very proud of the inn’s place in history.” But with vacationers having myriad choices for staying on the Vineyard, Eric says, “We are determined to put Shearer Cottage back on the map as the place to be.”

With so many rich voices and conversations in my head, I stroll back to Inkwell Beach, that stretch of sand I played on as a little girl more than 25 years ago. I watch two young boys blow water at each other through foam noodles as their parents laugh. The idyllic, carefree moment is timeless from my childhood to theirs, so representative of what this island means to so many Black families. Oak Bluffs allows them to create a haven for themselves and future generations to come where they can shed the pressure and racism of American society to embrace peace and relaxation. Stepping off the ferry in Oak Bluffs brings on a full-body sigh of relief. A relief in knowing that for at least a few days, or perhaps an entire summer, their joy and rest can be unfiltered, unencumbered, and lived out loud in the bright New England sunshine.



Clockwise from above: the distinctive and colorful gingerbread architecture of Oak Bluffs; T-shirts at C'est La Vie boutique; playtime on Inkwell Beach, where the author herself played 25 years ago; Carrie Camillo Tankard and Elaine Cawley Weintraub, founders of the African-American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard, which marks and connects 30 sites of historical significance in Oak Bluffs and beyond



GET HERE

Seasonal flights to Martha's Vineyard are available throughout the summer on American Airlines, Cape Air, Delta, and Jet Blue. However, for the full Vineyard experience, book a seat on the **Steamship Authority** ferry from Woods Hole to Oak Bluffs or Vineyard Haven. For those with an early morning ferry departure, kick off your trip in style with an overnight at the elegant **The Coonamessett** hotel, a quick drive from the ferry. Finally, if you have time before boarding, pick up a coffee and the best sticky buns in Woods Hole at **Pie in the Sky**.

STAY HERE

There is no shortage of tremendous lodging on Martha's Vineyard, including **The Christopher** (theedgartowncollection.com) and **Harbor View Hotel** (harborviewhotel.com) in Edgartown and **Summercamp** (summercamphotel.com) in Oak Bluffs proper. For Black-owned lodgings, book with owner Erik Albert at the **Oak Bluffs Inn** (oakbluffsinn.com), Kahina Van Dyke of both the **Narragansett House** (narragansetthouse.com) and **Dunmere-by-the-Sea** (dunmerehouse.com), and, when it reopens in 2023, the redoubtable **Shearer Cottage** (shearercottage.com).

EAT HERE

Look for Black-owned restaurants: **Chef Deon's Kitchen** (the jerk chicken and seasonal snapper escovitch are to die for; chefdeon.com), **Biscuits** (mvbiscuits.com), **Sarah Brown's Comfort Food** (sarahbrownsmv.com), and **Edgartown Diner** (edgartowndiner.com). From there, don't miss fresh-from-the-fryer apple fritters at **Back Door Donuts**, fried clams and the infamous mudslide at **Nancy's**, and pizza from the stone hearth at **Orange Peel Bakery**.

SHOP HERE

Support Black-owned shops across Martha's Vineyard: Snag butter-soft Inkwell sweatshirts at **C'est La Vie**, modern and fashionable wares at **Lennox & Harvey General Goods**, athleisure at **Sideline** boutique, and one-of-a-kind pieces at **Cousen Rose** art gallery. Other must-snags are Black Dog T-shirts at **The Black Dog General Store**, a gold Island Tie bracelet from **CB Stark Jewelers** in Vineyard Haven, and quirky greeting cards from **Rosewater Market** in Edgartown.