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Shore offers 127 miles of opportunity

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It may be stating the obvious, but anyone looking for cheap, outdoor entertainment at the Jersey Shore need not look past the state's 127 miles of sandy, white beaches.

For \$10, a carload of people can spend a day at Sandy Hook, a sand-spit peninsula on the shore's northernmost tip that offers hiking and biking trails and bird sanctuaries in addition to seven miles of beaches, including a clothing-optional one.

Ten dollars can also get a carload of people into Island Beach State Park in Ocean County on a weekend day, with admission dropping to \$6 per car on weekdays.

Daily fees for individuals at other beaches along the shore range from \$1 to \$10, with most locations offering discounted season badges and some allowing children in for free. In addition, beaches on Raritan Bay in Highlands and Keansburg are free.

At most of the spots along the coastline, you can pack a picnic basket and cooler with affordable refreshments to sustain you through a day of swimming, bodysurfing, beach volleyball, people-watching and combing the sand for seashells.

Sandy Hook presents free concerts on Wednesday evenings throughout the summer. And, places like Sea Bright and Jenkinson's Pavilion in Point Pleasant Beach offer free movies on the beach.

But if sun, surf and sand aren't your cup of tea, there are parks, animal refuges, and campgrounds to satisfy your hunger for fresh air without emptying your wallet.

One of the most spectacular, free recreation areas in the Monmouth County Park System is Hartshorne Woods, straddling Highlands and Middletown. Its trails lead to breathtaking, panoramic views of the Atlantic Ocean and New York City skyline from a hilltop spot that is among the highest on the East Coast.

Animal lovers can visit the Associated Humane Societies Popcorn Park Zoo in Lacey, where the nominal admission fees — ranging from \$4 to \$5 — go to help the abused, abandoned, injured and sick animals that find refuge there.

Bass River State Forest, spanning Ocean and Burlington counties, offers campsites for as low as \$20 a night.

And, Jakes Branch County Park in Beachwood provides a five-story observation deck for stargazing. That and family field trips at Cattus Island Park in Toms River and Cloverdale Farm County Park in Barnegat are among the outdoor activities offered by the Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation. Others are boat tours and beach bashes.

"We have so many great things going on all summer," said Ocean County spokeswoman Donna Flynn. "Most of it is free. Nothing is really expensive."

TOMORROW: You don't have to be a Hollywood star to enjoy beauty and fashion.

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