

Travel

MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Martha's Vineyard inspires

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If Mary Jo Kopechne had lived, she would have turned 69 this year.

Early last month, almost 40 years after Chappaquiddick became synonymous with Kopechne's name and that of U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy, I peered down from the notorious Dike Bridge in Martha's Vineyard, Mass. This otherwise innocuous span, about three metres wide and 23 metres long, sits by the easternmost coast of the Vineyard, a well-heeled island retreat about 11 kilometres south of Cape Cod.

Amidst the area's rural tranquility, it took straining to imagine that this plain structure, which straddles a six-knot channel and leads to Cape Poge lighthouse and a wildlife refuge, ever bore any stain of tragedy. (Kopechne, a passenger in a black Oldsmobile owned and driven by Kennedy, died on July 18, 1969, after the vehicle plunged off the bridge into about 4.5 metres of water. Kennedy pleaded guilty to leaving the scene of an accident after causing injury and received a two-month suspended sentence.)

Nothing suggests that this planked span ever played a role in the death of a young female campaign worker or ended an ambitious senator's run for the U.S. presidency. Except, of course, that it's now one of the most fortified small wooden bridges you'll likely ever see. With stanchions, thick wooden railings, and huge galvanized bolts jutting from its horizontal sides of pressure-treated 12 by 12 beams (all added after the accident), this bridge looks like it could withstand a nuclear blast.



HEATHER CONN PHOTO

A recent trip to Martha's Vineyard brought back a lot of memories.

Some might consider this site a bizarre tourist attraction, but the conflicting accounts of the Kennedy accident have always fascinated me. Curious to see the bridge, my husband and I drove our peppy blue Smart car, rented in the Vineyard's northeastern town of Oak Bluffs, to the site via the three-vehicle "Chappy ferry." It took barely two minutes to cross to Chappaquiddick, an island-within-an-island; the Vineyard itself is only 259 square kilometres (100 square miles). Thankfully, we were there in early June before the summer crowds,

when the on-island population swells to 120,000.

I was surprised to find no mention of the bridge in any local media or tourist literature; area bookstores did not display any of the many tomes written about the accident. Yet "Hype your infamy" is no Vineyard attitude. This laid-back haven of 15,000 year-round residents nurtures the privacy of its celebrities, whether they're residents or summer visitors, from the likes of former President Bill and Sen. Hillary Clinton to singer Carly Simon.

Forget discos, conspicu-

ous consumption, and places-to-be-seen. Instead, think farms, eclectic art and private parties behind picket fences or hand-made stone walls: the Vineyard specializes in laissez-faire leisure for upper-crust bohemia. It's like an exclusive version of our Sunshine Coast, with more money and more tourists. (Housing prices are almost double the national average, while the cost of living is roughly 60 per cent the U.S. average, according to a Martha's Vineyard Commission study reported by the *Vineyard Gazette* in April 2007.)