‘In the Heart’ of history

New film about whaling ship Essex puts spotlight on charming Nantucket, which offers visitors a chance to step back in time

BY CATHERINE MALLETT
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NANTUCKET, MASS.

Just above our heads, stretched out along the wavelike curved ceiling of the Nantucket Whaling Museum’s Gosnell Hall, is the 46-foot skeleton of a sperm whale, its massive head and jaw tilted downward as if the mighty creature has just taken a dive into the sea.

On Jan. 1, 1998, the bull whale rang in the new year with a spectacular and tragic, yet uncannily timely, death on the beach of Siasconset, the tiny village on the eastern end of Nantucket. The whale’s death on a beach was a remarkable thing in itself, as most perish in the deep seas, their skeletal remains finding their way to shore only after nature has ravaged the bones.

For those steeped in Nantucket lore, though, the whale’s arrival had an almost mystical, mythical quality that brings up the question of the whale’s intentions: Could he have known that the Nantucket Historical Association, in celebration of its 75th anniversary, would be launching a $10.8 million, two-year renovation and expansion of the Museum, and that he would provide the perfect visual centerpiece? Was his arrival a shout to Nantucketers, a “don’t forget about me” reminder of the source of their glorious history?

It seems unlikely, and yet.

And yet, there was the title character of Moby-Dick, Herman Melville’s great white whale with a vengeance, who hurled himself upon longtime nemesis Captain Ahab aboard the Nantucket whale ship Pequod.

Fiction it was, but fiction based on startling truth.

In 1820, the Nantucket whale ship Essex went down, struck by a whale that rammed the ship repeatedly with his massive head. The strangeness of this situation, unheard of in the whaling industry, caused first mate Owen Chase to later write in his diary, “The blows were placed to do us the most injury, the attack could come from only premeditated violence.”

My husband and I are in Nantucket, Mass., and...
we’ve just finished watching, here in Gosnell Hall, Nantucket, an excellent documentary on the island’s history.

To prepare for our trip, David and I have been listening to the audiobook of In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whale-ship Essex. Written in 2000 by Nantucket’s Nathaniel Philbrick, the book, which won the National Book Award for nonfiction, tells the tale of a 20-man crew that, after 15 months at sea, loses its ship in the whale attack, and then, with very few provisions, sets out in three whaleboats to try to make it 3,000 miles to the coast of South America.

Only eight men survive, and the story is every bit as nail-biting, horrifying and inspiring as you might think.

In fact, this is why we are here. On Friday, Warner Bros. Pictures is bringing In the Heart of the Sea to the big screen, directed by Ron Howard and starring Chris Hemsworth, and Nantucket is happily promoting the film, hoping to bring more attention to the history of this 14-by-3½-mile sandy island nearly 30 miles off the coast of Massachusetts and already one of the nation’s most exclusive destinations.

The film faces Star Wars: The Force Awakens for holiday box-office attention, but it’s getting plenty of good buzz. As Star-Telegram film critic Cary Darling wrote recently, “The fact that Warner Bros. pushed its release from March to the heart of Oscar season means they must have liked what they saw and have high hopes audiences will, too.”

We look now at the vintage whaleboat in front of us, wisely placed below the looming whale skeleton. These were the relatively fragile vessels attached to the sides of the ship, only about 28 feet long and used in the hunt of the whale, not intended for long journeys or survival in open water.

Hanging on the walls of the hall are harpoons used during Nantucket’s heyday as the whaling capital of the world. In a display case are artifacts from the Essex — maps, documents and a short length of twine, made by Benjamin Lawrence during his 93 days lost at sea.

I am inexplicably happy to see the twine, which plays a small role in Philbrick’s book. It is like a little message sent through the generations to all who stand before it: Survive, it whispers. Survive.

AN OLD FRIEND

The day is sunny and cool, and I decide to take a run. We’re staying at the White Elephant Village Residences, with their traditional cottage charm and loads of luxury features, including rare blue marble counters in the bathroom (which also has a pristine soaking tub and a glass-enclosed shower).

To be honest, with my mind immersed in the tragedy of the Essex and its starving whalers, the degree of comfort is a little overwhelming.

I head outside, stopping to admire how the new Residences mimic the weather-shingled houses that also line this street.

A turn to the right would take me toward the main streets of town with their tony shops and restaurants, but instead I go left, toward the quiet waters of the northern beaches. Nantucket is an old friend I am happy to see again. I first came here in the ’80s, working summers at a guest house.

Over the years, I’ve returned too many times to count.

After a brief stop at Jetties Beach, just one lovely spot among the island’s 80 miles of pristine beaches, I head up the bluff past stately homes with neatly manicured hedges, white picket fences, trellises draped with roses and the island’s signature hydrangea bushes with pillowy blue mounds of blossoms that echo the clear blue of the sky.

On Cliff Road, I turn onto the bike path that runs alongside the vast plains of grasslands and moors covered with acres of pink-flowered rosa rugosa. The island has more than 32 miles of bike paths, many created in the past decade to encourage people to explore the natural beauty of land that has remained largely unchanged by the passage of time.

In 1963, the Nantucket Conservation Foundation was formed, and its work has been remarkable. More than 45 percent of the island is preserved, including these open spaces and also hidden forests, bogs, pine barrens and salt marshes.

ISLAND’S HEYDAY

I think about the Nantucket documentary: Once
— and for a long while —
Nantucket was known as
the most cosmopolitan
place in the world. Sperm
oil fueled the American
Industrial Revolution, and
Nantucket was at the
center of it from the
mid-1700s to the
mid-1830s, with its robust
whaling industry featuring
state-of-the-art vessels.
Whalers were the astro-
nauts of their day, going
where no man had gone
before, and the kingpins
behind the industry built
mansions in town to re-
fect their status.

Like all good things, this
heyday came to an event-
tual end. The supply of
whales dwindled; Nan-
tucketers had to go farther
and farther to try to find
them, and trips to the
Pacific were long and
expensive. Meanwhile, the
nation tapped into new
sources of wealth: A dif-
ferent kind of oil was
discovered in Pennsylvania,
while gold was found
in California.

Then in 1846, what
would become known as
the Great Fire broke out,
destroying almost all of
the buildings along Nan-
tucket’s waterfront. The
Civil War put the final cap
on the industry, and Nan-
tucket fell into depression
and off the map for the
next hundred years or so.

Then there was a shift
in the wind, and like
Sleeping Beauty, the is-
land reawoke, reinventing
itself as an ideal spot for
tourism with its more than
800 pre-Civil War homes,
cobblestone streets and
historic sites, including
the country’s oldest oper-
ating windmill and the
Athenaeum, where Fre-
drick Douglass made his
first anti-slavery speech,
and where people once
gathered to hear the deep
thoughts of Ralph Waldo
Emerson and Henry David
Thoreau. The preserva-
tionists and the conserva-
tionists got to work, with
the can-do spirit and con-
fidence of their seagoing
forefathers.

To learn more about the
island’s history, David and
I take a walking tour off-
ered by the Nantucket
Historical Association.

SEE ISLAND, 9D

We learn that while the
men were at sea, the wo-
men of the island took
care of business. Our
group settles into the seats
at the Quaker meeting
house on Fair Street. Our
guide tells us that in 1702,
an itinerant Quaker minis-
ter came to town, and
soon the island gave itself
over to the religion, which
embraced not only hard
work and a sense of desti-
ny, but also spiritual
equality of the sexes. And
so a tradition of strong,
determined women was
born.

Maria Mitchell discovered
a comet in 1847 and
became known as one of
the greatest astronomers
of the century. In the
same era, Lucretia Coffin
Mott, born in Nantucket,
became one of the coun-
try’s leading abolitionists.

ROOTS IN COMMERCE

It’s a short walk to the
top of Main Street, where
we look at the mix of
shops around us — Mur-
ray’s Toggery Shop,
known as a source for
those preppy pants called
Nantucket Reds; the old-
fashioned drugstore; and
Nantucket Looms, where
upstairs, craftspeople
weave together one-of-a-
kind blankets and rugs
that blend practicality
with art.

Our guide tells us about
the island’s deep roots in
our nation’s commerce.
One of the early settlers
was named Thomas Macy.
One of his descendants,
R.H. Macy, left the island
of Nantucket for the is-
land of Manhattan, where
he started a dry goods
store that became a de-
partment store.

The Folgers were anoth-
er early island family.
James A. Folger went out
looking for gold in Cali-
ifornia and ended up set-
ting up a coffee enterprise.

The old streets and
buildings of Nantucket
carry the stories of those
who have come before. In
the Greek Revival Had-
wen House on Main
Street, I study the vestiges
of a life led by the family
of a former ship merchant.
I wonder: Was the check-
nerboard floor cloth in the
front entry imported from
Europe? What games did
the family play at night in
the parlor? Could they
ever have imagined that
time would bring tourists
like me into their home?
Back at our hotel, David
and I collapse into com-
fortable chairs on the
front porch of the main
building, enjoying compli-
mentary port and freshly
baked cookies. A girl darts
into a nearby door and
comes out with a scooter,
taking off into adventure.

We walk to dinner that
night at Brant Point Grill
at the White Elephant, the
Village’s older sister,
which is right on the har-
bor. When we first got to
the island, we headed
straight to the White Ele-
phant’s spa for a couples’
massage that instantly
erased our mainland worries.

**INFLUX OF WEALTH**

The former whaling capital has reclaimed its national cosmopolitan spotlight. With the influx of summer people (Nantucket’s population now swells from about 10,000 to 50,000 or more in the peak months) has come great wealth, and an abundance of trendy four-star restaurants, high-end boutiques and outdoor adventure opportunities, from fishing and sailing to tennis and disc golf.

New in-town luxury hotel options also abound. White Elephant Village is part of the Island Resorts group, which also includes the White Elephant, the Jared Coffin House, the Boat Basin’s Cottages and Lofts, and the Wauwinet, a 34-room inn nine miles from town that is the only Nantucket property that is part of the luxury hotelier association Relais & Châteaux.

We’ve had a perfect weekend, a healthy mix of fresh air and sea salt, history and culture, and over-the-top indulgences. Wow, life is good.

And it’s fun to think that our next Nantucket experience may well come through the big screen with a CGI leviathan that will undoubtedly make us jump in our seats — another mythical, magical whale that will remind us all of the simple, hopeful lessons of this faraway island in the heart of the sea: Survive. Survive.
The skeleton of a sperm whale is displayed in the Nantucket Whaling Museum’s Gosnell Hall.
Top 10 things to do in Nantucket

It's a small island, but there are so many great things to do. This is my own list of must-dos.

1. Bike to the beach. My favorite path leads to Madaket Beach, on the island's west side. Have some fresh fish tacos at Millie's and wash them down with lemonade, an island-made craft beer or a cold drink with tequila.

2. Visit the Whaling Museum. Watch the Nantucket documentary and sign up for one of the walk-around tours. This is the best way to get a crash course in island history.

3. Have an ice cream at The Juice Bar, downtown on Broad Street. The extra calories of a fresh waffle cone are worth it.

4. Hole up in a bookstore. Nantucket has two independent stores, Mitchell's Book Corner (on Main Street) and Nantucket Bookworks, both owned by the same person, and both loaded with regional titles and novels set in Nantucket.

5. Time your visit to a festival. In April, come for the Daffodil Festival and watch the parade of historic cars and trucks amble up Main Street bedecked with flowers. In May, there's a Wine Festival weekend, while June boasts both the annual Book Festival and Film Festival. There's a Garden Festival in July and a Cranberry Festival in October. Christmas Stroll is in early December.

6. Stop at Something Natural on Cliff Road, and pick up some sandwiches made with freshly baked Portuguese bread for a beach picnic.

7. Get in or out on the water. Charter a boat, rent a kayak or stand-up paddleboard, or at least dip your toes in the bracing waters of the Atlantic.

8. Take in a movie at the Dreamland, newly renovated but still with an old-school feel, or the more intimate Starlight Theatre.

9. Have breakfast (served all day) at the Downyflake at 18 Sparks Ave., which has been cooking up good food for 80 years.

10. Shop! Whether your tastes run to fine art, handmade crafts like the traditional lightship baskets, silly T-shirts about the man from Nantucket, brightly colored tunics, designer clothes and accessories, or Kobe beef steaks ready for the grill, Nantucket has the shop for you.

Learn about the island's history at the Whaling Museum.
If you go

Getting there

You can get to Nantucket by sea or air.

● There are two ferry lines that run from Hyannis in Cape Cod: Steamship Authority (508-477-8600) and Hy-Line Cruises (508-778-2600).

● The nearest airports are in Boston and Providence, R.I. If you prefer to fly into Nantucket Memorial Airport (ACK), you can, of course, arrive by private plane. There are no direct commercial flights from Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. You can fly to Boston and then take a connection on Cape Air (or, seasonally, Jet Blue), or (again, seasonally) fly through Newark, N.J., on United or through New York’s JFK on Delta or Jet Blue.

Getting around

If you are renting a house far from town, you’ll probably want to rent a car or, even better, a four-wheel-drive vehicle. If you are staying close to town, bicycles and taxis are your best options.

Go to www.wheelsheelsandpedals.com for car-free alternatives and www.nantucketchamber.org for more transportation options.

Staying there


● For other options, see www.nantucket-ma.gov/visitor.
Yachts fill a harbor at Nantucket.

The White Elephant Village Residences combine traditional cottage charm with modern amenities near downtown.
Chris Hemsworth stars in *In the Heart of the Sea*, based on a true story.

Nantucket, known as the Faraway Island, is today an exclusive getaway with gorgeous beaches.
The Three Bricks on Main Street are identical homes built by whale-oil baron Joseph Starbuck for his sons.

Hadwen House, also on Main Street, is a Greek Revival home built in 1845 by a whaling merchant.