

Explore Nantucket in the fall or spring and it'll be just you and the wind at scenic spots such as the Brant Point lighthouse. ISTOCKPHOTO

Peace returns to Nantucket in the fall. Visit during shoulder season and there's no wait at the best restaurants, tony hotel rooms go for a song and the pub is full of locals, not tourists. All that, plus warm autumn weather lures **Chris Johns** to this empty island paradise off the coast of Massachusetts

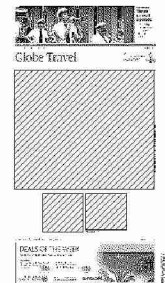
NANTUCKET, MASS.

**A** flight of swallows bursts out of the marsh and fills the air like a living, breathing firework. I stare slack-jawed for a minute then look around to see if anyone else is catching this, but there's no one in sight. No one on the beach, or the dock, or out on the water, or even on any of the boats. I'm not far from Nantucket's main wharf and at just about any other time of the year this small beach would be packed with tourists – some 50,000 of them flock to this island 48 kilometres off the southern coast of Massachusetts every summer – but now, on this warm autumn day, it feels like the birds and I have the place to ourselves.

It's shoulder season in Nantucket, that happy time of year when the weather is still gorgeous and the tourist hordes have left (March and April in the

spring, September and October in the fall). Beaches that in June, July and August are packed with crowds are nearly empty, dinner reservations are a cinch to secure and all of the shops seems to be offering sales. Lots of tourist hot spots offer shoulder-season deals, of course, but unlike certain destinations at this time of year, in Nantucket there's no major threat from hurricanes or blizzards.

I'm staying at the White Elephant, one of Nantucket's most luxurious hotels, but my room is currently going for a quarter of what it will cost in the height of summer. The price may have dropped, but the amenities are still mine for the taking. Want to take one of the hotel's new model BMW's out for a spin? Take your pick. And, sure the sun might not be as blazing as it was a couple of months ago, but there's no shortage of beach chairs.





» Not to mention, there's a warm fire burning in the library hearth and complimentary port and cheese when I get back from the beach.

There's also no wait to check out any of the complimentary bicycles, and I'm soon off in the general direction of Cisco Brewers, where I'm told the smoked pumpkin ale is on tap and only available in autumn. My ride takes me through town, past the iconic silver-grey cedar-shingled homes with their gabled roofs and perfectly manicured lawns and beyond to where moors give way to low scrub oak, now rusted in its fall colours. On the edge of town there's a dedicated bike trail, which I follow for a couple of kilometres before even seeing another cyclist.

I find a livelier scene at the brewery, although judging by the number of unoccupied picnic tables it's not as busy as it can be. "Locals don't come here in the summer," says the guy who's job is to stoke the fire pit that fills the air with the cozy smell of wood smoke. "It's way too busy, but it becomes like a clubhouse the rest of the time."

The brewery is joined by Nantucket Winery and Triple Eight Distillery on the property, offering what the locals call an "amusement park for alcohol." The complex attracts close to a quarter of a million people annually, but now dogs wander in and out of the buildings. There's a lively cornhole competition under way (it's my favourite new lawn game and involves tossing bean bags at a board with a hole in it; points and hilarity ensue), handrolled dumplings are steaming at a small food cart and the band starts up nearby.

Back in town, you'll find a crowd at the Nantucket Whaling Museum, but not much of one. In the mid-19th century, the handsome building at 13 Broad St. was a candle factory, turning whale oil into expensive, top-of-the-line candles – the LED lightbulbs of their time. Today, it

houses the museum where I'm joined by about half a dozen people on my tour. That's about a third of what there might be in high season and the sense of intimacy that the collection evokes, in delicate scrimshaw and handwritten letters, is accentuated by the lack of crowds.

Up a flight of stairs, past the ingenious old Fresnel lens that once helped illuminate the San-katy Head Lighthouse, the rooftop view encompasses the whole town, from the wharf to the wide Atlantic. But the highlight is a reconstructed, 14-metre long sperm whale skeleton that hangs from the rafters, dwarfing the poor whaling boat that it appears ready to crush. This particular specimen died from natural causes and washed up on the shore in the late 1990s. "When it was finally decided that we'd be allowed to keep the whale," our docent explains, "the fishermen were having such a hard time getting the flesh off it they eventually had to come here and use some of the 200-year-old whaling tools we have on display."

Oddly, all that gory, blood-thirsty history has worked up my appetite. There is no shortage of restaurants in Nantucket, but choosing one is normally based on where you can get a reservation. In high season, the marina has a dedicated concierge to secure tables at hot spots such as Brant Point Grill, Sfoglita and An American Place. During shoulder season, however, I can take my pick, and so I ask the most Nantucket-looking dude I can find – a guy wearing a Mackintosh jacket and a Bruins cap – where I can find the best chowder in town. "Sayle's," he says without hesitation.

A humble-looking spot on the waterfront – though nothing in Nantucket looks shabby – Sayle's has two indoor tables. In the summer, "there's a lineup out the door," the woman behind the counter says, gesturing up the street. Sayle's doesn't offer much in the way of decor beyond a gi-

ant lobster claw painted to look like a witch and some out-of-date calendars, but the chowder, as promised, is spectacular: velvety, rich and seasoned by the air itself.

The setting couldn't be more different for dinner the next night at Topper's in the magnificent Wauwinet hotel. If it was quiet back in town, it is positively silent up at this northern end of the island. Just beyond the hotel's driveway is the start of the Coskata-Coatue Wildlife Refuge. Two long, slender fingers of sand, the narrow peninsulas that give Nantucket its calligraphic shape are accessible only by foot, boat or specially permitted vehicle.

All of that adventure and wildlife just beyond the dining room doors will have to wait until tomorrow, because I'm settled into a plush booth with a great view of the crackling fireplace. All around me, equestrian sculptures and elegant oil paintings are illuminated by shaded sconces. When my dinner arrives, sweet local lobster is poached in seaweed butter and diver scallops, as tender and pure as pan-na cotta, are paired with shreds of meaty oxtail. Dark chocolate ice cream finds new richness alongside a salted caramel soufflé. This is Nantucket at its most elegant and delicious, and at the edge of the island on this warm autumn night, it feels like it's all mine.

Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer was a guest of Nantucket Island Resorts. The company did not review or approve the story.

## IF YOU GO

To reach Nantucket, the Hy-Line Cruises ferry (hyline-cruises.com) operates several times a day from Hyannis, Mass., (a 90-minute drive from Boston) and makes the 30-minute journey to the island in an hour. Visitors wishing to bring their cars must take

the bigger but more basic Steamship Authority Ferry ([steamshipauthority.com](http://steamshipauthority.com)), which also leaves from Hyannis and covers the distance in one hour, 35 minutes. Want to fly instead? Cape Air ([capeair.com](http://capeair.com)) flies direct from Boston and New York several times a day for around \$300 (U.S.).

WHERE TO STAY

**White Elephant:** Occupying a prime spot right beside Nantucket Harbour and surrounded by lush grounds, this 64-room hotel offers a taste of the gracious living that makes the island such a popular destination. 50 Easton St. Rooms from \$225; [whiteelephanthotel.com](http://whiteelephanthotel.com)

WHERE TO EAT

**Ventuno:** Northern Italian cooking in a romantic and comfortable setting from the owners of the 40-year-old Straight Wharf Restaurant and the popular sandwich shop, Provisions. A plate of polpetto

(pork and beef meatballs in tomato sauce) is a must. 21 Federal St.; [ventunorestaurant.com](http://ventunorestaurant.com)

**Sayle's:** This no-frills seafood shack is hugely popular with locals for its whole lobster dinners that include a heap of corn on the cob, steamed potatoes, coleslaw and clam chowder. Lighter meals, a bag of mussels or clams casino, are also available. 99 Washington St.; [saylesseafood.com](http://saylesseafood.com)

**Topper's:** You'll find the most refined and elegant restaurant on an island that knows a thing or two about those qualities in the Wauwinet hotel. Locally produced ingredients from places such as Pumpkin Pond Farm, Far Away Farm and Bartlett's Farm are paired with the best seafood the Northern Atlantic has to offer. Reopens for the season in April. 120 Wauwinet Rd.; [wauwinet.com](http://wauwinet.com)

Chris Johns





At any other time of year, the Old South Wharf would be packed with tourists. MASSACHUSETTS OFFICE OF TOURISM



Nantucket's iconic silver-grey cedar-shingled homes with their gabled roofs and perfectly manicured lawns eventually give way to moors and low scrub oak.

PHOTOS BY MASSACHUSETTS OFFICE OF TOURISM

