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## THE BEST OF TIMES

FALL FASHION  
CHANNELS VICTORIAN  
ELEGANCE, TAKES A  
SHINE TO THE FUTURE  
AND ROCKS THE  
TOTALLY AWESOME  
FOUR-SEASONS-BETWEEN



The magnificent skeleton of a sperm whale and (below) a jawbone of a mighty leviathan are on display at the Nantucket Whaling Museum, which provides a rich narrative of the island's history.



# Island Time

BY CATHERINE MALLETTE

STEEPED IN HISTORY AND WHALING LORE, NANTUCKET CHARMS VISITORS WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO STEP BACK IN TIME.

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 ran 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 perishes 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 soon 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 *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*: "catching sight of the nearing black hull of the ship; seemingly seeing in it the source of all his persecutions; bethinking it — it may be — a larger and nobler foe; of a sudden he bore down upon its advancing prow, smiting his jaws amid fiery showers of foam."

Fiction it was, but fiction based on startling truth.



Nantucket, known as the Faraway Island, is today an exclusive getaway with gorgeous beaches, a safe land yacht-filled harbor and vast expanses of conservation land and wildlife refuges.

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 non-fiction, 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 separate 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 and horrifying and inspiring as you might think.

In fact, this is why we are here. In December, Warner Bros. Pictures is bringing *In the Heart of the Sea* to the big screen, directed by Ron Howard, and Nantucket is happily promoting the film, hoping to bring more attention to the history of this 14-by-3 1/2-mile sandy island nearly 30 miles off the coast of Massachusetts and already one of the nation's most exclusive spots for summer travel.

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



Capt. Owen Chase was first mate of the ship *Essex*, sunk by a whale in 1820.

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.

**T**he day is sunny and cool, and I decide to take a run. We're staying at the White Elephant Village Residences, in a beyond-fabulous space — traditional cottage charm and styling but loads of luxury features, including rare blue marble counters in the bathroom (which also has a pristine soaking tub and a glass-enclosed shower), Italian bed linens, a cozy living area with a fireplace and our own well-stocked pantry, complete with a Sub-Zero and Royal Doulton china.

To be honest, with my mind immersed in the



The White Elephant Village Residences combine traditional cottage charm with modern amenities near downtown. (Below) Three Bricks were identical homes built by whale-oil baron Joseph Starbuck for his sons.



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 pillow 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 last 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.

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 astronauts of their day, going where no man had gone before, and the kingpins behind the industry built mansions in town to reflect their status.

Like all good things, this heyday came to an eventual end. The supply of whales dwindled; Nantucketers 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 different 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 Nantucket's waterfront. The Civil War put the final cap on the industry, and Nantucket 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 island 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 operating windmill and the Athenaeum, where Frederick 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 preservationists and the conservationists got to work, with the can-do spirit and confidence of their seagoing forefathers.

**T**o learn more about the island's history, David and I take a walking tour offered by the Nantucket Historical Association.

We learn that while the men were at sea, the women of the island took care of business. Our group settles into the seats at the Quaker meet-

Hawden House is a Greek Revival home built in 1845 by a whaling merchant.



ing house on Fair Street. Our guide tells us that in 1702, an itinerant Quaker minister came to town, and soon the island gave itself over to the religion, which embraced not only hard work and a sense of destiny, 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 country's leading abolitionists.

It's a short walk to the top of Main Street, where we look at the mix of shops around us — Murray'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 island of Manhattan, where he started a dry goods store that became a department store. The Folgers were another early island family. James A. Folger went out looking for gold in California and ended up setting up a coffee enterprise.

The old streets and buildings of Nantucket carry the stories of those who have come before. In the Greek Revival Hadwen House on Main Street, I study the vestiges of a life led by the family of a former ship merchant. I wonder: Was the checkered floor cloth in the front entry imported from Europe? What games did the family play at night in the parlor? Did they ever consciously think, "Wow, life is good"? Could they have foreseen how Nantucket's fortunes would change? Could they ever have imagined that time would bring tourists like me into their home? Could they possibly have imagined the Nantucket of today?



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