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Lost in conservation area. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)

Nantucket's small size belies boundless history, appeal

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The Grey Lady is gorgeous. Just the profusion of giant rhododendron and wild roses cascading over the sand dunes is worth the cost of the hourlong ferry ride south from Cape Cod. But there is so much more to see and learn about on the island of Nantucket, a National Historic Landmark. Its diminutive size (47.8 square miles, in what Herman Melville described as a "small elbow of sand") belies its rich and boundless history and current international appeal. Thirty-two-mile network of bike paths; 82 miles of pristine beaches; an historic town center; no traffic lights, no chain stores. Heavenly.

The moniker "Grey Lady" is both mythical and man-made. As the ancient story goes, the giant Maushope, who was sleeping on Cape Cod, kicked some sand from his shoe and where it landed, became Nantucket, the "faraway island." The smoke from his pipe drifted over like a fog where it still stubbornly hovers from time to time. Today, weathered grey shingles that dress all the homes create a comforting uniformity of style but also ensure that the lady stays grey.

On the first of my four days on the island, I walked along the soft sands of the windswept beach by the ocean in Wauwinet: tall grasses blowing wildly; the peaks of Nantucket houses barely visible over the sand dunes; the seals bobbing in the wayward waves; the seagulls riding and gliding in the silver sky. As I was the only person on the beach, an all-encompassing sense of total freedom and awe at the natural beauty was thrilling.

Returning to The Wauwinet, the Relais & Chateau that was my home for two days, I joined guests who gathered in the living room. A wood fire was burning, the port and cheese laid out on an antique table, a life-size wooden dog maintained a benign watch over us as well as two aristocratic looking cats peered down at him, protected within their painterly frames. Beyond the French doors and the scattered lawn chairs, lay Nantucket Bay glistening in the late afternoon sun. A guest I spoke with was a 22-year repeater. She and her husband return to the 33-room inn and cottage property for many reasons, including the wonderful staff. "They remember, without being reminded, every detail that makes each guest feel welcome," she said. I concur.

Another obvious reason is the excellent, award-winning restaurant, Toppers. I dined on huge chunks of fresh lobster in homemade rolls for lunch. For dinner, white asparagus; plump, succulent oysters from their in-house farm; perfectly grilled North Atlantic halibut surrounded by a village of neighborly food – a street of potato and fennel laced with artichoke puree. Dessert came with its own "appetizer" – the creative head chef Kyle Zachary whipped up a coconut custard with pineapple gel, settled it into a ceramic egg cup surrounded by a replica of a bird's nest. The finale: tangy rhubarb flan.

The following day I and a charming couple from Baton Rouge, La., spent several hours with Barry Thurston. As a guide for The Trustees of Reservations preserve, Barry, a natural storyteller, was in top form as he took us on a 2 1/2 hour round-trip tour through Coskata-Coatue Wildlife Refuge on the narrow, northern neck of Nantucket. He pointed out Osprey nests on top of telephone poles where the same birds return each year; the massive nesting site of the largest seagulls in the world; a small lake, home to a single pair of swans and their three signets; a resting ground of a colony of seals, near the historic Great Point Lighthouse and most implausibly, an area of the beach restricted for six weeks every summer to protect three nests of the endangered Piping Plovers.

This attention to conservation is but one of several private and public efforts that preserve nearly half of Nantucket's 30,000 acres under the stewardship of the Conservation Foundation and Land Bank. It is in stark contrast to the fact that Nantucket was once the whaling capital of the world in the 19th century, when hunting Sperm whales was key to its financial success. Now tourism is the main industry. As someone very directly said to me, "Tourists are the new whales."

Not entirely put off by the somewhat nefarious history, I visited the Whaling Museum and garnered a better understanding of the whaling industry. It houses 20,000 artifacts including the mammoth skeleton of the hunted Sperm Whale. The hard life of the whalers who sailed the seas for years at a time, leaving the women at home to fend for themselves. They grew fiercely independent and ruled the island with an iron fist. One of the commercial streets in the center town was called Petticoat Row by dint of the women's business acumen. Benjamin Franklin's mother, Abiah, was one of these strong women, a mother of 18, who happened to be a scion of the Folger family. Folger, as in coffee.

The current center of town meticulously maintains its heritage buildings and I highly recommend taking a tour of the area. Buy your tickets at the Whaling Museum. Our guide was a supreme storyteller painting a picture of its 19th century life. "Old Nantucket," he said, "was rancid, sewage everywhere with the omnipresent smell of whale oil. It stunk." "The Great Fire of 1846 spread out of control because of two competing fire groups arguing about which group should put it out first." Wonderful commentary as we moved from the rebuilt site of the fire, the Greek Revival library, the Atheneum, to the Quaker Meeting house, to Dreamland Theater, to the harbor area, etc., etc.

On my own meanderings I found my favorite small museum, at the far end of Union Street. The Nantucket Lightship Basket Museum is a repository of antique baskets woven by whalers during the long voyages to distant lands. Baskets by contemporary weavers are on display as well. They are as intricate and as varied as the individuals who created them. The museum shop offers a fine selection as well as basket-themed items including linens and handpainted cards, some with Nantucket recipes attached.

On the last two nights of my visit I stayed in one of the White Elephant's two-bedroom cottages, grey shingled, of course, but bright and airy inside. Country cozy furniture, a fireplace, a kitchen and comfortable beds created a welcoming atmosphere and quiet nights. The White Elephant is owned and operated by Nantucket Island Resorts, a collection of premier properties on the island that also includes the Wauwinet, White Elephant Hotel Residences, Jared Coffin House, The Cottages & Lofts and Nantucket Boat Basin. (The 29 Cottages and Lofts are particularly interesting as they used to house whalers and now are delightfully re-created as two-story houses perched alongside the waterfront).

A stone's throw from the Cottages is a charming shopping area where I found my favorite fudge store. Not surprisingly Leah's Fudge slogan is, "The Best Fudge in the World." With 40 flavors to choose from you can't go wrong and I didn't!

Back on Main Street, nostalgic reigns supreme at Pete's Soda Fountain at Nantucket Pharmacy. The Juice Bar Homemade Ice Cream, also on Main, is a waiting-in-line affair, but like many romances, worth the effort. Stroll over to Antiques Depot and you are transported to a world of treasures culled from whalers' travels - a veritable microcosm of the island itself, and the owner, Jack Fritsch, is an encyclopedia of information. For serious clothing shoppers, there are a surprising number of elegant boutiques with unique items culled from countries abroad, as well as made in the U.S.A.

With 75 restaurants on the island, your choices are equally abundant. At the White Elephant's Brant Point Grill, I dined on fresh oysters and a filet mignon, while sail boats drifted by in the harbor. Instead of wine, I opted for a home-made Cisco beer brewed on the island. An entirely satisfying end to a far too short a stay on a remarkably seductive island. As Herman Melville wrote about Nantucket in his novel "Moby Dick," "there was a fine, boisterous something about everything connected with that famous old island, which amazingly pleased me." Who would argue with the master storyteller?

FYI: nantucketislandresorts.com

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PHOTOS (for help with images, contact 312-222-4194): UST-NANTUCKET



Windswept Wauwinet beach. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)



Nantucket's Atheneum library. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)



Hand made Nantucket baskets. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)



Sperm Whale skeleton at Whaling Museum. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)



Widow's walk on Grey Lady home. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)



Aunt Leah and her famous fudge. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)



Top of the dessert pecking order. (Carol Ann Davidson/TNS)