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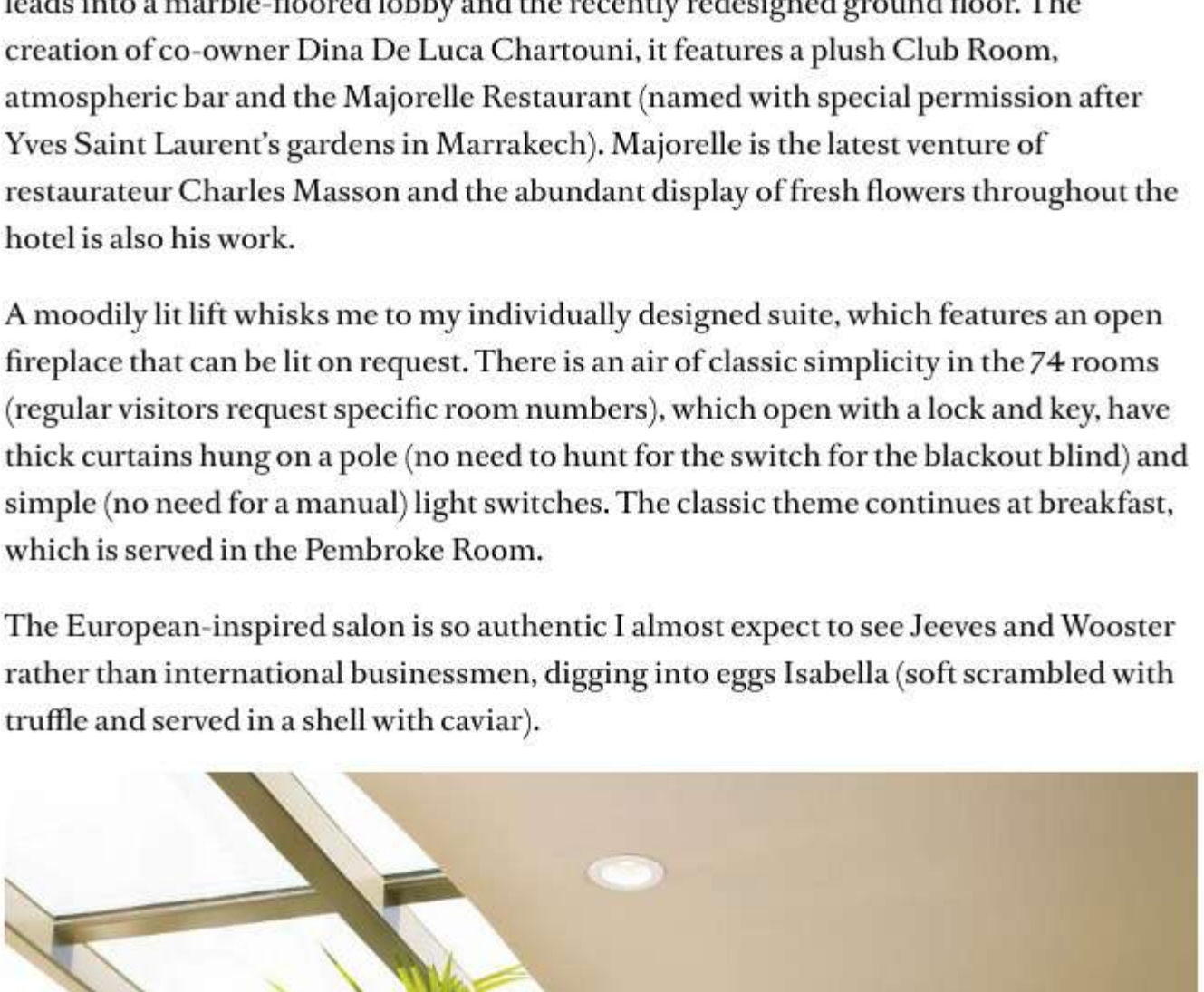
New England, Old haunts: exploring the East Coast's historic hotels

8 AUGUST 2018 BY SOPHIA WILSON

As celebrated as its lighthouses, New England's classic hotels are closely entwined with the region's boating heritage. Sophia Wilson steps ashore to find out more.

This phrase was coined by American writer Mark Twain in the 1870s and is still used by locals today. Twain described the “dazzling uncertainty” of these conditions as one of the region’s “brightest gems” and it certainly hasn’t dented its credentials as a summer bolthole for America’s glitterati and boating enthusiasts. It is true that in the time it takes to shuck a couple of oysters, tempestuous clouds can crowd a periwinkle horizon and pond-like tranquillity can flash into torrid waters. Thankfully, however, when the weather takes a turn for the worse, a treasure trove of culture-rich hideaways offer sanctuary until the next change in the heavens.

My adventure into these beautifully unpredictable waters – and their historical hideaways – begins in [New York](#). A fleet of superyachts has taken a bite out of the Big Apple in recent years, including 162.5 metre [Eclipse](#) and 133.9 metre [Serene](#). With a fleet of crewed Hinckleys available to its members along the Eastern Seaboard, Doug Gray, the co-founder of Barton & Gray Mariners Club, is an advocate of the city’s nautical credentials. “You have never really seen New York from that perspective,” says Gray. “You can watch the sun set over the Statue of Liberty and then you turn around and you have New York City lit up behind you. It’s the way the city is meant to be seen, reflecting in the water.”

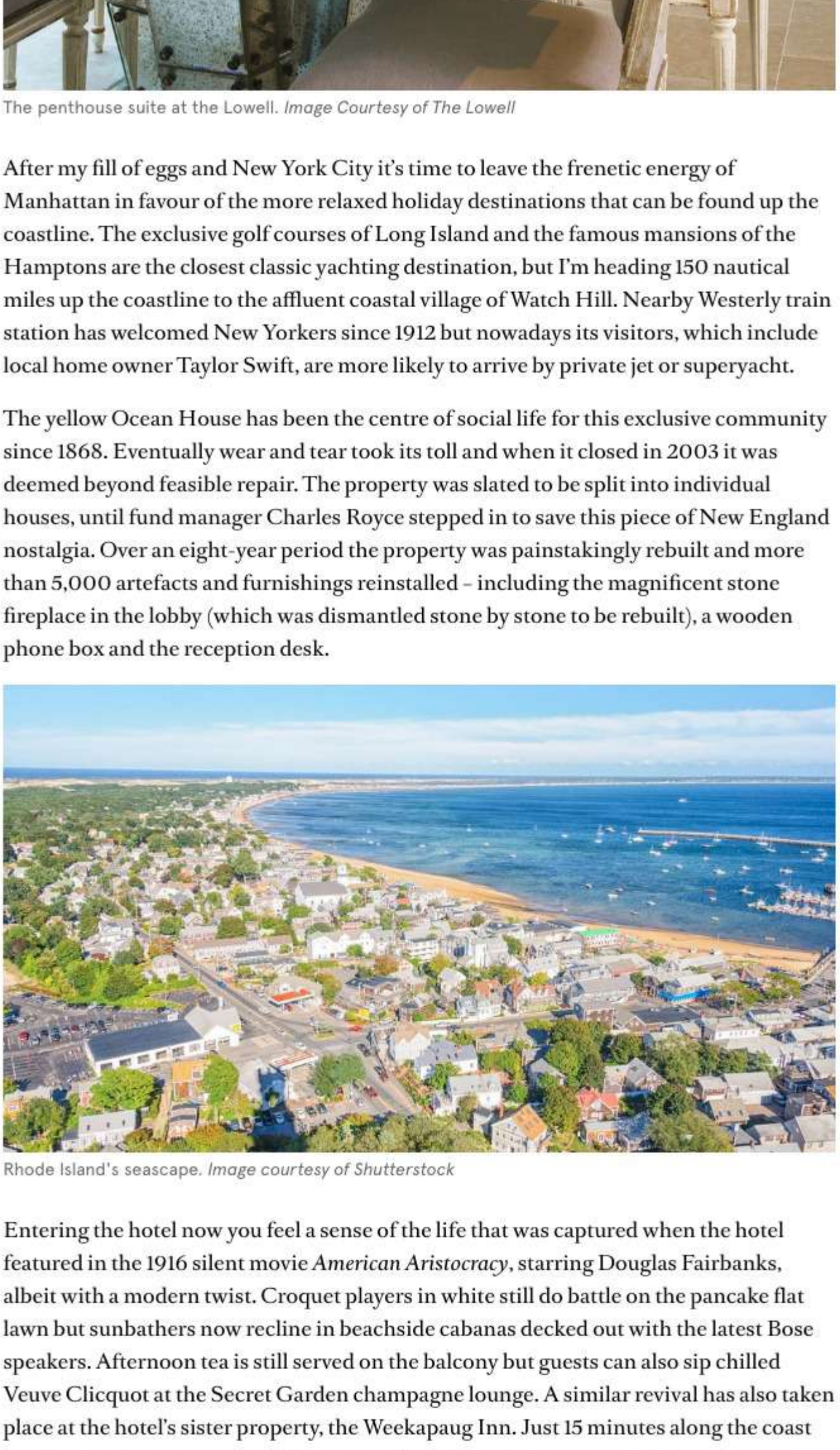


The Lowell's 74 rooms all differ in size and shape, but fresh flowers grace all of them. Image Courtesy of The Lowell

Heeding his advice, I head to the old-world glamour of The Lowell. Tucked away on a blossom-covered street between Park and Madison Avenues, the hotel opened its doors in 1927 and the Chartouni family took on the venture in the 1980s. The unimposing entrance, manned by an impeccably dressed doorman with sparkling gold buttons, leads into a marble-floored lobby and the recently redesigned ground floor. The creation of co-owner Dina De Luca Chartouni, it features a plush Club Room, atmospheric bar and the Majorelle Restaurant (named with special permission after Yves Saint Laurent's gardens in Marrakech). Majorelle is the latest venture of restaurateur Charles Masson and the abundant display of fresh flowers throughout the hotel is also his work.

A moodily lit lift whisks me to my individually designed suite, which features an open fireplace that can be lit on request. There is an air of classic simplicity in the 74 rooms (regular visitors request specific room numbers), which open with a lock and key, have thick curtains hung on a pole (no need to hunt for the switch for the blackout blind) and simple (no need for a manual) light switches. The classic theme continues at breakfast, which is served in the Pembroke Room.

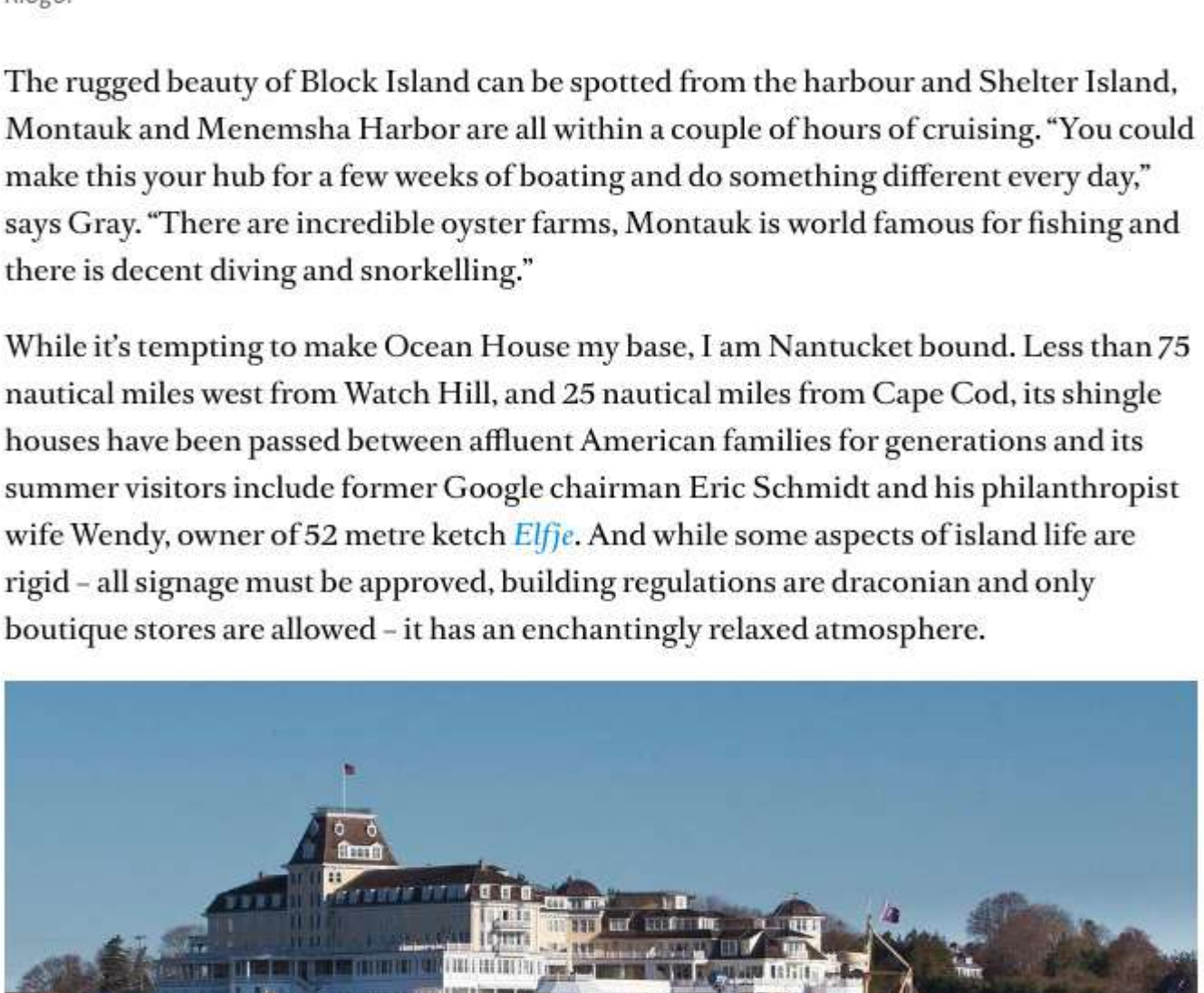
The European-inspired salon is so authentic I almost expect to see Jeeves and Wooster rather than international businessmen, digging into eggs Isabella (soft scrambled with truffle and served in a shell with caviar).



The penthouse suite at the Lowell. Image Courtesy of The Lowell

After my fill of eggs and New York City it's time to leave the frenetic energy of Manhattan in favour of the more relaxed holiday destinations that can be found up the coastline. The exclusive golf course of Long Island and the famous mansions of the Hamptons are the closest classic yachting destination, but I'm heading 150 nautical miles up the coastline to the affluent coastal village of Watch Hill. Nearby Westerly train station has welcomed New Yorkers since 1912 but nowadays its visitors, which include local home owner Taylor Swift, are more likely to arrive by private jet or superyacht.

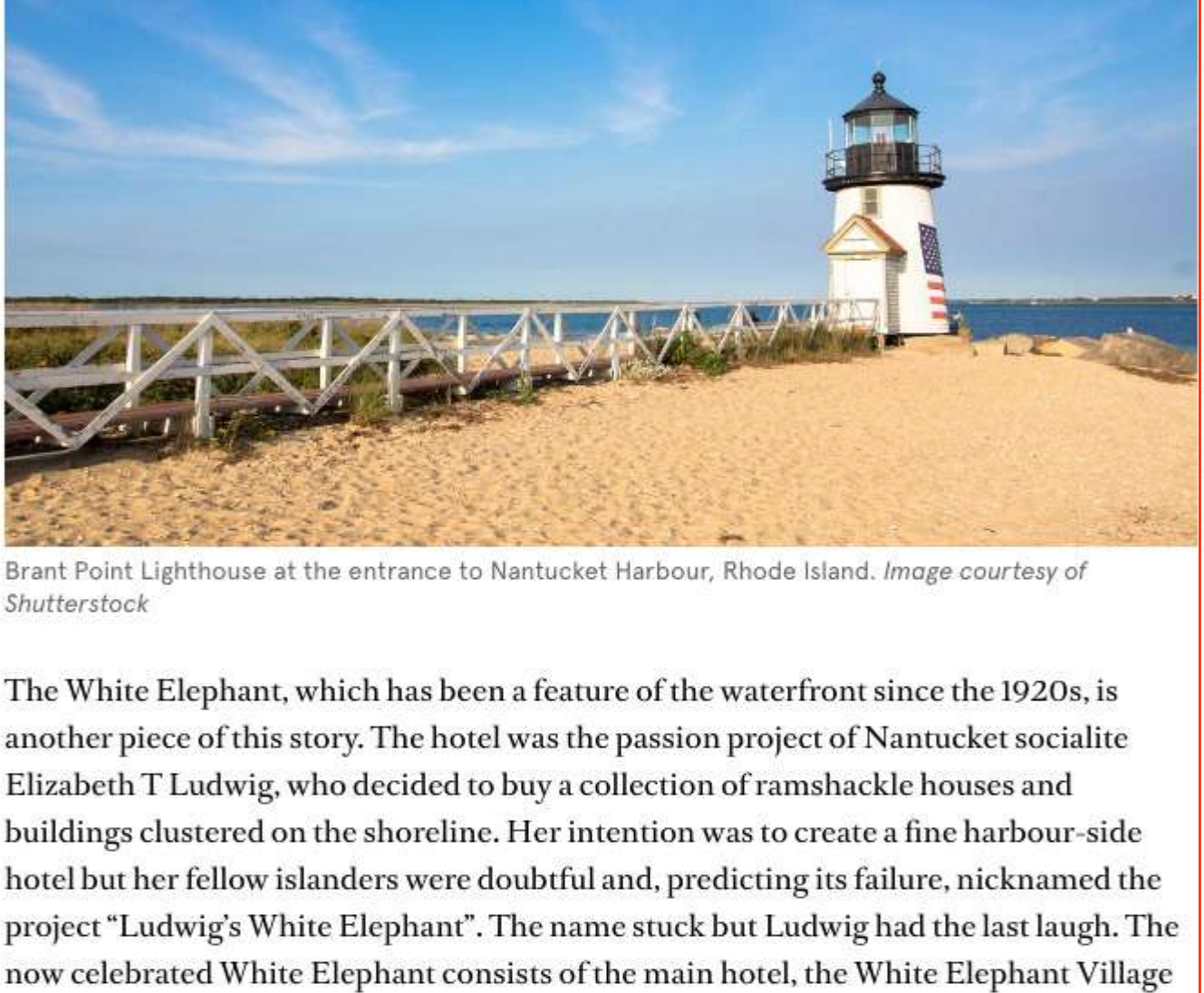
The yellow Ocean House has been the centre of social life for this exclusive community since 1868. Eventually wear and tear took its toll and when it closed in 2003 it was deemed beyond feasible repair. The property was slated to be split into individual houses, until fund manager Charles Royce stepped in to save this piece of New England nostalgia. Over an eight-year period the property was painstakingly rebuilt and more than 5,000 artefacts and furnishings reinstalled – including the magnificent stone fireplace in the lobby (which was dismantled stone by stone to be rebuilt), a wooden phone box and the reception desk.



Rhode Island's seascape. Image courtesy of Shutterstock

Entering the hotel now you feel a sense of the life that was captured when the hotel featured in the 1916 silent movie *American Aristocracy*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, albeit with a modern twist. Croquet players in white still do battle on the pancake flat lawn but sunbathers now recline in beachside cabanas decked out with the latest Bose speakers. Afternoon tea is still served on the balcony but guests can also sip chilled Veuve Clicquot at the Secret Garden champagne lounge. A similar revival has also taken place at the hotel's sister property, the Weekapaug Inn. Just 15 minutes along the coast the hotel, which was originally built in 1899 and is perched between two salt ponds, offers a more casual vibe with a bevy of outdoor activities ranging from kayaking to nature tours.

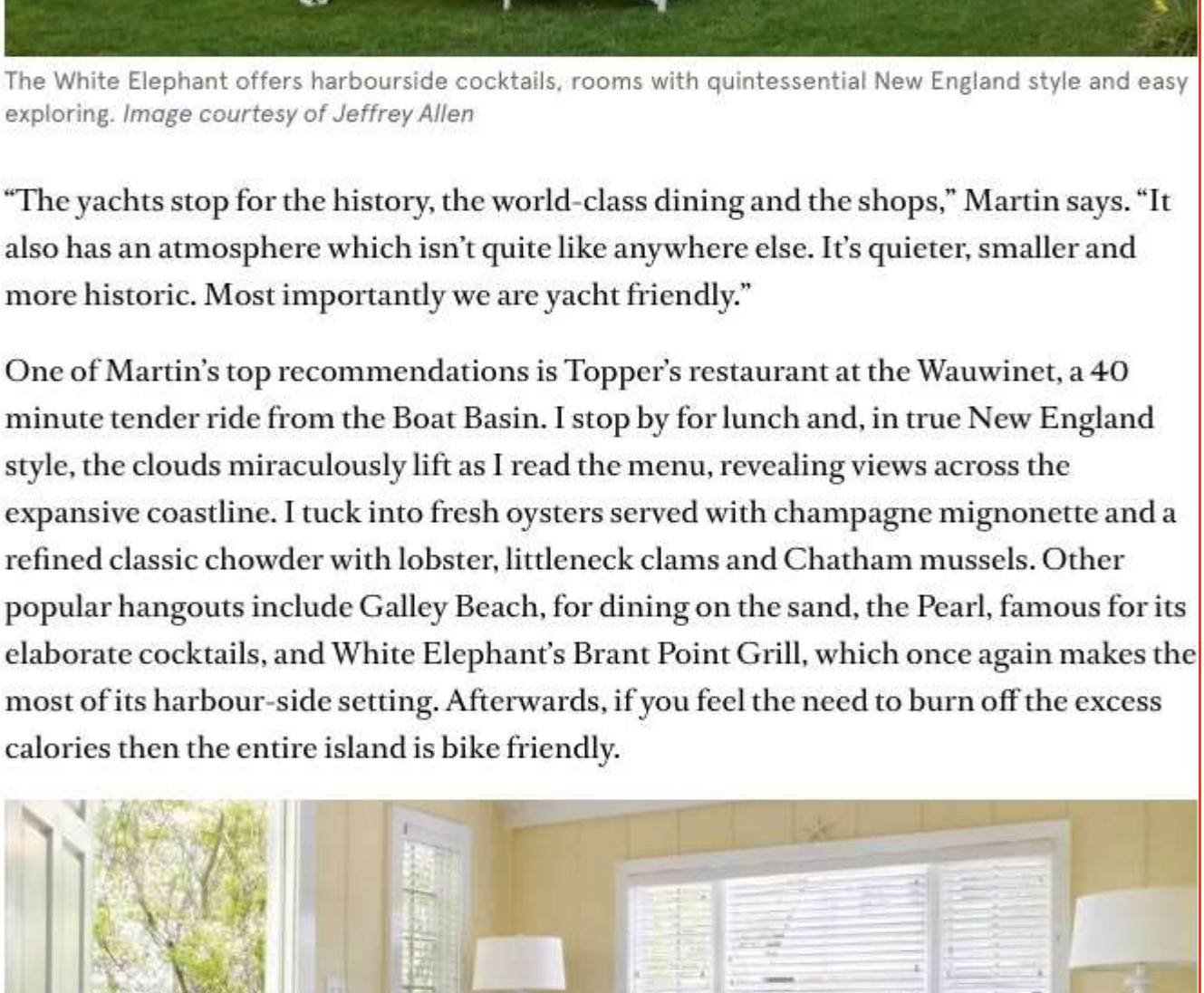
With the harbour of Watch Hill a five-minute stroll down the hill, Ocean House also acts as a perfect jumping off point to explore the surrounding coastline. If you aren't visiting on your own yacht, you can take advantage of the hotel's partnership with Barton & Gray, which allows guests to use its fleet. Alternatively, you can hope to be invited on board the private yacht of the owner of Ocean House, 22.5 metre *Aphrodite*. Launched in 1937, she was commissioned as a Coast Guard auxiliary vessel in 1942 and has carried dignitaries including President Franklin D Roosevelt and Hollywood celebrities such as Spencer Tracy, Sir Laurence Olivier and Katharine Hepburn.



The rebuilding of Ocean House kept all 247 windows in their original positions Image Courtesy of Chip Riegel

The rugged beauty of Block Island can be spotted from the harbour and Shelter Island, Montauk and Menemsha Harbor are all within a couple of hours of cruising. “You could make this your hub for a few weeks of boating and do something different every day,” says Gray. “There are incredible oyster farms, Montauk is world famous for fishing and there is decent diving and snorkelling.”

While it's tempting to make Ocean House my base, I am Nantucket bound. Less than 75 nautical miles west from Watch Hill, and 25 nautical miles from Cape Cod, its shingle houses have been passed between affluent American families for generations and its summer visitors include former Google chairman Eric Schmidt and his philanthropist wife Wendy, owner of 52 metre ketch *Elfe*. And while some aspects of island life are rigid – all signage must be approved, building regulations are draconian and only boutique stores are allowed – it has an enchantingly relaxed atmosphere.



Hop on board the private yacht of the owner of Ocean House, 22.5 metre Aphrodite. Image Courtesy of Chip Riegel

“Anything goes in Nantucket,” says Christina Hall, business development manager for Nantucket Island Resorts. “It doesn't matter if you are a millionaire or have got five bucks, everyone mingles.”

The island is now famous for its summer season but it was whaling that first put it on the world map. The Nantucket Whaling Museum details this part of the town's history, including the true story of the Essex whaleship that inspired *Moby Dick*, and fascinating exhibits include a 14 metre sperm whale skeleton.

The heroics of man versus *Moby Dick* may be the main narrative associated with the island, but it is a surprising history of female strength that intrigues me most. Centre Street, now home to a selection of eclectic art galleries, was once called Petticoat Lane because all its businesses were run by women whose husbands were at sea, often for years at a time. Nantucket was also home to the first American woman to work as a professional astronomer, Maria Mitchell, who in 1847 discovered a comet.



Brant Point Lighthouse at the entrance to Nantucket Harbour, Rhode Island. Image courtesy of Shutterstock

The White Elephant, which has been a feature of the waterfront since the 1920s, is another piece of this story. The hotel was the passion project of Nantucket socialite Elizabeth T Ludwig, who decided to buy a collection of ramshackle houses and buildings clustered on the shoreline. Her intention was to create a fine harbour-side hotel but her fellow islanders were doubtful and, predicting its failure, nicknamed the project “Ludwig's White Elephant”. The name stuck but Ludwig had the last laugh. The now celebrated White Elephant consists of the main hotel, the White Elephant Village (a 20 room inn and 25 one, two and three bedroom residences) and two spacious lofts in the centre of town. Its cosy rooms, with harbour views, fireplaces and a sheet thread count to die for, are booked months in advance during peak periods.

The view from my window spans both the harbour and Nantucket Boat Basin marina, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary. In keeping with the history of women in charge it is under the guidance of director of marine operations Christina Martin. Nantucket summer regulars include popular charter yacht 49 metre [Zoom Zoom Zoom](#), and 50 metre Westport [Annastar](#). Navigating into Nantucket takes some skill. The turn around the Brant Point Light lighthouse is sharp and the maximum draught that can pass through is 4.8 metres. Larger superyachts that can't be accommodated by the marina are recommended to opt for Anchorage Area J, known as Juliet.

The White Elephant offers harbourside cocktails, rooms with quintessential New England style and easy exploring. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Allen

“The yachts stop for the history, the world-class dining and the shops,” Martin says. “It also has an atmosphere which isn't quite like anywhere else. It's quieter, smaller and more historic. Most importantly we are yacht friendly.”

One of Martin's top recommendations is Topper's restaurant at the Wauwinet, a 40 minute tender ride from the Boat Basin. I stop by for lunch and, in true New England style, the clouds miraculously lift as I read the menu, revealing views across the expansive coastline. I tuck into fresh oysters served with champagne mignonette and a refined classic chowder with lobster, littleneck clams and Chatham mussels. Other popular hangouts include Galley Beach, for dining on the sand, the Pearl, famous for its elaborate cocktails, and White Elephant's Brant Point Grill, which once again makes the most of its harbour-side setting. Afterwards, if you feel the need to burn off the excess calories then the entire island is bike friendly.

Image courtesy of Jeffrey Allen

If island life gets too claustrophobic then Boston, like New York, is easily accessible by superyacht or is a 45 minute flight away. Its airport also makes it an easy point from which to hop back to London, with British Airways operating four flights a day, and with a flight time of only six and a half hours. Flights can also be boarded directly from its newly renovated lounge, making it a seamless process. Deciding which season to pack for is likely to be your biggest challenge and multiple layers are advisable.

I can't help but agree with Twain, however, that part of New England's beauty is its unpredictability, and with its glorious historic hotels and storied boating past, it is indeed a gem of a cruising ground, whatever the weather.

Flight facts

British Airways flies four times a day from London Heathrow to Boston. A return Club World fare starts from £2,072 including all taxes.

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