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June
2018
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Stars and sights

MARY LUSSIANA STEPS BACK IN TIME TO AMERICA'S GILDED AGE ON A TRIP ROUND RHODE ISLAND, NANTUCKET AND CAPE COD

This is a journey of multiple layers: of the indigenous Mashpee Wampanoag tribes and incoming pilgrims; of fortunes made from sperm oil and lost to the California gold rush and petroleum; of places, people – and whales – immortalised on the page by Edith Wharton and Herman Melville; of the fascinating social history of the Quakers in their sober shingled houses of Nantucket, and the Vanderbilt and Astor heiresses in their opulent Rhode Island mansions. It is marked by windmills and waves, lobster and clam chowder.

Interwoven through today's tourist spots are the trails left behind by politicians and presidents, for whom this area has long been a favourite haunt: from Franklin D Roosevelt commuting up the Hudson River in the yacht *Aphrodite* during the Second World War all the way to Cape Cod (famed as the summer playground of the Kennedy clan), to Nantucket island, which, though only 15 miles long and three miles wide, is important enough for both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump to have held campaign dinners there at the last election.

Nowhere in America has quite this varied depth of history, nor its charm. Start in Rhode Island, America's smallest state, and base yourself at one of its greatest hotels, Ocean House. Perched on the cliff's edge on Watch Hill, the grand nineteenth-century structure looks onto a private beach and the white-capped Atlantic, while to its side is an immaculate croquet lawn.

It stands here today thanks to its owner Chuck Royce, who was persuaded by locals to save and preserve the building after it was under threat of destruction to make way for new houses. (He also bought and refurbished *Aphrodite*.) His renovation replicated the original exterior design from 1868, while bringing all the luxury of the twenty-first century to the interiors. Original art from covers of *The New Yorker* by Garrett Price, doodled self-portraits by Truman Capote, François Truffaut and Arthur Miller, and a series of amusing watercolour, pen and inks by Ludwig Bemelmans – best known for the *Madeline* picture books – line the corridors.

The hotel's farm-to-table food ethic even stretches to home-made salt. Do not miss the memorable lobster rolls and clam

chowder at lunch; or the heirloom tomatoes at breakfast – having first dipped in the swimming pool with its ceiling of sky and seagulls. Take the time, too, to meet Melissa, the New York therapist who greeted me with the words: 'What part of you do you want beaten up, then?' and left me the most knot-free I have been in decades.

Newport in Rhode Island, a 40-minute drive away, perfectly portrays America's late-nineteenth-century Gilded Age, when it became a showplace for the country's greatest architects and designers. The scale of wealth was extraordinary, such as the Breakers mansion, built by the Vanderbilts in Italian Renaissance style, which has 70 alabaster-adorned rooms illuminated by Baccarat crystal chandeliers suspended from frescoed ceilings.

The harmonious simplicity of Nantucket is a welcome sight after that opulent indulgence. Nantucket, or 'the faraway place' as the Native American name translates, was called 'an elbow of sand, all beach without a background' by Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*. He may have regretted his description when he finally visited the island, because the well-preserved eighteenth- and nineteenth-century houses are of note. Clad in muted tones of cedar-shingle, they are often topped by a characteristic Widow's Walk – a rooftop platform from which, legend has it, wives watched for their whaling husbands to return.

The shops are wonderful, brimming with 'Nantucket Reds' (shorts) and antique lightship baskets, or scrimshaw worked by sailors to pass the time. The fascinating Whaling Museum is a must to understand how important this place was in the early 1840s. Also worth a visit is the Quaker Meeting House on Fair Street; the religion fostered the independent, educated women that were the mainstay of the Nantucket community while the men were away. Stay at the White Elephant, which looks onto the harbour and serves an unforgettable lobster mac 'n' cheese.

And then there is Cape Cod. In 1961, President John F Kennedy signed legislation establishing a Cape Cod National Seashore to preserve its natural and historic values. Rest your head in one of the gorgeous clapboard cottages at Wequassett Resort near the charming town of Chatham, and walk along that pristine shoreline early in the morning with just the cry of birds for company. Sometimes, just sometimes, presidents get things right.

OPPOSITE
CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT
A Nantucket stilt house. Breakers mansion, the Vanderbilts' summer 'cottage'. Providence is the state capital of Rhode Island. A quintessential clapboard house on Nantucket. Boats moored at Weekapaug in Rhode Island. Steps lead through heathland to the Nantucket shoreline. The New England waters are a feeding ground for humpback whales in spring and summer. Nantucket streets are lined with antique shops and cafés. Castle Hill Light at Newport, Rhode Island (centre)

Ways and Means

Mary travelled as a guest of Scott Dunn (020-8682 5030; scottdunn.com), which offers a nine-night holiday from £3,500, with three nights each at Ocean House, White Elephant and Wequassett, including flights and car hire, but excluding breakfast □

