

# Nantucket the jewel of New England

Summer playground of the rich and famous began life as a whaling town

SEAN MALLEN Sean Mallen's visit was partly subsidized by Nantucket Island Resorts and Porter Air. [↗](#)



Brant Point Lighthouse is a landmark welcoming visitors arriving on Nantucket by ferry.

When we stepped off the ferry in Nantucket, we almost felt like we needed to wipe our feet first. The lawns were all perfectly mowed, the houses built in the same distinctive style, the beaches unspoiled and the people impeccably

dressed in expensive casual clothes. It is a moneyed place.

What a contrast from its earlier prosperity. In the early 19th century, the whaling trade filled the pockets of Nantucketers. It was a messy, brutal indus-

try — the harbour clogged with oily, blackened whaling ships and the trades that supported them.

“You wouldn’t want to come here as a tourist,” said Linda Steelman, a guide at the Nantucket Whaling Museum. “It was a stinky whaling town.”

The whaling trade collapsed 150 years ago and now the town’s wealth is based upon, well, wealth. It is the summer playground of American gentry — one of the richest communities in the U.S., a place where the population of



The cobblestoned Main Street in Nantucket is lined with tony shops, while Jetties Beach is on the outskirts of Nantucket town.

10,000 quintuples in July and August.

We visited in early September, a time when the hordes were gone, the beaches nearly deserted and the weather still warm enough to enjoy the island's many charms.

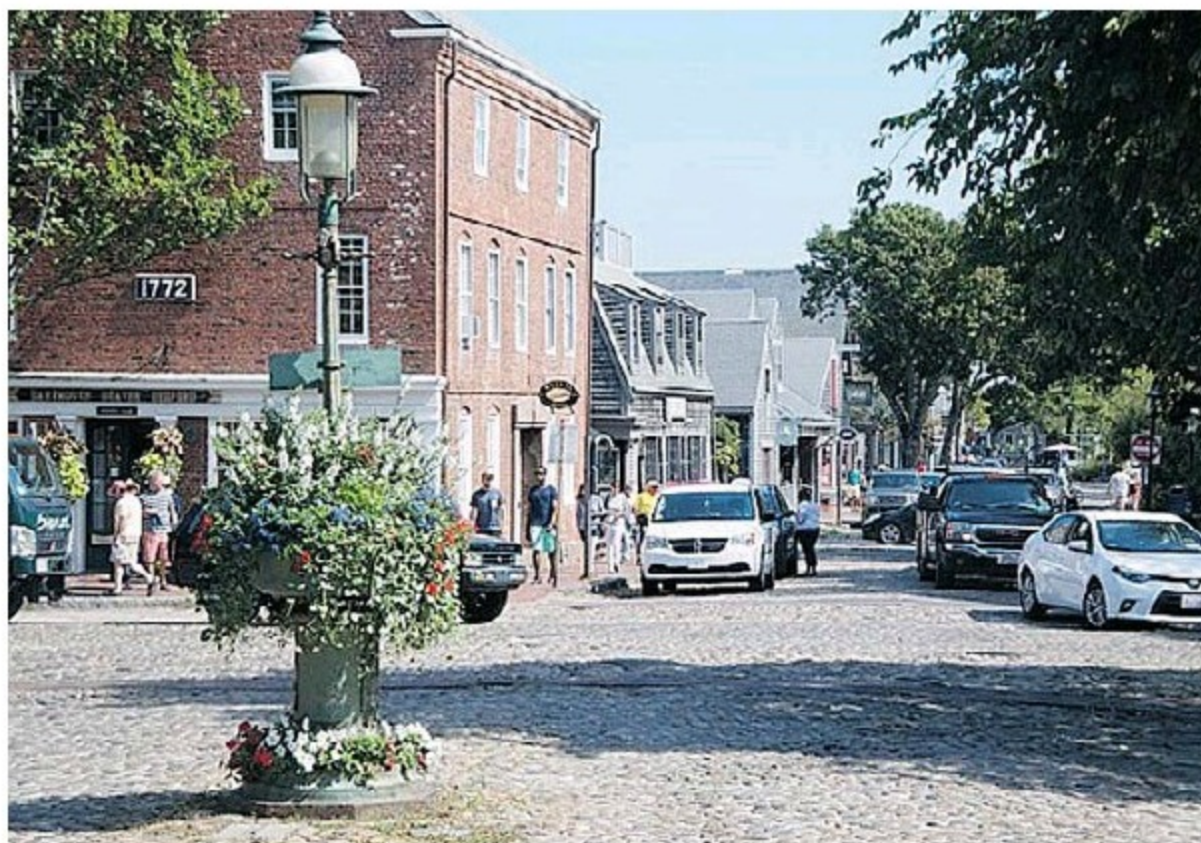
In the summer, Porter Air runs connections from Toronto to Nantucket. As we were travelling just after peak season, they flew us to Boston and we took a bus to Hyannis and then hopped aboard the ferry — a longer but more scenic way to get to the island.

At the ferry dock, we met a retired Canadian neurosurgeon who has maintained a summer house on Nantucket for decades.

"Can you recommend a place where we can eat that won't break the bank?" I asked.

He had to think about that one. But such places exist.

Although firmly middle class, we enjoyed a taste of luxury as we were hosted at the White Elephant, a landmark property a short walk from the ferry dock. Our jaws dropped as we walked into our suite. It looked as if it must have been featured in a design magazine and came complete with a coffee table picture book that profiled the art on the walls



and the artists who created it — that is to say: one book for the art in our room alone.

Starbuck was a well known family on Nantucket for years. But you will find no Starbucks coffee shops on the island. In fact, there are no food chains period. Nantucketers do not let them in. We did not miss them.

Instead, we ate at the Brotherhood of Thieves on our first night, a casual place in the village where they served delicious quahog chowder followed by

an expertly prepared broiled cod. My credit card survived the experience with only moderate damage.

Although the streets can be clogged at times with all manner of expensive wheels, the best way to explore the island is by bike. The hills are gentle and the many beaches within relatively easy reach.

Jetties Beach is on the edge of the town, only a five-minute ride from our hotel and has moderate surf that is friendly to swimmers. You can bike to

Surfside Beach on the south of the island in less than half an hour. The waves are bigger, but the scenery fine.

Nantucket is now reliving its whaling days because of the scheduled December release of the latest Ron Howard film *In the Heart of the Sea*, based upon an incident in 1820 when a rogue sperm whale rammed and sank a ship called the *Essex* — the inspiration for *Moby Dick*.

The acclaimed Nantucket Whaling Museum is running a special show highlighting the *Essex* story and I took an *Essex*-themed walking tour of the town, where guide Katie Kubie pointed out the houses of some of the surviving crew members.

I asked her whether first mate Owen Chase looked anything like Chris Hemsworth, the lantern-jawed actor better known as Thor, who is playing him in the movie.

"Oh no. Not at all!" she said. Surviving pictures of Chase show a dour old man who carried the trauma of the disaster with him the rest of his life.

When George Pollard, the captain of the *Essex*, returned home after the wreck the whole town turned out to watch as he trudged up the muddy Main



Today, Pollard would have had many options to pick up a pricey new wardrobe because the cobblestoned Main Street is now lined with tony shops. The house where he lived out his days as the town's night watchman is still standing, now a gallery.

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