HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS
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DREAMY VILLA VACATIONS
Grab the gang and go!
Nantucket offers thousands of visitors the warmest of holiday welcomes during its annual Christmas Stroll.

Winter Wonderland

Part holiday-shopping heaven, part old-fashioned block party, Nantucket’s annual Christmas Stroll brings locals and visitors together for a holly, jolly weekend.

By Tracey Minkin • Photographs by Reena Bammi

It’s a bracing winter day on Nantucket, and the narrow wharf is packed with people—shoveling their gray Hunter boots on ice-skated cobblestones, tightening crimson wool scarves, swapping jokes over clutched cups of coffee, and gripping the mittened hands of bundled-up, cherry-cheeked children. Everywhere, holding stop this sea of humanity like tiles on a roof, there are hats. Yes, sensible knit caps for a cold New England day, but also Santa hats, elf hats, reindeer antler hats, pirate hats, fedoras fashioned with holly and berries, and headbands anchoring tiny, teetering stacks of presents. And while this crowd may lack flash compared to the Nantucketers who’ve congregated at this very spot for hundreds of years to welcome their sea captains, scallopers, and lobstermen home, they are doing what has always been done here: eyeing the horizon.

Because they are waiting for Santa, and he’s coming by boat.

Such is the buoyant banjo of Nantucket’s Christmas Stroll. Created 41 years ago to lure shoppers across the water for a burst of economic goodwill before shuttering shops for the long winter, this holiday-themed weekend has evolved into much more than a promotion. While the island’s hundreds of independent businesses do welcome close to 32,000 shoppers who come to hunt and gather its distinctive, upscale wares, to bed down in its luxurious resorts and inns, and to sample its world-class restaurants, Nantucket also transforms into one big, jolly block party full of old-fashioned fun. It’s two parts Christmas Carol, one part Mardi Gras, with a twist of Mélissa. And it’s no wonder that for many, The Stroll, as it’s called, is an annual pilgrimage without which the holiday season cannot properly begin.

“It gets you kick-started into the whole Christmas thing,” Dale Albright tells me earlier that morning over breakfast. Albright and his wife are devoted strollers—back for the 14th year in a row; they’ve carried on a long-distance love affair with the island from New Jersey since their honeymoon. “We fell in love with...
It's a bracing winter day on Nantucket, and the narrow wharf is packed with people—stomping their gray Hunter boots on ice-sheened cobblestones, tightening crimson wool scarves, swapping jokes over clutched cups of coffee, and gripping the mitten-covered hands of bundled-up, cherry-cheeked children. Everywhere, bobbing atop this sea of humanity like gulls on a swell, there are hats. Yes, sensible knit caps for a cold New England day, but also Santa hats, elf hats, reindeer antler hats, pirate hats, fedoras festooned with holly and berries, and headbands anchoring ringlets, beading stacks of presents. And while this crowd may look flamboyant compared to the Nantucketers who've congregated at this very spot for hundreds of years to welcome their women, scallopers, and lobstersmen home, they are doing what has always been done here—eying the horizon.

Because they are waiting for Santa, and he's coming by boat.

Such is the insistent rhyme of Nantucket's Christmas Stroll. Created 41 years ago to lure shoppers across the water for a burst of economic good will before shuttering shops for the long winter, this holiday-themed weekend has evolved into much more than a promotion. While the island's hundreds of independent businesses do welcome close to 12,000 shoppers who come to hunt and gather its distinctive, upscale wares, to bed down in its luxurious resorts and inns, and to sample its world-class restaurants, Nantucket also transforms into one big, jolly block party full of old-fashioned fun. It's two parts Christmas Carol, one part Mardi Gras, with a twist of Melville. And it's no wonder that for many, The Stroll, as it's called, is an annual pilgrimage without which the holiday season cannot properly begin.

"It gets you kick-started into the whole Christmas thing," Dale Alright tells me earlier that morning over breakfast. Alright and his wife are devoted strollers—back for the 14th year in a row, they've carried on a long-distance love affair with the island from New Jersey since their honeymoon. "We fell in love with..."
the place," Dale says. Dorothy, meanwhile, gratefully, got up in tartan trousers and a luscious cream-colored turtleneck, eyes her extensive, handwritten list. She'll do all their holiday shopping here, she says. Like a thoroughbred straining at the gate, she's anxious to get going.

For some, this weekend will be a giddy anticipation of shopping with little pause. For most, though, it's a browser's delight. Every block of Nantucket's Historic downtown is lined with extravagant shop windows, gaily decorated doorways, twinkly lights, and legions of smallTRY trees along the narrow sidewalks, each decorated by local businesses and organizations.

The shops throw their doors open in welcome. Everywhere you go, someone is giving away free cups of cider, sips of wine, or nibbles of chocolate. Main Street—a cobblestone expanse that fills with vehi-
cles during the summer months—today fills with milling folks who linger for brass band serenades, Christmas carols, and photo opportunities with locals who've come out in their best holiday regalia. That fellow with the walrus mustache wearing the bare coat and wire-rimmed spectacles who has a Christmas wreath crowning his head like an L.L. Bean version of the Ghost of Christmas Present? He's patiently pa-
ing and has probably been P familiar, Instagrammed, and Pined more times today than Taylor Swift. And there are dogs—lots and lots of dogs. Labradors and golden retrievers herald their movements with sleigh bells jingling on their collars. Italian grayhounds and French bulldogs pout aristocratically in their tight-fitting sweaters. It's a parade at every level. Even the vintage pick-up truck parked nearby sports an enormous Santa hat on top of its cab.

"When you walk down the street, every-
one you see has smiles on their faces," says Eric Schenfeld, another New Jerseyite who is here for his first stroll with his wife, Barbara. "And it's so easy to meet people.” Indeed. In just a day, you'll be introduced to locals from every strata on the island, from a young fashion entrepreneur whose hand-sewn silk holiday fascinators are flying off the shelves at a local boutique to the patriarch of Young's Bicycle Shop (where a Christmas tree made from bike finders sparkles beside a model of a revolving fireplace). There are artisans and surfboard makers, carpenters and real estate agents. There's a couple who grew up playing at the same Nantucket bench more than 60 years ago. They both moved away and fell completely out of touch. This year they rediscovered each other, and, love, back on the same small island.

Meanwhile, in the peaceful sanctuary of Nantucket United Methodist Church, Sara Jones has collected hundreds of cloves and put them carefully on display for the weekend. Calling the exhibition "No Flowers in the Dark," Jones took donations at the door to help provide food and shelter, plus heating fuel assistance, for islanders in need. It's a sweetly gentle reminder that Nantucket remains a place called home by many—and that's what makes this holiday celebration of visitors and locals so unexpectedly heartwarming. It makes a weekend on a sunny, crescent, less than 30 miles offshore and laid open to icy blasts, downright warm.

Back at the wharf, a Coast Guard cutter has pulled assuredly to dock. With a heavy scallop shell trimming the enorme of his cup, Santa steps ashore like a festive holi-
day Neptune. Children finger his rich, red coat, and he beams down at them. With Mrs. Claus at his side, he draws the crowd along with him up the cobbledstone way, toward more revels and even more wonder, back into the heart of Nantucket.
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graced up in tartan trousers and a luxu-
rious cream-colored turtleneck. She had 
her extensive, handwritten list. She'd do all 
her holiday shopping here, she says, like a 
thrifty girl at the mall. 

For some, this weekend will be the big 
guantlet of shopping. With little time 
and energy, they have to make the most 
of the festivities. The streets are 
decorated with lights and trees, and 
many people are out shopping and 
mixing with others. 

One of the highlights of the weekend is 
the annual Christmas parade. The streets 
are lined with people of all ages, 
enjoying the festive atmosphere. 

The shops throw open their doors to 
welcome everyone. Everyone you see, 
someone is giving away free samples of 
candy, signs of wine, or nibbles of 
chocolate. It's a great day for 
shopping and mixing with others. 

And there are dogs—lots and lots of dogs. 
Labradors and golden retrievers herald 
their movements with sleigh bells jingling 
on their collars. The atmosphere is 
festive and joyful. 

Meanwhile, at the Nantucket United Methodist Church, 
Sara Jones has collected hundreds of 
Christmas cards and put them on display 
for the weekend. Calling the exhibition "No Room at the Inn," Jones hopes 
to remind people of the true meaning 
of the holiday season. 

At the end of the day, everyone is 
tired, but happy, having enjoyed 
the festive atmosphere. 

Where to Stay 
The sophisticated waterfront 
residence of the White Elephant Hotel 
and Village Residences offers 
expansive views and luxurious 
accommodations. The Union Street Inn 
provides a cozy and inviting atmosphere. 

Where to Eat 
When it comes to dining, 
Nantucket offers a variety of 
options, from rustic cafes to 
fine dining restaurants. The 
Island Institute at Great Harbor 
is a great place to enjoy 
local seafood. 

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