

As America's 'first resort town,' Nantucket is constantly reinventing its spirit

Nantucket's shores have been a haven for visitors for thousands of years and its pioneering spirit continues looking ahead to an ocean-fuelled future.

By **EMMA YARDLEY** Special to the Star
Fri., Aug. 18, 2017



NANTUCKET, MASS.—Getting its name from an ancient Wampanoag word meaning “away off shore,” this glacier-formed, elbow-shaped island, situated 50 kilometres south of Cape Cod, certainly feels like a world unto its own.

Blessed with warm Gulf Stream currents, a mild oceanic climate and a continuous sandy coastline, [Nantucket's shores](#) have been a haven for visitors for thousands of years — first as a seasonal fishing ground for Native Americans, and then, in the mid-1600s, for English settlers who'd turn the island into the world's largest whaling centre.

I'm getting this history lesson from Robert “Captain Rob” McMullen, a U.S. Coast Guard Certified captain, tour guide and Nantucket history buff at [The Wauwinet](#), a charming boutique inn on the edge of Nantucket Bay, as we drive across the island in the inn's beautifully restored cherry-red 1947 Chevy Woody.

“Nantucket's transformation (into a whaling hub) was very fast,” says McMullen. “By the late 1700s, there were 19 candle factories in town, with ships coming and going.”

A 199-ship fleet from Nantucket once hunted sperm whales around the world for their head oil, called spermaceti, which was used to make pure-white candles and long-lasting lamp oil. But the aromas from processing the spermaceti in the high summer heat weren't pleasant.

“It was a busy industrial port and it stunk in the summer,” says McMullen of the main town, also called Nantucket. It still boasts many of its original 18th- and 19th-century buildings and narrow cobblestone streets, which now house high-end hotels, boutiques and bistros.

But back then, those who could leave town did. Many made the 13-kilometre trek to Sconset, a picturesque village on the southeast corner of Nantucket, which is where we’re headed on one of The Wauwinet’s many complementary, Capt. Rob-led tours.

“It was basically the first resort town in America,” says McMullen, motoring past cranberry bogs and rolling wooded hills. “The fishermen began to bring their wives and children, just to get away and get some fresh air. Also, they were getting away from the vice that the sailors were bringing to town.”

Nantucket’s first English settlers originally hoped to make a life in Boston. But the strict Puritan government didn’t sit well with them or their Quaker beliefs, so they decided to move to freer shores in 1659. Some of these first settlers’ surnames will sound familiar, such as Folger (yes, like Folgers Coffee) and Macy (yes, like the department store).

They modelled this simple fishing village on the ones they remembered from their upbringing in England’s West County, says McMullen, who grew up on Nantucket himself.

“Even in its day, in the late 1600s, Sconset was a remarkable relic of an earlier era, as it looked and functioned just like a medieval village.”

Nantucket, which was designated a National Historic Landmark District in 1966, goes to great lengths to honour its past. For example, to help preserve the traditional esthetic of the island’s architecture, homeowners can only choose from 12 historically accurate colours to paint their exterior (although most still go with traditional bare cedar shingles and white trim).

But rather than being stodgy, Nantucket is instead defined by a spirit of constant reinvention.

When the whaling industry suddenly collapsed in mid-1800s thanks to the discovery of oil in Texas, Nantucketers were in need of a new industry. Locals began advertising off-island about the delights of sea bathing and freshly cooked seafood, and opened their homes to summer boarders. The Wauwinet saw its first guests in 1875, first as a beachside dinner destination for day-trippers from town serving up clam chowder and boiled lobster, and later as an inn.

Getting back to the fully renovated, modern-day inn after our driving tour of Sconset, we find ourselves in the kitchen of [the Wauwinet’s award-winning Toppers restaurant](#), which strives to continue the tradition of serving fresh, local sea-harvested specialties.

“We all love being surrounded by the ocean,” says Kyle Zachary, executive chef at Toppers restaurant, which hosts clambakes through the summer. “Seafood brings people together, a lot of times in celebrations.”

Zachary is showing a group of us how to shuck and prepare oysters that came from the choppy waters of Nantucket Bay just 100 metres from The Wauwinet’s front door.

That locality comes courtesy of the recently launched, family-run [Retsyo Oyster farm](#), one of eight oyster beds that form part of the latest burgeoning industry on Nantucket.

“Oysters are ocean filters, so it’s great for the water,” says Zachary. “This is the true terroir of Wauwinet, because oysters will take on the flavour of their surroundings, much like a grape would in a vineyard.”

After a few minutes fighting with the sharp-edged shell, I hear a satisfying pop and pull back the top with my oyster knife to expose the meat inside. I throw it back with a dash of whipped mignonette Zachary had just prepared and am happily met with a soft, salty flavour.

It's a true taste of Nantucket, a place where the nautical history is honoured, but a pioneering spirit continues looking ahead to an ocean-fuelled future. Not to mention that it's delicious.

Emma Yardley was hosted by Nantucket Island Resorts, which didn't review or approve this story.

When you go:

Get there: There are multiple flights per day going from Toronto to Boston's Edward L. Logan International Airport (BOS), which makes it easy to catch one of [Cape Air's many daily 45-minute connector flights](#) to Nantucket Memorial Airport (ACK). Prices are in the US \$140-\$300-range one way. There are also a number of seasonal ferry routes, if you prefer to take a car. More info: capeair.com, hyannistonantucket.com

Do this trip: While [The Wauwinet](#) is nearly 15 kilometres from the main town, once you're at the hotel everything you need is right there: a gourmet restaurant, relaxing spa, beaches on either side, bikes to borrow, complementary island tours and a town shuttle. Room rates begin at US \$275. More info: wauwinet.com

When to go: A lot of Nantucket businesses and accommodations are seasonal, including The Wauwinet, which is open from April until the end of October. The summertime highs hover in the 25-degrees-Celsius zone, with fresh breezes coming off the Atlantic, but the good weather brings big crowds. To get the island all to yourself (well, you and the 10,000 locals), consider visiting in the fall and spring shoulder seasons.

Do your research: nantucket-ma.gov, nantucketislandresorts.com

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TRAVEL



The Nantucket spirit



EMMA YARDLEY FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Nantucket Bay has a thriving scallop season from November until March each year, where locals fish early in the morning before their regular work shift to supplement their winter income.

Crack open an oyster and breathe in some history in America’s first resort town

EMMA YARDLEY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

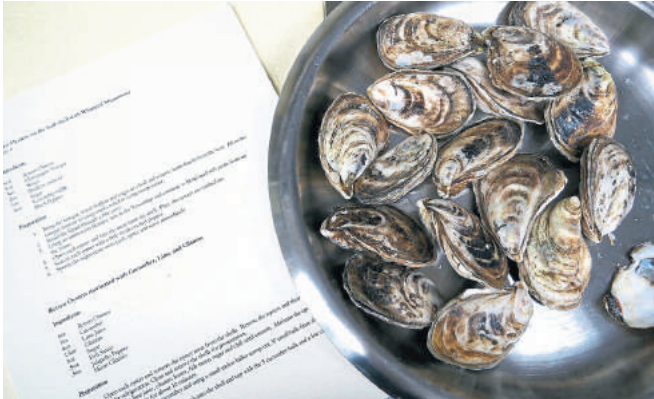
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MASSACHUSETTS continued on T4



A plate of oysters, which executive chef Kyle Zachary has marinated with cucumber, lime and cilantro, waits to be consumed by a group of seafood enthusiasts at Topper’s — an award-winning restaurant that serves fresh, local sea-harvested specialties.



The “Wauwinet Woody” is a 1947 Chevy Woodie that’s used to tour guests around Sconset, a historic fishing village on the northwest side of Nantucket.

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>> TRAVEL

Coming together to celebrate the sea

MASSACHUSETTS from T1

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NANTUCKET ISLAND RESORTS

The Wauwinet, which sits on Nantucket’s Great Point, has been welcoming guests for 142 years.

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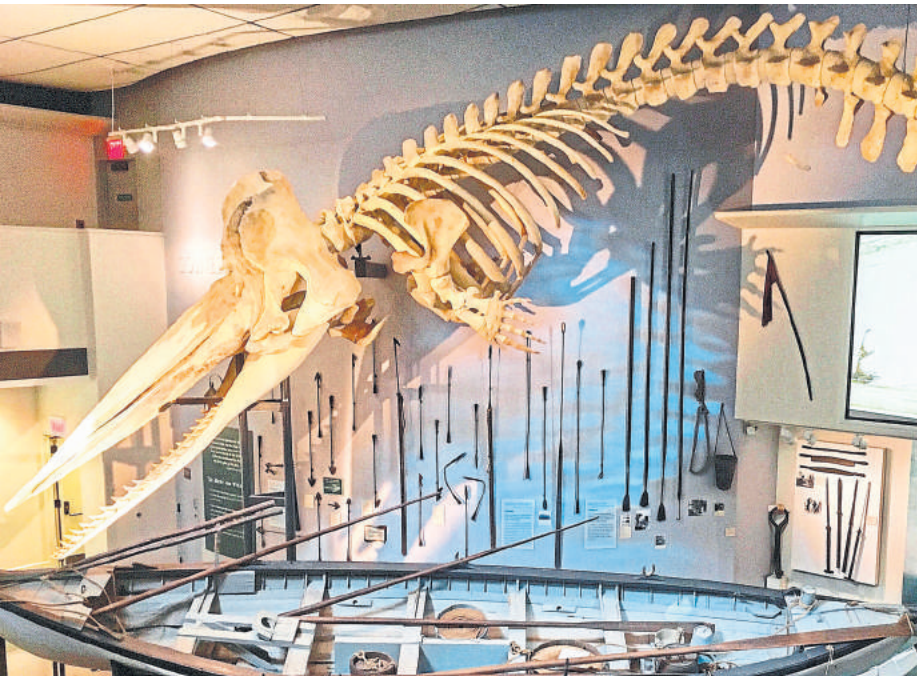
EXPERIENCE NANTUCKET HISTORY WITH SIX UNIQUE ACTIVITIES

EMMA YARDLEY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

NANTUCKET, MASS.—Sitting pretty off the coast of mainland Massachusetts, Nantucket is an island rich in maritime history and blessed with natural beauty. Its iconic cedar-shingled homes, cobblestone streets and spectacular beaches have made it a hot holidaying spot for more than 125 years — here’s why.



Brewery: You may think an hour is enough time to taste a brew or two at Nantucket’s only craft brewery, Cisco Brewers, but it’s not — schedule the whole afternoon to enjoy this local hangout and you won’t be disappointed. The wide range of delicious Nantucket-inspired brews such as Grey Lady Ale and Sankaty Light Lager will draw you in, but the chill atmosphere of friendly bartenders, live music, food trucks and roaming dogs will make you stay. More info: ciscobrewers.com



Whaling Museum: To get a good grounding on what made Nantucket what it is today, make the comprehensively curated Nantucket Whaling Museum your first stop. Housed in an old candle-making factory in the historic downtown, learn how the island’s industry grew on the backs of whalers who hunted sperm whales for their lucrative head oil, called spermaceti. It also features a 14-metre sperm whale skeleton, which made an appearance in the last episode of the *Gilmore Girls* reboot. More info: nha.org



Luxury hotel: It’s all the little extras that make the luxury White Elephant hotel such a relaxing island retreat. A fruit-filled iced-water carafe in the lobby provides refreshment upon arrival and the complimentary afternoon port and cheese in the library sets the tone going into the evening (the on-site Brant Point Grill makes a mean surf and turf, featuring Maine beef and lobster). Plus, the staff really go the extra mile to make sure your experience is the best it can be. More info: whiteelephanthotel.com



Shop: If you’re seeking that quintessential Nantucket look for your home, mother-daughter owners Debbie and Jillian Fraker will help you find just the right elements at the Lion’s Paw. Whether it’s an end table handcrafted by a local 92-year-old furniture maker or a set of whimsical Coral & Tusk embroidered narwhal pillows, browsing the shop’s beautiful displays will make you want to run to the real-estate agents so you can decorate your own cedar-shake-covered seaside cottage immediately. More info: thelionspawnantucket.net



Vintage: In a retail manifestation of “follow your bliss,” currentVintage owner Elisabeth English left the restaurant industry and decided to open a seasonal store selling her two loves: vintage clothing and wine vintages. Half of the seaside shop stocks hard-to-find (and, quite likely, one-of-a-kind) frocks, tops and accessories from brands such as Liberty of London and Lacoste, while the other half is filled with wine from Sonoma to Sicily, ranging in price from \$15 (U.S.) to \$250. More info: currentvintage.com



Book shop: With its diverse selection of Nantucket-themed tomes, Nantucket Bookworks is the place to go if you’re looking for a literary souvenir from the island — plus it also stocks bestsellers for easy holiday reading. It’s clear this store is there to support the community (and not just visitors) with a variety of in-store events, a water-bottle-filling station, healthy, locally made snacks for sale and a colourful room at the back just for kids, complete with toadstool-shaped reading stools. More info: nantucketbookpartners.com

Gastropub: Taking its name from the title of an 1844 pamphlet written on Nantucket, attacking those who still supported slavery, the dimly lit gastropub Brotherhood of Thieves continues an island tradition of individualism and eccentricity — albeit on a smaller (more delicious) scale. With ingredients from local, organic growers and producers, dishes like the Brotherhood house salad and lobster bisque, which comes with a puff pastry top and huge chunks of this delectable crustacean, are sure to delight. More info: brotherhoodofthieves.com



Historical building: As the birthplace of Maria Mitchell, the first female astronomer in the U.S., the Mitchell House museum hosts a variety of programs focusing on the daily life of the Mitchell family, who bought this traditionally built Nantucket house in 1818. Mitchell was an advocate for women’s education, going on to become first woman fellow elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the first professor of astronomy at Vassar College — she clearly had the pioneering spirit that defines Nantucket. More info: mariamitchell.org
Emma Yardley was hosted by Nantucket Island Resorts, which didn’t review or approve this story.

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