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BLOWN AWAY

Clover Stroud visits Nantucket Island, where she discovers deep, historical roots beneath the picture-perfect streets

The far northern tip of Nantucket Island is a thin spit of land stretching into the Atlantic, a distant lighthouse the only full stop on an empty stretch of sand and limitless sea. This is Great Point, where white beach is fringed with chips of shells, and wind ripples the grasses in the low dunes as relentlessly as the surf chopping against the beach. I was there in October - low season - so my only company was a group of dog-eyed seals.

Halfway down, the spit curves round, encircling the water stretching to the harbour. The moneyed bustle of Nantucket Town is on the far side of the lagoon, but I was beguiled by the empty melancholy of this distant spot, where piping plovers screamed overhead and the belly of cold sky stretched to the far flats of the ocean. This area is Wauwinet, named after a Native American chief who controlled it in the seventeenth century. Nantucket has the highest concentration of Native American names in the States, and is patched with a stamp of lyrical but unfamiliar Indian memories: Siasconset, Pocomo, Tuckernuck, Miacomet, Wesco.

Unlike so much of the States, where past and present overlap with seamless continuity, Nantucket is dense with layers of juxtaposing history. The Wampanoag Indians left their mark, but Nantucket became a place synonymous with the whaling industry, dominated by Quakers. In the middle of the seventeenth century, those Indian names were replaced by Europeans - Coffin, Starbuck, Nicholson, Gardner. They discovered the riches in spermaceti - the bright-burning oil found in the head of the sperm whale - and sent thousands of ships from the island to hunt this giant. Until the discovery of kerosene and petroleum, Nantucket was the whaling capital of the world -

and London, to where nearly half of all the oil was exported, was the best-lit city in the world.

Nantucket is tiny, but salty memories of leviathan are everywhere, its oily, epic history permeating the knife-sharp air. I sat in the United Methodist Church arched with beams brought to the island on whaling ships. Panelled balconies with glossy mahogany rails running above the pews sighed with shadows of the sturdy and industrious families who'd prayed here. Walking over cobbles brought from Gloucester, I passed elegant brick houses built by merchants and whaling captains in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Enclosed walkways looking to the ocean, known as widow's walks, topped these houses, where women would watch for the return of their husbands. With so few men around, Nantucket was a progressive place for women, who defined its practical and forceful moral character. The first US female astrologer, Maria Mitchell, lived on Vestal Street, and Mary Coffin Starbuck, who came to the island in 1660, became town leader. Lucretia Mott, early champion of women's suffrage, lived in Nantucket and was known as 'the bright morning star of intellectual freedom in America'.

Today, Nantucket - a place so pretty that Walt Disney modelled his vision of cartoon cuteness on its Main Street - is playground to the rich and richer, but old and new sit together with easy harmony. Those whaling families now work as tour guides and hotel owners, their names joined by a new roll call - Hilfiger, Heinz, Proctor and Gamble - who come to play in the summer.

On Main Street, you can buy a Versace jacket for thousands of dollars, or watch local life in the drug-store on the corner, where mothers juggle buggies and groceries, and local teenagers text one another

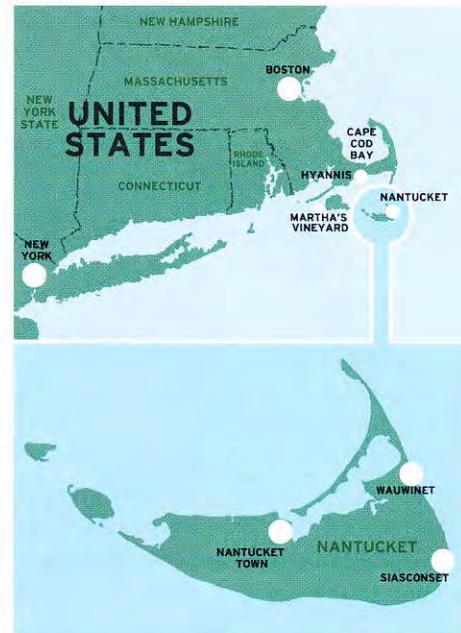


Travel

over chocolate sodas. Fancy restaurants dot the streets, but the best place for seafood is the Straight Wharf Fish Store. Here you can eat soft-shell-crab sandwiches or lobster rolls on a bench by the water, watching old men, wearing tweed jackets and characteristic Nantucket Red trousers, rustling through the local newspapers in the sun. At the southern tip of the island is the chocolate-box village of Siasconset, with white cedar-shingle cottages with roses tumbling over their doors and weathervanes shaped like whales. Their 'simplicity' belies their position on some of the most valuable land on the entire island.

Daffodil season - before the population triples or quadruples with incoming tourists - is the time to visit, or autumn, when amber sunsets shimmer over the island and the leaves are falling. And for all the prettiness of Nantucket Town, Wauwinet was the place I'd return to again and again. The Wauwinet Hotel is also pleasingly stamped with local history; it first opened in the mid 1800s as a restaurant to serve 'shore dinners', before rooms were added for guests in 1876, and is deeply comforting, drenched in New England charm. It was from here that I walked out to Great Point, imagining a horizon silhouetted with whaling ships, sailing away from Nantucket on another high-seas adventure, leaving something of their mystery for me to discover today □

THIS PICTURE The lighthouse at Great Point is on the far northern tip of Nantucket Island. **RIGHT** The Whaling Museum in Nantucket Town (top left) is an essential part of the island's history, as is boat and maritime life (centre). An empty stretch of beach (bottom left) leads out to Great Point. A fisherman's cottage in the village of Siasconset (bottom right)



Ways & means Clover Stroud travelled as a guest of Seasons in Style (01244-202000; www.seasonsinstyle.com). Seven nights at the Wauwinet Hotel, in a double room, B&B, costs from about £1,595 per person, based on two adults sharing, including flights and transfers.