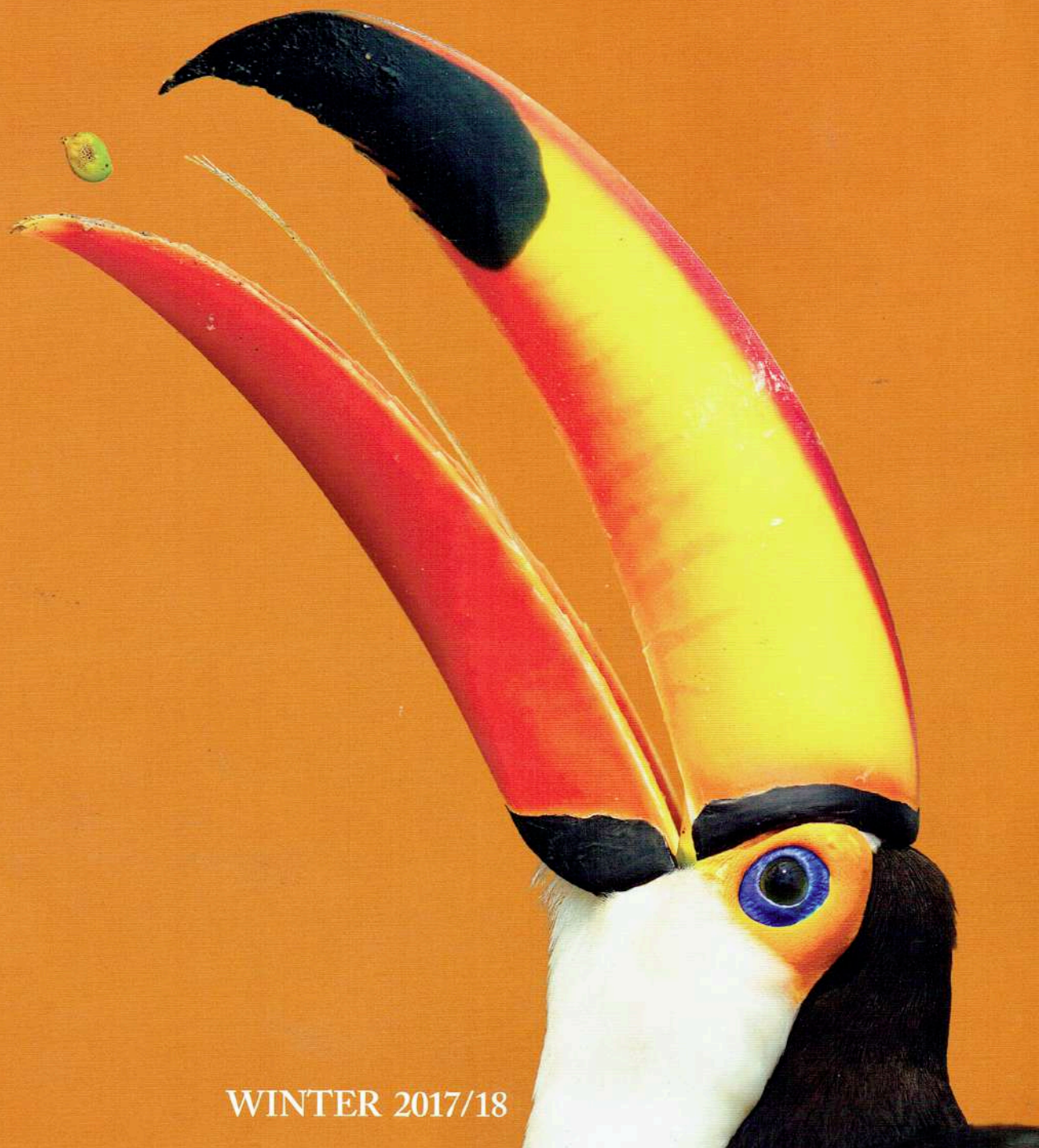


COUNTRY LIFE[®] TRAVEL

It's the little things that count



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As leaves turn across the pond

Lobsters, falling leaves and Gatsby-esque guesthouses: Nick Hammond experiences autumn in New England, USA, and finds echoes of a coastline closer to home

THE cold hiss of the surf mingles with the salty, sweet tang of the ocean and grand dwellings line the cliff road like the watch-houses of old. You could be admiring an affluent stretch of Devonian coastline; a slice of the South Hams, perhaps. This, however, is on a bigger scale—it's America, after all—and although Rhode Island is the nation's smallest state, it still packs a punch.

Belle of the ball and beaming pale gold across the Ivy League hamlet of Watch Hill is Ocean House Hotel (00 1 855 678 0364; www.oceanhouseri.com). Restored to its former glory by the mind and pocket of financier and local Charles 'Chuck' Royce, the hotel is a paean to a former age—and it's wonderful. The corridors are lined with pithy cartoons from the likes of Ludwig Bemelmans and Josephine Maynard, the original wooden elevator car has been refurbished and retained and even the stone fireplace, first built in 1868, has been lifted, stone by stone, numbered and rebuilt on restoration.

However, this is no picture postcard, preserved in aspic. State-of-the-art OH! Spa is brainwashingly relaxing, the food in five

restaurants ranges from high-end small plates to hearty local favourites (it's impossible to grow tired of clam chowder, right?) and the private beach *cabañas*, 'secret' doughnut and sweet shop and verandah rocking chairs offer all the R&R you could wish for. Although a cruise down the coast to sister hotel Weekapaug Inn, in a complimentary convertible Mercedes Roadster, is worth getting out of bed for, too.

The whole point of being at Ocean House, much like Salcombe, for instance, is the sea. You can look at it, swim in it (great whites are usually found out in deeper water, apparently) or ride atop it perched in President Roosevelt's private yacht. At least that's what I did. *Aphrodite* is usually reserved for Mr Royce and his family, but I was fortunate enough to be invited aboard his mahogany-clad, gold-railed nymph of the sea for a leisurely sunset pootle.

The light in these parts—as in Devon, on those unique, crystal-clear, burnished days—is beloved by artists. The most sensational demarcation of sea and sky slipped before me across the limpid waters of Little Naragansett Bay as *Aphrodite* chugged landwards.



I've fished for mackerel from the pier at Plymouth—and tremendous fun it was, too, with schools of tiger-striped predators visible from the quayside as I pitched my spinner among their dashing flanks—but it's hard to compare it to the sea fishing I experienced here off Westerly. In a gentle swell and under the warmth of an Indian summer, I was whisked up the Quonochontaug Pond and out into the Atlantic by Marc Bullinger, the resident wildlife expert at Weekapaug Inn (00 1 855 679 2995; www.weekapauginn.com).

After scouting distant flocks of diving seabirds, we found a sizeable subaquatic bait ball of small fry. Where there are little fish, there are also big fish. Soon, I was doing considerable battle with a reel-stripping heavyweight of a bluefish.

Steal further across the water on yet another boat—this time, the ferry that crosses from Hyannis to Nantucket—and you'll

Facing page: The White Elephant Hotel in Nantucket. Above: Brant Point Lighthouse off Nantucket is a welcome sight in a Grey Lady fog

meet the Grey Lady. She creeps across the water shrouded in a veil, blocking out the sun before you realise she's doing it. A familiar sight on Nantucket, this eerie sea fret reminded me of a night once spent in a mist-bound Cornish fishing village, the mournful hoot of the foghorn sounding across the damp, still air.

My arrival at the White Elephant Hotel (www.whiteelephanthotel.com; 00 1 800 445 6574) was thus enshrouded, adding a mystical, *Hound of the Baskervilles* shiver to my first night on the old whaling island. By morning, the Grey Lady had left and this funky little outpost was shining in all its 12-palette glory.

Local building regulations stipulate that houses can only be painted in one of a dozen colours on the island and the bleached grey shingle used by the Quakers who first

settled here still predominates today. Occasional splashes of pale yellow and dawn blue are reminiscent of Cornwall's Atlantic coast—parts of surfer-chic Newquay, perhaps?

Nantucket certainly fits that vibe. Each mini marina and mooring station dotted around the harbour houses a former fishing shack, now transformed into a boutique bolthole. There are no chain stores, no fancy signs, just row after row of jewellery, antiques, T-shirts and New England memorabilia. Bring your credit cards.

The White Elephant Hotel is Jeeves to your Wooster; unobtrusive, insightful and ever-reliable. As evening falls here, retire to the outside deck and make full use of the famous New England lobster on offer. The highlight of my visit was a killer lobster mac and cheese, although I have to say

a lobster bloody Mary gave it a run for its money the following morning.

Nantucket folk have a contented air about them, as if they know they're onto a good thing. They are. You can feel the positive energy across the harbour here and in the bars and restaurants. It's a can-do kind of town.

The author travelled with Aer Lingus, which currently operates up to twice-daily services to Boston via Dublin, where travellers can pre-clear USA immigration before boarding their flight. Fares from London to Boston from £199 each way. Visit www.aerlingus.com. The Heathrow Express at Paddington runs a fast train to Heathrow and back every 15 minutes, with special advance fares and kids-go-free offers. Visit www.heathrowexpress.com for details