

ULTRATRAVEL

OUT OF THIS WORLD

IN LOVE WITH ITALY

*From the charms of Capri
to the glamour of Milan*

BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

A sky-high safari in Kenya

THAI SPICE

Get a flavour of Bangkok

RHODE TRIP

Timeless charm in America's
smallest state



LIGHTS UP
This page: Brant Point
Lighthouse in Nantucket.
Opposite: seafood
splendour at
Weekapaug Inn



LOOKING FOR NEW ENGLAND

Rhode Island has long been overshadowed by other, flashier coastal areas – but now luxury and style are fused with old-world charm in America's smallest state

By Stefanie MARSH Photographs by Anthony CROOK

Rhode Island squats on the edge of the Atlantic, squashed between Massachusetts and Connecticut. Though it has one exceptional claim to fame – it was the first of the 13 colonies to renounce its allegiance to the British Crown – it remains little known among non-Americans. Tourists, if they say they've heard of Rhode Island at all, are usually confusing it with Long Island. A not insignificant error: Long Island, a skinny peninsula in New York State, is where the Hamptons are and *The Great Gatsby* was set.

But sooner or later in the lifespan of any tourist hotspot, even the upscale ones like The Hamptons, the spotlight begins to fade, then swivels away, distracted by the search for something a bit different, less written-about, "new". Right now, it's beginning to shine a cautious light on a strip of coast on the southwestern point of tiny Rhode Island. An area with spectacular ocean views, an evocative name – Watch Hill – and a past to match.

The first outward sign that Watch Hill was somehow "back on the map" came in 2013, when the millennial pop star Taylor Swift bought a \$17 million oceanfront

home here. Why had Swift chosen Rhode Island? Well-travelled folk began their research. They began to understand how pretty it can be. They found out that its capital, Providence, is one of the culinary hotspots of the United States. More importantly, they discovered how easy it is to get to Rhode Island, not just from New York or Boston, by car or by train, but by sea, from most of coastal New England's beauty hot spots – Block Island, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Rhode Island's ferries are kings of interstate navigation. Through fresh eyes, they saw that America's smallest state also functions as a gateway to some of the country's natural treasures.

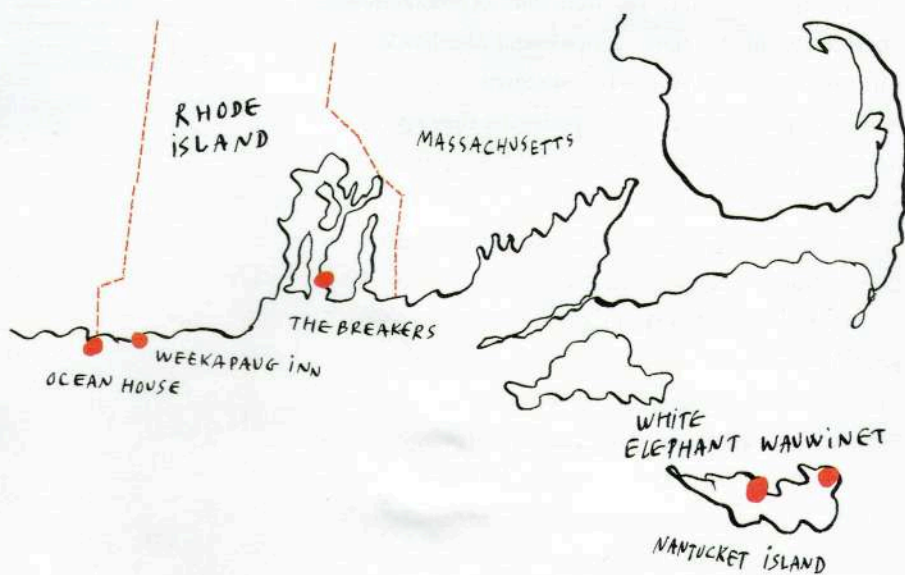
I wanted to go to Rhode Island and I wanted to go back to Nantucket, an understated Wasp paradise. I'd visited in the 1980s but I'd since been surprised to see it described as "the St Barts of New England". And I liked the thought of being able to go to both without having to set foot on another plane once I'd stepped off my long-distance flight from the UK. I envisaged the journey as a luxurious long weekend. How romantic to travel direct from Penn Station in the centre of Manhattan to ►



Westerly, at Watch Hill, on a train built on tracks once owned and expanded by Cornelius Vanderbilt, the first true American tycoon. The Breakers, the colossal summer house he built for his family, is also on Rhode Island.

Even if you know nothing about America's Gilded Age, you know as you approach Ocean House hotel's grand exterior – with its rolling lawns, its wraparound porches, its painstakingly made replica of the original Mansard roof – that you're in some sort of deluxe time warp. It helps to know Ocean House's past to understand why exactly the hotel does its job of recreating a bygone era so well. By the mid-1850s, Watch Hill had become the exclusive summer resort of a select group of wealthy families, an old-money summer colony made of enormous "cottages". Ocean House, the 159-room rangy, over-the-top, Victorian-style mega hotel, built in 1868, formed its centrepiece. Douglas Fairbanks, David Niven and Jean Harlow made films and spent downtime here,

Both Ivanka Trump and Hillary Clinton checked in to the Ocean House in the run-up to the 2016 election – on the same weekend



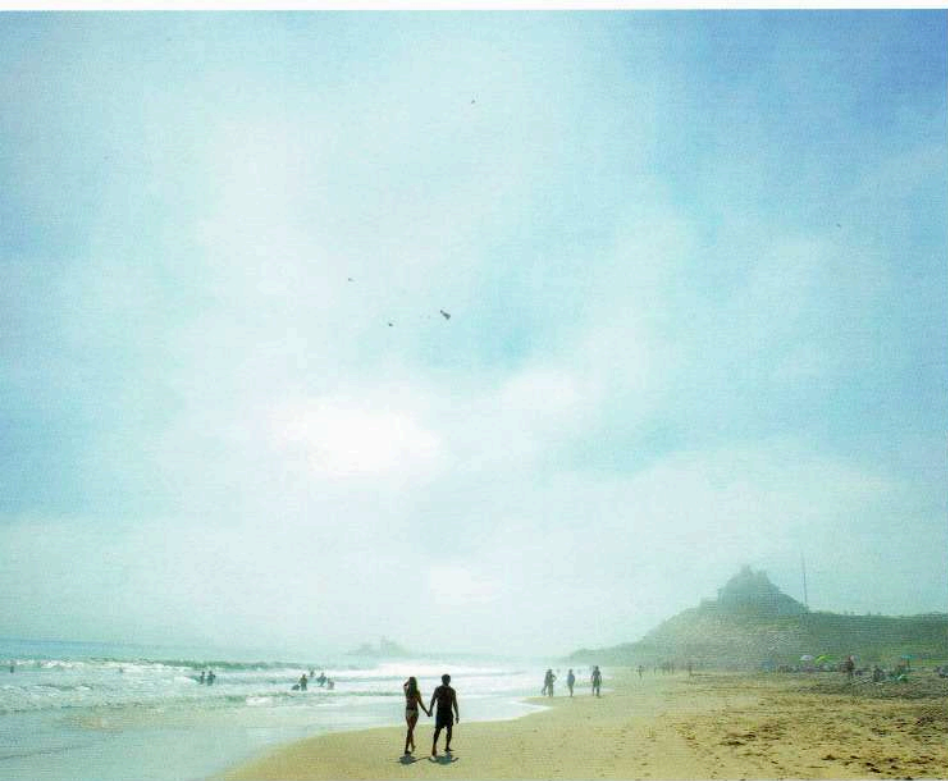
ISLE BE SEEING YOU
From top: Nantucket's harbour; the stately elegance of Ocean House hotel in Rhode Island, complete with croquet lawn

but by the end of the 20th century, hurricanes and fires had destroyed most of the grand old buildings around it. Somehow, the increasingly decrepit and vacant hotel stayed standing. It was bought in 2003 by a developer.

But the citizens of Westerly have always loved their old hotel, even when it became unusable, and the outcry when its new owner announced he was going to raze it became so voluble that he abandoned the project. Ocean House was sold on to a fund manager, Charles Royce, who had holidayed in the area as a child and had a mad dream of restoring the dysfunctional landmark to its former splendour. Royce's architects told wary locals that to save Ocean House it would have to be destroyed then reimagined as a 57-room paean to its forerunner. The fact that Royce, clearly a history fanatic, salvaged the hotel's wood-panelled elevator, its front desk, its phone booth and over 5,000 of the original furnishings and artefacts and integrated them all into the new structure was the stroke of genius that got him the green light. By the time Swift had moved in nearby, and a century after its heyday, the Ocean House hotel, now complete with fine dining and a 12,000 sq ft underground spa and pool, had become one of the finest retreats in America for a second time. No expense spared for this journey into the past.

After the long flight, two nights here was paradise. The windows, through which every room has a sea view, are perfect copies of the originals. Inside, modern building materials have been spurned as often as possible in favour of wood. Outside, the surrounding grounds are pleasantly walkable. I spent the next morning nosing around the likeable small towns of Westerly and Mystic (a fraction over the border into Connecticut), their small shops, cafés and restaurants revived when Rhode Island's tourism industry began to get its groove back. I mentioned the cuisine in Providence, but it's fair to say that it's extremely difficult to go anywhere at all in New England nowadays without eating consistently sensational food – whether you're in the market for fine dining, simple seafood, vegetarian or traditional local fare such as clam chowder or doughnut pizza (no state has a closer relationship with the doughnut than Rhode Island). Definitely a foodie's holiday, if you want it to be.

I spent lunch and an untaxing afternoon the next day a mile down the road, exploring Winnapaug Pond, a two-and-a-half-mile-long saltwater lake, where you can kayak and fish and take waterborne nature tours. On one of its banks sits Weekapaug Inn, laid-back sister property to Ocean House – it's very relaxing to kick back on the lawn on one of its Adirondack chairs. I loved the Inn's famous lobster rolls, but less so the smell of them being boiled permeating through the building. Gratefully I crept back to Ocean House to watch a man on the hotel's formal croquet lawn knock a ball about, and a cocktail-sipping couple drift off on a bespoke one-hour luxury cruise of the coast. Several members of staff told me the story of how Ivanka Trump and Hillary Clinton both >>



WHALE OF A TIME
From left: daytime fog on Nantucket's beach; Weekapaug Inn's celebrated lobster roll; the cobbled stones on Nantucket's Main Street are said to be ballast for whaling ships



checked in to the Ocean House in the run-up to the 2016 election. The fact they inadvertently did so on the same weekend may have put a dent in their R&R, but undoubtedly brought Rhode Island to the world's attention.

On day three, we left for Nantucket. We did so via The Breakers in Newport, a monument to the then-emerging American upper class. It is five floors built on a 125,339 sq ft plot, a museum-size Italian Renaissance-style colossus containing mosaics, a ballroom plus fireplaces and other knick-knacks imported from French châteaux. It's a New England "must-see" – but only if you're really interested in money. Down the road is Beechwood, the supposedly haunted Astor family summer estate. Vanderbilt and his great rival, John Jacob Astor, longed for the hereditary British titles their vast fortunes could not buy, so they sent their unmarried daughters to England to snag a duke. The often feckless new husbands would be hauled back to the States to live a life of philandering ease. These are sad stories, unmitigated, I felt, by the boastful grandeur of these heirlooms: footnotes, at best, to a Henry James novel. I was glad to leave them behind.

It's a one-hour crossing to Nantucket on the fast ferry. The ocean milled around us and I looked out for humpbacks, now safe from Nantucket's former commercial whaling industry (*Moby Dick* is set here), which built fortunes, claimed hundreds of human lives and went into decline in the 1850s. Many of Nantucket's petite wooden seafront houses have platforms on their roofs known as "widow's walks", from where wives of seamen would watch – sometimes in vain – for their husbands to return from their year-long ocean journeys.

I tried to recall the Nantucket I'd experienced on trips here 30 years ago: I remembered the wide, often magically foggy beaches, eating lobster, exploring the

Down the road is Beechwood, the supposedly haunted Astor family summer estate



ISLAND LIFE

● Rhode Island

Ocean House, Watch Hill (oceanhouseri.com), from £285, room-only.
The Weekapaug Inn (weekapauginn.com), from £245, room-only.

● Nantucket

The White Elephant (whiteelephanthotel.com), from £165, room-only.
The Wauwinet (wauwinet.com), from £140, room-only.

● Getting there

British Airways flies from Heathrow to Boston, from £611 return, and from Heathrow to Providence and Rhode Island, via Philadelphia or Chicago (with onward travel on American Airlines), from £681 return. Visit ba.com.

island's hidden corners by bicycle on its network of easy cycling routes. I remembered the righteous iron grip Nantucket's Historic District Commission kept on the Quaker shingle-style architecture and the cobblestones of Main Street, and how this preserved in aspic the fantasy of a long-ago time where chain shops and tower blocks didn't exist. Nantucket was a salve against the horrors of modern-day life for the gazillionaire Wall Street bankers and Capitol Hill politicians who holidayed annually on the island with their families. Could this genteel retreat really have become "the St Barts of New England"? The signs were ominous: I'd seen a newspaper article that claimed a Kardashian had bought a \$50 million house there...

Our arrival in busy but not manic Nantucket Town was perfectly timed – on a bright afternoon. Nothing so far suggested St Barts. The pretty independent shops were more numerous than before but I was happy to see that the Historic District Commission clearly still ruled. Main Street was still all huge bumpy cobblestones. Young's Bicycle Shop, The Whaling Museum, The Lobster Trap and Murray's Toggery Shop remained central to a visit here. It's easy to feel a tenderness for this place, once you get to know what it's gone through. The island was already suffering great economic hardships after the whaling industry went into decline when on July 13, 1846 the "Great Fire", fuelled by whale oil and lumber, devastated the town. Hundreds were left homeless; 40 acres were destroyed. Somehow it's not a place you feel it's right to splash your cash. Hunting for seashells on Dionis Beach on the north shore and visiting Coskata-Coatue Wildlife Refuge make for more satisfactory pursuits.

I kept my eye out for a Kardashian but instead I got John Kerry and Jack Welch as "famous Nantucket holidaymakers". The nightlife here consists of The Club Car, a decades-old piano bar. In summer, day drinking (especially at Sandbar on Jetties beach) I read, is "essential".

The White Elephant is a chain of hotels but it has a nice, simple range of properties and that's where I stayed. Again, I ate fantastically: restaurants have upped their game to an extraordinary extent since the 1980s and you'll find the gamut – hearty sandwich-and-smoothie shacks such as the Lemon Press, to Michelin-starred chefs at the new Greydon House hotel. My favourite meal was at the lovingly furnished boutique Wauwinet hotel, tucked away almost as far north as you can go on the Island.

New England wraps you in cotton wool without suffocating you in the process. Nostalgia without gloopy sentimentality. Sensational food. Beautiful walks. Clean air. A reminder of many of the things America is really good at. The deference to the past gives the whole region a mature, understated dignity which makes it a very relaxed place to visit – provided you don't come accessorised with too much make-up, platform heels, plastic surgery and logos. Those would be considered vulgar novelties, better suited to somewhere else. Somewhere like The Hamptons or St Barts.