

Travel

# Reuniting with Nantucket, 20 years later

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Brant Point Light, at the entrance to Nantucket Harbor, dates from 1746. (Amiee White Beazley)

No one minded that the water was cold. No one hesitated, stood frozen, arms crossed, while waves lapped up to their knees, letting body parts adjust to the temperature. Instead, all eight of us, grown women, ran to the water and dove headfirst into the surf, the sand beneath our feet falling off into oblivion, our bodies bobbing over the tops of waves, others cresting overhead. I laughed, a real laugh, one from the gut born of joy, like I was a kid again. Nantucket will do that to a girl.

Twenty years after spending a final summer in Nantucket living together and working following our senior years of college, eight of us had returned — now wives, mothers, still friends — to spend a long weekend together at the scene of the crime.

### Star of the sea

Nantucket, once the “Whaling Capital of the World,” is everything a travel destination should be: distinct, richly historic in both culture and architecture, a small town with big ideas, and just a little difficult to get to, which is why this small spit of sand — just 48 square miles — is the choice destination of 60,000 people each summer.

For three high seasons beginning in 1993, I lived in Nantucket doing any work I could get my hands on. I nannied, cleaned floors and toilets, polished barroom brass, bagged groceries, sold flowers on the back of a truck on Main Street, tended gardens and, finally, drove taxicabs. I wove myself into the fabric of the island, and I, like so many others, felt wedded to this place. But today is different. Today I am arriving as a visitor instead of an islander.

As I stepped off the ferry onto Steamboat Wharf, it hit me: I was 20 years older. How could this be? I still felt like a kid fresh from college. Where had the time gone? I had changed, the world had changed, and in those years, the plans I once had for my life had changed. Had my beloved island changed, too?



Friends arrive at the Nantucket home of artist Christine Schoettle. (Amiee White Beazley)

I drove through town, past Steamboat Pizza where I delivered pies one summer, and onto the cobbled roads paved with stones rumored to have been used as ballast for the ships that made 19th-century Nantucket both rich and famous, and past the taxi stand where I spent my

final summer on Nantucket carrying fares from one end of the island to another. With the first smell of beach roses, a glimpse of gray-shingled buildings and tourists crowding brick sidewalks, I was transported back to the summer of 1995 — before cellphones and GPS, fast ferries from the mainland and shuttle buses on the island.

I moved to Nantucket with a Syracuse classmate, attracted by its endless summers, multi-generational community and the feeling it was a place that time forgot. Today, we are set to reassemble after all these years apart on the island’s south side, at the classmate’s summer home.

It’s no small task to assemble eight women who live throughout the country, some as far away as Los Angeles, who must abandon small children for three days to get to this island 27 miles from Cape Cod. But one by one each of my Nantucket summer sisters arrived on the island. Some by ferry, of which there are two main lines, the Steamship Authority and Hy-Line Cruises, and fast one, the traditional two-hour-plus slow ferry and the 60-minute two one. Others by plane, via connectors up and down the East Coast.

As soon as we are together the long travel day is worth it. The time machine we’re riding is fueled by stories, laughter and legally purchased, never-ending glasses of rosé — better than any wine we might have drunk on a student’s budget back in the day.

Aside from one another, it is Nantucket we are here to see — our friend who sheltered us from the real world long ago, and the place from which our lives took off.

### Old haunts

Our first evening “on island” we head to Millie’s, on Nantucket’s west end. Once called the Westender, Millie’s is best known for two things: sunsets and its Madaket Mystery rum punch. It still has a small free-standing market — although with a noticeable facelift — from which those living in this part of the island can get staples instead of hauling 20 minutes into town. As it happens it is Town, a restaurant in a historic home (the entire island is a designated National Historic Landmark District, with more than 800 pre-Civil-War houses), where we head next. By the time we arrive, the tables have been cleared from the dining room and replaced by a band led by long-haired fiddler. Needless to say, we dance into early morning.

The next morning we, some more spry than others, take a fleet of bikes out along the Surfside Bike Path to Surfside Beach on the island’s south shore. One can bike just about anywhere on Nantucket. The island’s network of paved trails have been continually built and improved since the 1960s. There are now more than 30 miles of trails in Nantucket, which allow visitors to see the smaller pockets of the island and keep cars off Nantucket’s crowded roads.



Surfside is perhaps the most popular beach for day-trippers, where bikers and shuttle buses run throughout the day. I spin past Star of the Sea, the island’s only hostel, and perhaps the most beautiful, perfectly located one in the United States. The red-trimmed former lifesaving station offers beds for under \$40 a night — a rarity on an island where high-season prices for luxury lodging can exceed \$1,200 per night.

The Wampanoag tribe who first populated Nantucket called it Canopache, or the “place of peace,” and with 110 miles of coastline and

80 miles of free, public beaches surrounding the island, those who want solace can surely find it here. Just keep walking along the shore until there is no one left beside you. Or, those with four-wheel drive can access remote beaches over sand: It’s something I love to see in Nantucket, dozens of cars lined up at places like Nobadeer Beach — releasing pressure from their tires and then driving miles to spots few can find.



Later in the day, on our quest to soak up as much Nantucket as we could in three days, we break out our jackets and load into our hostess’s Grady-White Canyon. We cruise from Madaket Marine, around Eel Point, and past 40th Pole, Steps and Jetties beaches eyeing the new waterfront homes and the one or two small cottages that remain. We motor quietly into Nantucket Harbor, which is one of the state’s busiest, with 2,200 moorings and 300 slips, where we ogle monstrous yachts that busied a once modest Straight Wharf.

The sun is sinking when we make our way toward Great Point and the Wauwinet hotel. We dock as the Wauwinet Lady, a complimentary water taxi that takes diners from the White Elephant near town to the Wauwinet’s restaurant, Topper’s, for lunch and dinner service, arrives. Its passengers toast with champagne.

There, we gather on the hotel’s patio lounge and order warm clam chowder and fresh Bartlett’s Farm tomatoes to eat while we drink strong Dark and Stormys and spicy bloody marys. We talk about the lives with families and children and careers that continue to exist so far from that moment. Our patient 19-year-old captain sits among us and listens, his face only changing expression when he happily agrees it is time to go. We motor back to town, where we eat dinner at the Boarding House — a favorite haunt from the ‘90s — sharing plates of charred octopus, tuna tartare and smoked bluefish dip, followed by entrees of halibut and local lobster risotto.

Dining in Nantucket has always been an event, and even more so today with the island’s more than 60 restaurants, an eclectic mix of French, Italian, Portuguese, Thai and everything in between — a far cry from the days when Asian food had to be flown in by plane from the mainland. Many of my favorite places remain: American Seasons, Black-Eyed Susan’s and Company of the Cauldron. But others are gone, including Cap’n Tobey’s Chowder House, which had operated since 1954, a favorite place for late-night drinks and a beneficiary of my early-morning cleaning services. It is now a faceless barbecue joint, a misplaced genre for a remote New England island if there were one.

### Crimson tide with fall

At the end of the summer season in 1995, Labor Day called the summer families home, and their children back to school. Only a handful of workers remained — college graduates, Irish workers on J-1 visas whose school schedules didn’t require them to return until October and most of my comrades from the house at 20 Waydale Rd.

As the days got shorter and cooler, we wore our fleece jackets day and night. The calls to Topsy Taxi and Atlantic Cab became fewer, and no one needed help waiting tables or delivering milk. So we spent our days clamming and learning to cook mussels in white wine and butter, watching as the cranberry bogs turned crimson and riding out to the end of Great Point to fish. But we were still kids, delaying the inevitable — the day we had to leave the island and step into a world where street lights and chain restaurants pounded the senses into complaisance.

Today, Nantucket has grown from a summer destination to a four-season resort town, and shoulder season is filled with events such as the conservation association’s annual cranberry festival at Milestone Cranberry Bog, a short-film festival and a half marathon. But fall is still a special time to be on the island. Many stores and restaurants remain open, but lodging prices drop back down to earth.

When the weekend comes to a close and the ferry beckons me home, as it did 20 years ago, I board hesitantly, feeling as though I was again leaving something behind. The vessel rounds the bend past Brant Point Lighthouse and I throw two pennies into the sea as tradition dictates, assuring that I will one day return to the island I call home.

*Beazley is a travel writer in Aspen whose novel “On Mermaid Avenue” is based on her last glorious Nantucket summer.*

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