



Nice & Quiet

Sick of the summer crowds on Nantucket? Plan a trip in the spring. You'll spend less money and have the beach all to yourself.

BY JACI CONRY



IT'S NO WONDER Nantucket is overrun in the summer. With its sparkling coastline and miles of pristine white sand beaches, Nantucket is one of the most idyllic places in New England, a true summer playground. The little island's population swells by as much as six times at the close of the school year, when a well-heeled crowd of twentysomethings, the perennially preppy, and families in overstuffed SUVs descend on the island.

Come July and August, the downtown streets are clogged, dinner reservations are tough to come by, and if you're looking for last-minute lodging, think again: Most inns are booked in advance and have two- or three-night minimums in season. Bringing a car to the island over the Fourth of July? Not unless you reserve a spot on the ferry months ahead. Years ago, I learned that lesson the hard way when I attempted to make a reservation a mere three weeks before my departure, and was turned down.

That summer, when I was in my mid-20s, I fell in love with Nantucket: the cobbled downtown, the gray-shingled cottages covered in pink roses, those winding dirt roads leading to the beach. And yet when I returned home I felt a little exhausted by the frenzied summer scene. In my 30s, I was surprised to discover that Nantucket is an entirely different place in the spring. It's low-key, there are far fewer people, and those who come amble at a slower pace. While you'll need to dress warmer and there'll be no sunbathing, you'll enjoy nearly everything else that the high-season visitor does. And you won't blow your budget either since hotel rates typically cost about a third of what they do during high season.

PHOTOGRAPH OF BOATS BY ROB BENCHLEY; ALL OTHERS BY CARL TREMBLAY



Opposite page: the path leading to Steps Beach. This page, from top: a beach near Brant Point Lighthouse, dinghies on the beach next to Nantucket's public Town Pier, the foot bridge over Gully Road in Siasconset.



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GET THERE

From Hyannis, the **Steamship Authority** (steamshipauthority.com) offers passenger service to Nantucket via one-hour high-speed ferries (starting April 12; \$69 round trip) and traditional ferries (\$37 round trip), which take a little over two hours. **Hy-Line Cruises** (hy-linecruises.com) offers only high-speed service (\$77 round trip; starting May 18; \$89). In a hurry? **Cape Air** (capeair.com) offers several 22-minute flights between Hyannis and Nantucket daily (round trips start at \$74).

STAY

The striking Victorian exterior of new boutique hotel **21 Broad** belies the mod aesthetic inside. Boston designer Rachel Reider strove to update the historic building's decor with a fresh white-on-white palette highlighted with pops of orange, yellow, and blue. The chic property, run by Lark Hotels, serves a breakfast of artisanal baked goods in the lounge which is a lively spot at night thanks to an old-school turntable and an assortment of records; there's a juice bar too and guests are invited to bring their own "mixers."

Built in 1891, the landmark **Nantucket Hotel & Resort** (508-228-4747, thenantuckethotel.com) recently underwent extensive renovations. The new look is fresh and modern while maintaining the integrity of the 19th-century architecture. In addition to traditional hotel rooms, there are private cottages and one- to four-bedroom suites. Yoga classes are available in the expansive fitness center, and there are spa treatments, children's programs and two outdoor heated pools. If you're in the mood to stay in, **Breeze**, the hotel's restaurant, serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

EAT

By April most restaurants are open. While tables are much easier to come by than in high season, you should call ahead for a reservation. At **Lola 41** (508-325-4001, lola41.com) sushi is the main draw, though the menu's full of other enticements.

Try the chicken and rice meatballs with coconut curry and chilies or the gnocchi Bolognese. The sleek bar is hopping even in the offseason with a varied crowd of hipsters, dressed-down professionals, and local regulars enjoying the powerful cocktails that are Lola 41's specialty.

The **Brotherhood of Thieves** (508-228-2551, brotherhoodofthieves.com) has a family-friendly environment and serves delicious fare made with local ingredients. There's a great selection of burgers, salads, and comfort food entrees, along with 10 beers on tap.

While you'll have to drive or bike about a mile from downtown, an island visit isn't complete without a stop at the **Downyflake** (508-228-4533, www.thedownyflake.com); for 80 years the family-owned restaurant and bakery has supplied Nantucket with delicious homemade doughnuts.

SHOP

Murray's Toggery Shop (508-228-0437, nantucketreds.com) is an island institution, where you can find a selection of Nantucket Reds—the iconic pinkish pants (and shorts and shirts and caps) favored by the sailing set. Other highlights include **Milly and Grace** (508-901-5051, millyandgrace.com), an adorable boutique with smartly curated home goods and women's clothing from brands like Ella Moss. **Mitchell's Book Corner** (508-228-1080, mitchellsbookcorner.com) hosts signings by authors including islanders Elin Hilderbrand and Nathaniel Philbrick. This spacious book trove even has a room partially devoted to volumes of Nantucket lore.

If you have little ones, be sure to check out **Pinwheels** (508-228-1238) for adorable kids' clothes and toys. At **Nantucket Looms** (508-228-1908, nantucketlooms.com), splurge on a signature hand-woven throw and you'll cherish it forever. The shop also has an artful selection of home accessories including dishware, linens, lighting, and artwork by locals.

EXPLORE

Almost half of Nantucket is protected thanks to conservation efforts,

and spring is an ideal time to discover its remarkable landscape. **The Nantucket Conservation Foundation** (nantucketconservation.org) maintains, among others, Sanford Farm and Ram Pasture, a 780-acre property used by the island's early settlers for grazing sheep, farming, and harvesting wood. Walkers, runners, and cyclists frequent the property's trails, which crisscross woodland and grassland and have ocean views. Another foundation property is the Nantucket Field Station; the parcel encompasses harbor beachfront, freshwater ponds, and salt marsh habitats and is home to egrets, herons, and ospreys. The largest of the foundation properties is a 3,000-acre expanse known as Middle Moors. It's comprised of three distinct areas; the most alluring,

called Nantucket's "Serengeti," is a 400-acre swath named for the landscape of low vegetation mixed with a smattering of trees.

DO

A trip to the island isn't complete without a visit to the **Nantucket Whaling Museum** (508-228-1894, nha.org), housed in a restored 19th-century candle factory. It showcases multitudes of artifacts and historical photos chronicling an era when Nantucket was the whaling capital of the world.

The prosperity of the island in its heyday is evident in the architecture downtown. As someone who writes about design, I'm awestruck by the mix of Colonial, Federal, Greek Revival, and Victorian homes. Nantucket boasts the largest concentration of

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intact pre-Civil War houses in the country (about 800). The historic buildings survived, ironically, because the island was all but forgotten for decades. Deaths from the Civil War, the discovery of kerosene as a substitute for whale oil, and New Bedford's emergence as the nation's prime whaling port caused Nantucket's wealth and population to plummet in the late 19th century. It wasn't until the 1950s that Nantucket was "rediscovered" as a vacation destination, and soon after

it became one of the first towns in America to establish a local historic district.

Spring is an optimal time to stroll slowly down its streets, taking in the meticulously preserved residences. If you'd like a guided walking tour, arrange one with Nantucket Preservation Trust (nantucketpreservation.org), which acts as a steward for the island's architectural heritage. ■

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rites of spring

When planning an excursion, keep Nantucket's two annual spring events on the radar. What began as a simple affair in the 1970s, the **Daffodil Festival** (April 29–May 1) encompasses a slew of events including an antique car parade and tailgate picnic, exhibitions, lectures, children's activities, and, of course, the island's 3 million-plus daffodil blooms. The acclaimed **Nantucket Wine Festival** (May 18–22) includes more than 50 events featuring winemakers from around the world.

HOW WE WON THE WEST

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89A north through Slide Rock State Park to the majestic Grand Canyon. (Tip: Find lodging inside the park. That way you can wake up before dawn, watch the sunrise paint the canyon, and be back in bed by 8 a.m. That's what I call a great vacation moment.)

We had hoped to stay at the historic El Tovar Lodge, but it was booked months in advance. Only by checking the website every day were we able to snag a reservation at the Yavapai Lodge East (visitgrandcanyon.com/yavapai-lodge), a glorified Days Inn set in the pines. The mile-long walk to the canyon rim was nicely offset by the affordable price: \$124 per night.

The South Rim of the Grand Canyon is a crossroads of the world. Nearly 5 million people visit the national park annually. For us, the best moments are spontaneous, like watching the London-broil reds and browns of the canyon fade to black after sunset. (Remember to bring a flashlight). Or walking with a herd of mule deer that ignore us. Or eating at El Tovar and pretending Teddy Roosevelt is going to stroll past the mounted moose head and into the dining room.

If it's too crowded during the day, hike toward the Desert View Watchtower, where the crowds thin out but the beauty remains. At one point, Sam sits on a stone wall near the tower and dangles his legs into the Grand Canyon. He takes a 10-second video that becomes part of an Earth Day story on Snapchat that gets 7.7 million views!

We want to see the canyon from the Colorado River, so that we can look back up at nature's magnificent handiwork, but we don't have the time to take a weeklong rafting trip. Instead, we journey north to the little town of Page and the base of the Glen Canyon Dam. There, we take a relaxing half-day raft trip (888-522-6644, raftthecanyon.com) on the river (adults \$86, \$76 for kids under 12; there's also a \$6-per-person National Park Service river use fee). The raft stops along the way so we can view petroglyphs carved into the rock, but the highlight is the amaz-

ing Horseshoe Bend, where the Colorado River makes a dramatic hairpin turn. Viewing the bend from above can be just as rewarding, and it's free. Turn off Highway 89 (look for a sign between mile markers 544 and 545) then follow an easy hike to the edge of the canyon.

A 10-minute detour on the way back to Page takes us to the world-famous Antelope Canyons. These magical slot canyons, located on Navajo land, are accessible only with Navajo guides (\$20 per person, \$12 for kids 12 to 7), and visitors can choose either the Upper or Lower Antelope. We choose the Lower Antelope because it's larger and less crowded. It's like being inside a giant seashell: orangy, smooth, serene, and sensual. It's also noticeably cooler just below the surface, which is a relief in the desert heat.

Back in Page, I discover the stunning 18-hole Lake Powell National Golf Course (lakepowellgolfing.com). It mixes incredible views with dirt-cheap prices (\$52 for 18 holes with a cart, \$24 for kids under 17). On the dramatic back nine, you'll encounter the par-3 15th hole, dubbed "Cliffhanger." Its tee is perched 120 feet above the green, with an ominous sign warning golfers: "Caution! Cliff Edge."

We stay at the Courtyard Page for \$219 per night (928-282-4828, marriott.com) and eat at the highly recommended Big John's Texas BBQ (928-645-3300, bigjohnstexasbbq.com), a converted gas station with great barbecue and a country hoes-down atmosphere. Try the half rack of smoked baby back pork ribs for \$13.25.

The ride back to Phoenix includes a stop in Flagstaff for a stroll on old Route 66. Also known as the "Mother Road," it was once the main artery between Chicago and Los Angeles. It flourished at a time when families hopped into automobiles seeking adventure on the open road. "Get your kicks on Route 66" said the old Bobby Troup song, and for at least a week, everyone got a kick out of the grandeur and beauty of Arizona. ■

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PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL TREMBLAY