

America's Most Famous Travel Destinations Are This Summer's Great Pretenders

Your fishing village has a Chanel pop-up. The coffee shop charges \$10 for an oat latte. Is it time to admit the jig is up at these supposedly relaxed summer getaways? An end-of-season report from the front lines of getting away from it all.



By [Holly Peterson](#) Published: Aug 31, 2023 10:00 AM EST



Getty Images

In the bustling catering area behind a vast Nantucket party tent, Island Kitchen chef August Wing brushes a melted butter and sage mixture onto a hundred grilled oysters. “This is game day,” he explains, and then removes them from a steaming seaweed bed. “No nervousness. This is warfare. You know?” In 12 minutes, over 2,500 ticketed guests at the annual benefit concert featuring the Boston Pops will enter and inhale his creations in one fulsome slurp.

As summer’s clock nears midnight, social gatherings burst with peak intensity, like the corn and tomatoes on our tables. Nostalgia grows more potent with each tick. We must reenact a backflip off this rickety dock, eat that homemade donut in town, and force-feed the kids over-cooked lobster steamed on “our” beach.

A reporting trip through Nantucket, Martha’s Vineyard, Newport, and the Hamptons revealed residents clinging to the authenticity of their “fishing village” or “whaling town,” often with a fervor that seems a tad far-fetched. Some locales still deliver a version of a quaint American summer, while others are past the point of no return, never to be low-key again.

Nantucket

Hands down, [the island of Nantucket](#) wins the prize for having the sweetest town and best preserved old-world whaling-capital architecture. Rooftop widows' walks dot the viewscape, Murray's Toggery-clad folk fill Main Street, and blue hydrangeas smother every fence. That said, preserving the past is an increasingly elusive quest here as traffic clogs the island's roads and crowds pressure-pack its restaurants.



Yellow Productions

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Old-school Nantucketers believe one's name should appear in the newspaper only twice: once for a wedding announcement and the other for an obituary. Unlike in the more high-octane Hamptons, where self-promotion is a virtue, few, if any, Ferraris roll down these narrow lanes. This island throws back to a time when beach cottages were miniature, stores were local, and rich people had manners.

Nantucketer's devotion to cornball traditions helps stem the onslaught of money and megalomania: yacht club types observe "Colors": standing in silence as a nightly cannon blast announces a dockside lowering of the flag.

However, other scenes challenge the notion that quaintness can be bottled forever. Ghostly, mega-mansions bulge with impossible weight on sea cliffs.



KenWiedemann/Getty Images

Nantucket has cobblestone streets, well-preserved architecture, and fearsome crowds at its best restaurants.

Here, the price of an item, property, or party isn't written in neon lights, but the expense is discernible if you care to know. Case in point: perfectly restored vintage Ford Broncos seem to have outnumbered the Land Rover Defenders that brave summer people drive to adventure over the bumpy cobblestone streets. Stick-shifts and open roofs exude a bygone era but cost upwards of \$100,000—a vehicle any local surfer would give their left testicle to own.

This island's biggest event is the **Boston Pops** concert and dinner benefiting the island's **Cottage Hospital**. Ironically, last year, the overhang of the concert stage blocked the view from the \$75,000 front tables, and guests inhaling those sage-buttered oysters couldn't see the drone fireworks show. Beyond the velvet ropes, families far and wide, 3,000 strong, sat for free in their BYO-beach-chairs under the stars, enjoying a spectacular panorama.

Newport

Newport folk do not need to struggle with a tug-of-war pitting modern against tradition. With the precision of synchronized swimmers, they simply socialize the way they did in generations past.

Many live in the same mansions their families built a century ago, unapologetically fancy and intent on setting examples. What can one say? Some Like it *Haute*.



Jeff Greenberg//Getty Images

The Breakers, a summer cottage built for the Vanderbilt family in 1895.

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Descendants of 19th century [Gilded Age families](#), such as Astors, Vanderbilts, Auchinclosses, and von Bulows, still “summer” here to socialize with their own. They huddle in many of the same clubs their grandparents did back in the day, the most coveted *of course*, **Bailey’s Beach**. “It’s an old-world formality,” Jill Roosevelt, associate broker at Brown, Harris, Stevens, explains. “Except for the most informal barbecues, men always wear blue blazers at night. The older women wear jewels to dinners. They look fabulous; if anyone can wear vintage Verdura wonderfully, it’s Grande Dames of Newport.”

Newport is harder to get to, so loyalists have an easier time isolating among their own. The train station is 45 minutes away. Over a spectacular martini, when asked if there was a Hampton Jitney-like bus here, a Newport social fixture drew in a swift breath as if she’d just sucked on a lemon. She explained (not allowing her name in this magazine because she’s not dead yet), “No Jitneys here. Newport Airport does not have jets and no regulated tower. It keeps out a lot of those *jerks*.”

The famed black-tie **Preservation Ball** keeps the past alive in word and function: this year, risqué meant daring to serve lamb instead of filet mignon.



Andrea Hansen

The Preservation Society of Newport County's annual dinner dance.

At this evening event, younger generations are primed to dress and dance in preparation to support the same institutions as their parents. "When you walk in, you are seeing something over the top," says Trudy Coxe, CEO and executive director of the Preservation Society of Newport County. "You suddenly think: 'This is it. I've seen it all.'"

Martha's Vineyard

Martha's Vineyard defends itself valiantly against too much change brought by the onslaught of newcomers wanting to spend big and used to having their way. It is the most diverse locale of the four covered on this trip: from the racial mix of the crowd to the social options to the types of families who visit seasonally. This variety serves to protect the island's small-town aura. Summer residents and visitors are able to choose the socializing and lifestyle that suits them, rather than force their ways onto a more homogenous island.



Darren McColleston//Getty Images

U.S. presidents are a common sight in the summer months on Martha's Vineyard.
Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

In the town of Chilmark, where parts of the movie *Jaws* were filmed, many of the docked fishing trawlers look as dilapidated and authentic as Captain Quint's doomed vessel. Crowds, game for the corny fun of it all, bring beach chairs for a nightly tradition in summer: watching the sunset over steamers and lobster rolls from Larsen's on the nearby docks. One evening in late August, people watched the red sun descend majestically beneath the horizon line, blazing like a huge, peeled tomato, and then clapped on cue as it disappeared.

"All different cultures come here: white, Black, or whomever. Everyone's smiling and playing with their families," explains 21-year-old traffic supervisor Aidan Coombs. "It feels great; I have a sense of accomplishment [that] I helped them be here safely."

The communities spreading from Edgartown to South Beach to West Tisbury are more cauldrons of social and political activity. Wealthy machers here host presidents and hold power-packed birthday parties for them. When a wealthy operative was texted about the hoity-toity social scoop, this reply was sent, "Can we talk later? I'm with the Clintons."

The four-generation-old [Oak Bluffs African American community](#) manages to navigate the new while preserving "porch life" with impressive balance. The traditions of **Illumination Night** and late-August fireworks are sacred. It is the norm here to hop from coffee klatches to issue-driven events to beach chairs at **Inkwell Beach**. In August, former BET chairman Debra Lee held a

“Leading Women Defined” get-together for 200 women, the bright, carefully appointed outfits and energy in the room a spinning kaleidoscope.

“It's restoring yourself in community,” explains Alexis McGill Johnson, president of Planned Parenthood. “People are eager to understand the plan, their charge, and how they will make meaning of their network and resources. And so, they're going from event to family dinner or beach cocktails to understand how these pieces come together. And I think that that's actually what happens here in the Vineyard while socializing; they're putting the big picture together in their brain.”



Win McNamee//Getty Images
Watching the sunset in Martha's Vineyard.

“The trick of being on the island is you have to know the events, but you have to leave room for spontaneity,” instructs Rashida Jones, president of MSNBC. “A bike ride that leads to the conversation you would have never experienced if you were highly scheduled as we tend to be in New York. It's the opportunity to be still, to be quiet, to enjoy the vibe on the island.”

The Hamptons

If you need a shot of steroids infused with a dozen Red Bulls pumped into your veins, you've found your place and your people. Members of the summer crowd, whether here for decades or

newcomers, believe with gusto that *they* discovered everything excellent about this Eastern Long Island landscape earlier and, therefore, are smarter than you are.



littleny//Getty Images

The Corwith Windmill in Water Mill, New York.

Yes, problems arise in a community when anyone standing in any line believes *they* should be able to cut that line. Or, when anyone wandering into a cute farmstand feels entitled to destroy every ear of corn to get the dozen best ones, leaving a mauled pile of corn silk and husks for the next customer.

“The traffic, of course, is oppressive; you have to take it into account for everything you do,” admits author and columnist Richard Cohen, who poo-poo’s other New England locales. “But it’s the best eating place in the world with the exception of parts of France. It’s more unpredictable out here; all the qualities that have made NY attractive for the last several hundred years. Rich people aren’t interesting, but talented people are. And the talented come here.”

New Yorkers may be the most entitled creatures on earth, but whether they are rich, talented, or neither, they are generous to institutions they care about. “Culture is moving in on the Hamptons in a good way. It’s not Frieze Art, not a commercial venture type of way. Just great culture,” architect Peter Marino explains. About his eponymous art foundation in Southampton, he adds, “Interest has been off the charts. So many different seas of fish out here, whatever lake you want to swim in. In that way, the Hamptons is a mirror of New York City. For most of us, it’s a respite. A lot of us don’t go out. I go home to the garden and house I built for my daughter and wife and close the gates.”



Patrick McMullan
Southampton Arts Center's annual SummerFest Gala.

In the Hamptons, summer types don't wax on about make-believe fishing docks or get overly nostalgic about a mom-and-pop donut shop. Those coming from New York live in a city that moves fast and they are conditioned to accept that places and even people evolve and change (and are not entirely upset that an excellent Brunello Cuccinelli has moved in).

Isn't that what genuine authenticity is? Being real, even if you're rude sometimes? In New York City the deli guys yell at you when you don't choose a schmear for your everything bagel quickly enough. Maybe this city-bred reporter, who grew up with that deli-counter conditioning, can get a tad testy in a long Citarella Market line for a \$80 bag of tomatoes. Yet, the Hamptons provide a gale-force breath of fresh salty air when it comes to being who you are when you damn well please.