

CORONAVIRUS RESOURCES

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# Trying to escape the coronavirus, the well-heeled flee to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard

Islanders fear supplies will be depleted and that the influx will bring infection.

By [Dugan Arnett](#) and [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 18, 2020, 10:45 a.m.



A lone passenger stood on the deck of the 11:55 a.m. high-speed ferry from Hyannis to Nantucket as it left Hyannis Harbor on Wednesday. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The Steamship Authority terminals on Cane Cod are normally sleepy this time of year, free of the crowds that iam onto  
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/03/18/nation/escaping-coronavirus-well-heeled-flee-nantucket-marthas-vineyard/>

the ferries bound for Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard during the summer season. But in recent days, long lines of vehicles have formed. Passengers have been left behind because boats were unexpectedly full.

On the islands, year-round residents who typically live in semi-isolation into May are noticing a sudden increase in traffic, with an abundance of New York and Connecticut plates. At the Martha's Vineyard Airport, said Brian Packish, a selectman in Oak Bluffs, private jets "have been pouring in."

The apparent cause of this sudden rush: The [coronavirus pandemic](#) is driving well-heeled summer residents to the perceived safety and isolation of their second homes.

"There's no better place to self-distance than Martha's Vineyard," said Gary A. Jenkins, a New York entertainment lawyer who has been spending summers on the Vineyard since the age of 5 and is now contemplating a trip. "I can sit on my front porch, smoke a cigar, and not see anybody."

But the influx — by some accounts, several thousand people have arrived on Nantucket alone — has set off resentment among some of the islands' full-time residents, who worry that virus refugees will deplete groceries and other crucial supplies that must be brought by ferry and, most of all, that someone carrying the infection will touch off a medical crisis.

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“I don’t speak for everyone on the island, but I think it’s a pretty common belief,” Gordon Healy, an assistant manager at a Martha’s Vineyard animal shelter, said Tuesday. “If you don’t need to be here, if you don’t have a reason to be here, it doesn’t make sense for you to be here.”

On online message boards, some islanders have discouraged these part-time residents from coming. Local officials have voiced similar concerns; Nantucket officials on Tuesday [announced](#) they’d asked the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency to limit passenger service to the island.

Though both Nantucket and the Vineyard are plenty capable of handling significant influxes in the summer months, when tourists and part-time residents send the population skyrocketing, their ability to do so at what’s typically a down time — and amid a global medical crisis — is another story.

Already, some residents say, there have been issues. Caretakers and plumbers have been forced into early duty, scrambling to keep up with the calls they’re getting to have homes ready for seasonal residents, while full-time residents on both islands have reported runs on groceries and toiletries.

“I’ve never seen grocery carts so full,” said John Christensen, an official in the Martha’s Vineyard town of West Tisbury.

The bigger concern, however, is the stress a potential outbreak could put on local medical resources.

On Tuesday, Gary Shaw, president and chief executive of the Nantucket Cottage Hospital, which has 14 licensed beds, said in a [statement](#) the hospital is designed for routine surgeries and procedures, with no intensive care unit and few ventilators and respirators. "We are working with limited medical resources and personnel on our small island," he said.

Julian Cyr, a state senator representing Cape Cod and the two islands, said that if Boston's better-equipped hospitals fill up, it could make emergency medical attention, like airlifts, difficult or impossible. Oak Bluffs select board member Gail Barmakian, noting the island's large senior population, called on the Steamship Authority to discourage those coming to Martha's Vineyard for nonessential purposes.

"I'm not going to be judgmental," Barmakian said, "but we need to let them know it's not as safe as they think."

Not surprisingly, seasonal residents, many of whom have been summering on the islands for decades, have bristled at suggestions they should stay away.

In a recent online discussion, one part-time resident responded to calls to avoid the Vineyard by announcing that as a tax-paying homeowner on the island, he would soon be arriving with his wife and dog, with or without a blessing.

"Sorry that you have a problem with all of the above," he wrote. "Get used to it. See you tomorrow."

A number of recent arrivals have defended their decision to come, saying they are taking the government's calls to isolate themselves seriously.

"A lot of people are retreating, whether they're going to the Cape or New Hampshire or some more isolated place that's

off the beaten path,” said Rufus Gifford, the former US ambassador to Denmark, who on Tuesday [was en route to Nantucket](#), via Steamship Authority ferry, from his home in Concord.

“It’s hard to know to do the right thing in these times,” he added, “but [this] feels like the right thing.”

Packed up the car with everything I need - starting with Stephen, Argos and Svend as well as weeks worth of food and supplies - and heading to Nantucket to ride this out.

Reach out and say hello anytime.

Sending all of you a 🥰 and 😊 from an appropriate social distance. [pic.twitter.com/5MYVqZCM1g](https://pic.twitter.com/5MYVqZCM1g)  
— Rufus Gifford (@rufusgifford) [March 17, 2020](#)

So far, at least, there have been no official plans to prevent travel to and from the islands, even as towns in others states have made such moves.

Earlier this week, the select board on the island of [North Haven, Maine](#), voted to prohibit visitors and seasonal residents to protect the community from infection. Officials in North Carolina’s [Outer Banks](#) instituted similar restrictions.

But that kind of measure on Nantucket or Martha’s Vineyard, some residents said, would be extreme.

“It would be really shortsighted of us to start banning people,” said Josh Goldstein, who grew up on Martha’s Vineyard and now sits on its commission. “These people have kept us going for all these years. If they want to come in July or

January, we'd welcome them."

Jenkins, the entertainment attorney, said he understands the concerns of full-time residents, many of whom are decades-old friends. On Tuesday, he remained in New York and was discussing with family the idea of heading to the Vineyard as early as next month. He also said he hoped the animosity of full-time residents would be short-lived.

To him, the recent discord brought on by coronavirus fears called to mind an old ["Twilight Zone" episode](#) in which a few mysterious occurrences — flickering streetlights, appliances stopping and starting for no apparent reason — quickly turn a group of otherwise friendly neighbors against each other.

Said Jenkins, "As the aliens behind the chaos said in their epilogue, 'Humans are easily turned from loving, caring creatures into hateful monsters simply by inserting some angst and insecurity into their lives.'"

*Matt Stout of the Globe staff contributed to this report.*

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