



TRAVEL

Escape from 2026! A Sturbridge hotel becomes a tropical portal to the past.

It was an island of civility, and I was thrilled to be there.

By **Christopher Muther** Globe Staff, Updated February 13, 2026, 6:00 a.m.



Hula dancers Kerrie Willette and Danielle Peloquin of Polynesian Fusion perform at the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend in Surbridge. CORAL ASHLEY/DISCO DEVIL PRODUCTIONS

STURBRIDGE — Outside, the landscape resembled Siberia. It was snowing and colder than the frozen food aisle at Market Basket. The sky's color oscillated between bleak and hopeless.

But inside, none of those things seemed to matter. The luau was well underway, and the Mai Tais were flowing. Grass skirts swayed to and fro as dancers began pulling audience members into the flagstone courtyard to teach them to hula. Soon, they were moving like a grove of graceful palm fronds in the Tahitian breeze. Well, at least in theory.

Sure, the Patriots would soon lose the Super Bowl, and the ever-churning 24-hour news cycle wasn't exactly sunshine and lollipops, but here, by the swimming pool, the scene was the South Pacific circa 1946. All of those troubles were decades away, at least for the 200 or so people who came to Sturbridge to attend the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend, which was staged by the [Greater Boston Vintage Society](#).

Technically, it was neither the South Pacific nor 1946. This was the interior of the Sturbridge Host Hotel & Conference Center. The hotel has seen better days (likely in 1983), but for the purposes of Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend, the lack of updating was ideal. Hotel rooms with facades that looked like actual homes faced into a courtyard with gazebos and a swimming pool. But it wasn't the pool or the rooms that gave the place its throwback charm.

It was the people, both dolled up and dapper, who were making the scene special.



Natalia Farrington, who performs burlesque under the name Miss Ruby Pavlova, chats with a friend at the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend in Sturbridge. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Almost everyone at the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend had a story as to how they ended up immersed in Boston's vintage scene. For some, it was the allure of tiki culture; others ended up here through their connection to Boston's rockabilly scene, through a love of Exotica (a musical genre popular in the 1950s and 1960s), or swing dancing.

"Back in Russia, I was always curious about the whole scene," said Natalia Farrington, who performs burlesque under the name Miss Ruby Pavlova. "When I moved to New York City in 2016, I started swing dancing, and I saw all the ladies dressing up, and I thought, 'I want to do that too.' From there, it was all downhill. My closet is now full of vintage clothes."



Paige Martin of Boxborough takes a break from the room crawl during the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

These retro-lovers come together at events throughout the year, such as the [Ohana Luau at the Lake](#) in Lake George, the [Hukilau](#) in Fort Lauderdale, or [Tiki-a-Go-Go](#) in Orlando. The festivals, often referred to as weekenders, all follow the same basic recipe: bands play vintage music, there are talks on the culture's history, and a marketplace for vintage goods. Participants dress in retro finery, and there are cocktails. Lots and lots of cocktails.

You can dismiss gatherings like this as vintage cosplay, but for those who participate, they are much more meaningful. There was a large sense of community at the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend. For some, it was a chance to catch up with old friends. Others were here to connect with their retro-loving brethren. I didn't know a soul and packed my suitcase with a 2026 wardrobe (which I don't recommend), and was still greeted warmly. No one was talking politics or bemoaning current events. It was an island of civility, and I was thrilled to be there.

The Tropical Weekend kicked off on Friday night with a room crawl. Participants decorated their hotel rooms to look like Polynesian palaces, or at least the lobbies of 1950s Chinese restaurants. From there, the masses descended upon each room.



Andy MacLeod serves drinks in front of the facade of the Kowloon inside his hotel room for the room crawl at the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend in Sturbridge. MacLeod built the structure with his wife, an electrician. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

As a naive first-timer, I thought I would simply be bouncing from room to room, admiring the decor and the effort that went into each transformation. I loved the passion and creativity on display. What I didn't know was that each room participating in the crawl also had a signature cocktail. By the end of it, I understood why it was called a crawl, because I felt as if the only way I would make it back to my room was if I crawled.

Andy MacLeod served up rum cocktails in a room that paid homage to Route 1 in Saugus. MacLeod, a carpenter by day, built a replica of the facade of the Kowloon and assembled it in his room. His wife, who is an electrician, wired the Kowloon sign, along with a replica of the giant cactus that once served as a sign for the Hilltop Steakhouse. Like the

Kowloon sign, it also glowed as a beacon to those needing more cocktails. In the corner was the Leaning Tower of Pizza.

“We had to bring in all the lumber to build the Kowloon A-frame, and the hotel staff were probably thinking, ‘What the hell are these people doing?’ We actually want to recreate it and make it better next time. We want to bring in an orange dinosaur,” said Jessica Connolly, MacLeod’s wife, who wired the project.



Jessica Connolly of Norwood gets her hair ready for an afternoon pool party with help from Jenny Mendonca at the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend in Sturbridge. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Connolly explained the complex room design the following afternoon as Jenny Mendonca was fixing her shocking pink hair to prepare for the full slate of Saturday events.

My head was still aching from the Friday night room crawl, but hangover be damned! Saturday was a busy day, so I downed a fistful of Advil and stepped back into 1946. Greg Theberge, a renowned collector of tiki artifacts, gave an instructional talk on creating a tropical paradise in your home. [Tim “Swanky” Glazner](#) offered a history lesson on

cocktail and restaurant magnate [Don the Beachcomber](#). There was even a WWII Jeep that had been wheeled into the courtyard of the hotel. A woman sang and strummed her ukulele nearby.

Several times a day, I'd run into a slightly frazzled Jason Volk. He's the mastermind behind the Greater Boston Vintage Society and Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend. Often referred to as Mr. Vintage, he has an earnest Fred MacMurray quality. Or perhaps it only seems that way because of his wardrobe. He's long dabbled in the vintage scene, but is a newbie to tiki culture, although he's quite sensitive to using the term tiki to describe it.

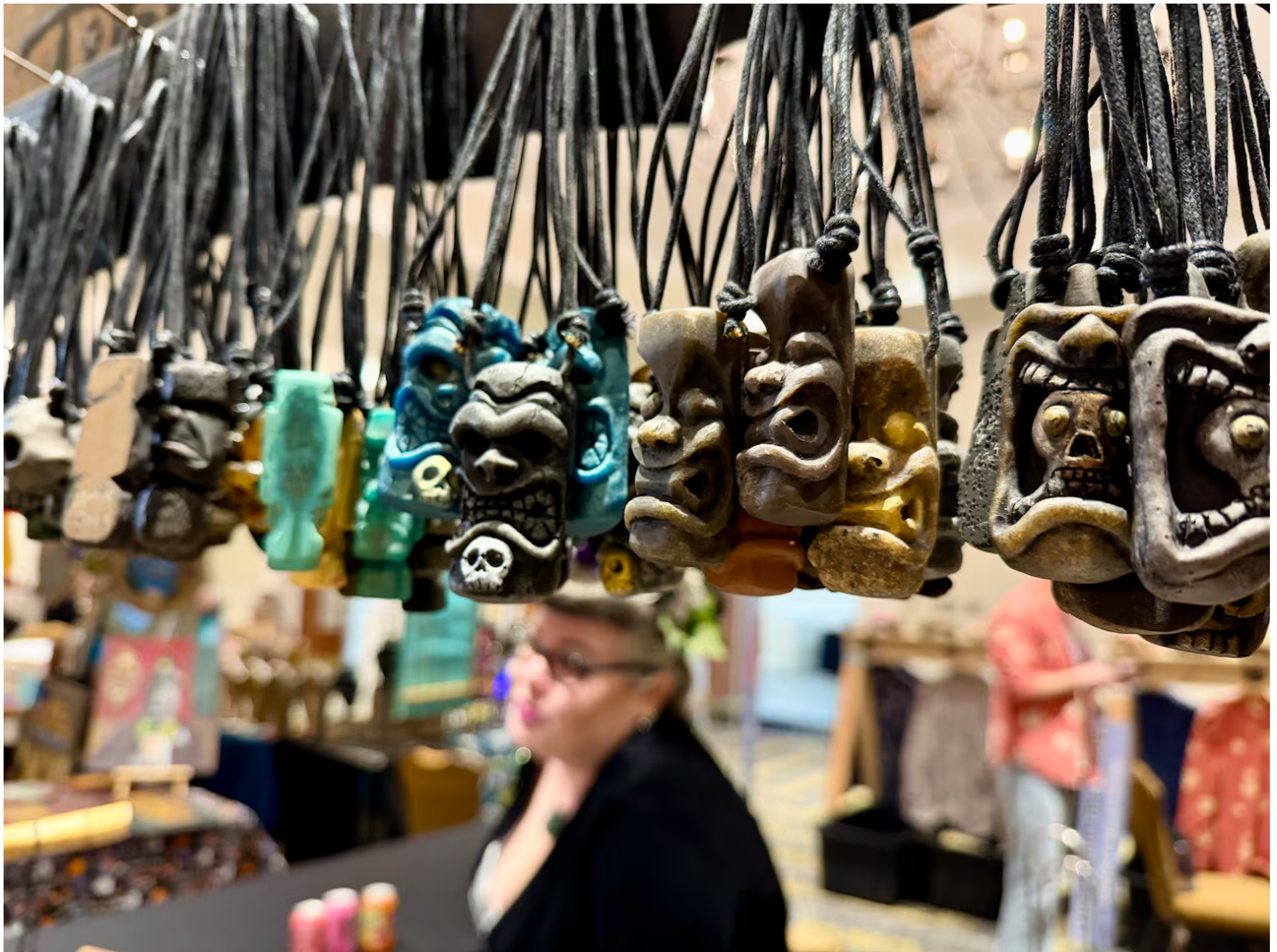


Jason Volk, head of the Boston Vintage Society, poses at Nor'Easter Island in Sturbridge. It's the first and only immersive tropical weekend of its kind in New England. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

"I wish the word 'beachcomber' would take over for the word tiki, because it defines the culture so much better," he said. "To call it tiki, you're really using their word for God,

and it's a bummer. I think it stems from Disney and his tiki room. I think that's kind of how the word got so popular."

Volk started with an appreciation for WWII, which led him to swing dancing and the belief that he had a better chance of finding a girlfriend at a swing dance than at a WWII reenactment. From there, he founded the Greater Boston Vintage Society and helped launch the sprawling, popular summer garden party at Crane Estate. Last year, he started the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend.



New Hampshire-based shop Zombie Oasis sells pendants at the day-long market at the Nor'Easter Island Tropical Weekend in Sturbridge. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

I dropped into the vintage market, where multiple vendors displayed their wares in the hotel's ballroom, to try to pull together something more appropriate to wear for the evening's luau. I tracked down a Hawaiian shirt from the Pineapple Parlor, and a tiki idol

necklace that looked exactly like the one that Bobby Brady found when the family went to Hawaii. Fortunately, mine did not [bring me bad luck](#) or result in [a kidnapping by Vincent Price](#).

I stuffed myself at the luau that night, mainly on pineapple upside-down cake, and then headed to the swing dance. I had no intention of dancing because I wanted to avoid squashing someone's toes, but it was enthralling to sit to the side and watch and listen to the 18-piece band.

Can I tell you something slightly embarrassing and very hokey? I started to tear up watching the dancers in their throwback glad rags. My grandfather served in WWII, and he loved dancing almost as much as he loved my grandmother. I couldn't help but think that this was the kind of party they would have attended in 1946. Thinking of them and remembering them dancing at family celebrations was all it took to set off the waterworks. I grabbed my Mai Tai and silently toasted them. I felt extremely fortunate that, if only for a weekend, I had the opportunity to forget about the world and go back in time, envisioning them dancing and smiling again.

Christopher Muther can be reached at christopher.muther@globe.com. Follow him [@Chris_Muther](#) and Instagram [@chris_muther](#).

[Show 15 comments](#)