

Provincetown in the Off-Season

Provincetown, Massachusetts, the quirky little gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-friendly resort town at the end of Cape Cod that poet Mark Doty describes as being, “dedicated to pleasure and to beauty, eccentric, graceful without being too impressed with itself.” It emerged as an artist colony at the end of the 1800’s and has managed to keep its bohemian heritage. Its streets and alleyways and are still lined with art galleries and studios and its culture still provides acceptance and permission for a broad variety of tastes, lifestyles and creative expressions. According to Doty, P-town’s driving norm is, “Love who you want, dress as you like, do what feels right to you.” This is balanced by the rule, “Remember that people live here” – a nod to be respectful of the lives of the town’s inhabitants. It’s this accepting culture that has made P-town one of the best known GLBT vacation destinations in the United States. And what’s not to love? Here, I can walk down the street holding my girlfriend’s hand and we can interact with the same physical tenderness in restaurants, clubs and on the street that heterosexuals take for granted in the rest of the country. Not even Key West, one of the other celebrated GLBT travel destinations, allows for this sort of unabashed openness.

Most people want to go to for Provincetown in the summer, when nation has its thoughts turned towards the beach and the clubs are packed. What most people don’t know is that P-town has a lot of offer in the off-season, especially in September. What you lose in terms of a scene is more than made up by some other perks. First, without as many visitors, the town is a lot quieter. This means that you can walk through town without feeling like a sardine. You can also be more spontaneous because you don’t have to plan everything hours in advance. Your stomach’s growling? No problem, you can nab a table in a restaurant without a long wait. Decide you want to see a show and it’s already after 6:00 pm? No problem, you can still get tickets for most shows a few hours before they start. (Note that this does not mean there won’t be a crowd. We made the mistake of only arriving half an hour before “Showgirls” at the Crown and Anchor and ended up standing for most of the show. More painful, my girlfriend and I are both vertically challenged and a Ms. Crabbypants Super Giant decided to squeeze in front of us and refused to move even when asked politely. Fortunately, karma works and someone gave us their seats so we got to sit in front of her. But I digress.) Bed and Breakfast and hotel prices also drop after Labor Day.

The gardens are another reason to wait until the end of summer to visit Provincetown. In September, the whole town seems to be in bloom. Roses especially seem to love the cool nights and sandy soil and the town is covered with them. And then there are the sunflowers. Where I grew up, sunflowers were weeds that had to be hoed or poisoned. I learned to hate them with passion. The sunflowers in Provincetown have broken that mental association. They’re all but dancing on their stalks this time of year. It’s almost like they’re celebrating the last tea-dances before fall comes in and ends their season.

In September, the water is still warm enough to ramble along the beach and splash in the waves. The warm water also means that you can kayak without freezing when you get wet. The water in the harbor is calm enough most days that even novice kayakers have an easy paddle. My girlfriend had never kayaked before and picked up the basics pretty quickly. Lots of people bring their own kayaks to P-town, but if you don’t happen to own a kayak, you can rent one at Venture Athletics, on the beach just west of the pier. Swimming is also still an option in September. Intrepid souls and polar bears swim in the ocean. I’m a little squeamish about the sea grass in the harbor and the churning waves at Herring Cove beach (we picked a windy day to walk to the beach) so I opted for the heated swimming

pool at the hotel. The water felt great even on the day the temperature never got out of the upper sixties.

When weather permits, Provincetown is also a bicycle town. Biking is a great way to get around town and much easier to park. More exciting for me is the fact that you can ride out to the national seashore. The bike trails are great, especially the dune trail. If you're not an avid cyclist, be forewarned, the dune trail is pretty hilly, which translates into chanting one of the following as you peddle: "Hills are good," (if you are trying to psyche yourself out); "Feel the burn," (possibly accentuated with a few choice swear words if you're honest); or if the burn is too much, a cathartic, "Fuck it!" as you get off your bike and walk it to the top of the hill. Going down hill is much easier. I've got a beautiful purple and white Specialized Dolce Elite road bike and I am all but drooling at the thought of riding her on the trails by the beach. Next time I come, she's coming with me. Folks who don't want to cart their own bike can easily rent one at any number of bike rental places around town.

If your body's jonesing for a real workout (or the weather sucks), you can check out the local gyms. P-town has two: Muscle Beach Health Club and Provincetown Gym. Both are mostly packed with sweaty boys. Of the two, Provincetown Gym is a bit cheaper and has coupons available online. If yoga is your thing, several places, including Provincetown Gym and Muscle Beach Health Club offer yoga classes. Of the available options, Yoga East gets the highest endorsements from the locals.

If you're into less strenuous activities, it might be helpful to note that the end of the season does little to dampen the sport of gallery hopping. The most exciting is Backshore Gallery on Commercial Street because they're showcasing the work of Walter Baranowski, a local artist who makes funky chairs, clocks, shelves and tables out of driftwood. His pieces are functional and rustically beautiful -- perfect for a little beach house on the edge of the dunes.

And there's always shopping. If you want something besides a t-shirt, check out Recovering Hearts, WomanCrafts and the Whydah Pirate Store. Recovering Hearts specializes recovery oriented material but also has a nice collection of GLBT fiction and nonfiction books and videos. They also carry a number of mainstream books and upscale gifts. WomanCrafts is close to my heart because it's one of a dwindling number of feminist bookstores. They sell women's literature, jewelry, t-shirts, music and gifts. The Whydah Pirate Store -- well it's just fun to play with pirate stuff.

Whale watching is another of Provincetown's claims to fame and the early fall is an especially good time to go whale watching here. Whale watchers regularly spot fin and humpback whales and on occasion, lucky observers catch sight of a rare North Atlantic right whale.

Sailors and wanna be sailors should know that there are two schooners in town: the Baylady II and the Hindu. We went on a sunset cruise on the Baylady II and managed to go out on the perfect night. The seas were calm, the sky was clear, the sunset was gorgeous and the other passengers were great. I met the most adorable little Dutch girl. She melted my heart even though I suspect she was far more interested in my tootsie pop than she was in me. And no, I didn't give one to her... I was sparing her the pain of getting a cavity. The Hindu also seemed to do a good business and they fly a rainbow flag, so how bad can they be?

Because of its quirky culture, downtown Provincetown is a great place to people watch. You can sit for hours and just enjoy the show as it unfolds around you. Weather permitting, your people watching will be accompanied by live music. At all hours of the day and night, performers busk in the squares and on the corners. The most notable is Marcia Mello. She plays old style blues, ragtime, and even some classical pieces on a guitar that looks like it's been rode hard and put up wet. Her old school blues and slide guitar will reel you in and her warmth and smile will captivate you. You can catch some of her songs on YouTube.com but "Love Changing Blues" is the only one that even comes close to doing her justice.

Even though the nightlife is considerably calmer in the off-season, there's plenty to do when the sun goes down. The Crown and Anchor, the Post Office, and the Vixen, still have shows on the weekends and if you're desperate for entertainment on the off nights (Tuesday and Wednesday) you can always check out karaoke at the Governor Bradford Restaurant. Club Purgatory is also usually open every night, though the focus shifts from night to night. Among other things, they have a leather night, a men's underwear party, and a karaoke night that Earl, the guy who runs the club, swears brings in good singers. It was the most happening club while we were in town.

Of all the more formal shows we saw, Jimmy James' "The One and Many Voices of Jimmy James," at the Post Office, stands out. Jimmy takes impersonation to a new level, ditching the 1950's sex-goddess look he sported in his previous incarnation for a post-punk, multi-cultural version of androgyny featuring a safety-pin studded linen jacket, a stunning Brazilian carnival feather headdress and black Armani boots sprinkled with glitter. Jimmy's impersonations, especially of Patsy Cline, Eartha Kitt and Cher, were mesmerizing. His performance of his own hits, "Fashionista" and "Famous," brought down the house. Unfortunately for you, he's done with P-town this season. He said he'd been meeting with folks in Vegas and my bet is that he'll be playing Vegas soon for \$100 a night. You can still catch Jimmy's dance hall hit "Fashionista" as well as some older work on *YouTube.com*.

Bobby Wetherbee was our favorite entertainer in Provincetown, hands down. We went to see him 3 nights in a row. He performs Thursdays through Sundays at the Crown and Anchor's Central House through the end of September. He plays piano and sings nonstop for four hours and can do just about everything from show tunes to jazz to pop songs. His stage presence draws audience members in and creates a space for them to sing along. Even more impressively, his voice (and good speakers) are strong enough to carry (or cover up) the audience members who take up his sing along invitation. This last perk was particularly relevant because we spent an hour or so watching singers who had consumed a lot more alcohol than we had do karaoke at the Governor Bradford Restaurant on Tuesday night.

Provincetown is also known for great restaurants, especially those that specialize in fresh clams, oysters, scallops and lobsters. Even if you don't eat seafood, you can find something to satisfy your cravings. Enzo, for example, offers classic Italian cuisine in an elegant setting served by courteous staff. You can even find post-modern Mexican food and an encyclopedia length tequila selection at Lorraine's Restaurant.

Of all the restaurants we ate at, Bayside Betsy's was our favorite. The dining room overlooks the harbor and the view is spectacular. Add to this the ambiance created both by a simple but elegant décor, warm friendly service and fabulous food and you have a hit. For years, Betsy, the owner, has

been an institution and Provincetown and has done a lot to make Provincetown the GLBT friendly place that it is. She still takes time to make sure her guests feel welcome and her staff follows suit. This is significant because even though P-town is known for good food, good service is a lot harder to find. Earl, the man who waited on us the first night we ate there, (we went back several times) was especially fabulous. I have a lot of food allergies so picking things from the menu often feels like taking a multiple choice test for a class I never took. Earl not only helped me navigate the menu, he made sure I got great substitutions and even brought a little container of cayenne pepper to sprinkle on my raw oysters in lieu of (wheat infused) Tabasco sauce. Earl also runs Club Purgatory and took a few moments to share some of Provincetown's local color with us.

One of the ironic challenges of visiting Provincetown is there are so many GLBT friendly places to stay, choosing a place can be overwhelming. We spent hours deciding where to stay and booked a room at the Surfside Hotel months earlier based on their beachfront access, views of the bay and fabulous heated pool. The staff was great and the manager actually took time out to interact with the guests, asking us about our plans and helping us navigate WiFi internet connection issues.

Even with our planning, we still ended up having to “wing it” accommodation wise because we decided lengthen our vacation. Be forewarned: even though P-town stays up late, finding a room after midnight is a challenge. We left early and rolled into town late Sunday night (OK early Monday morning), hoping to check into our hotel room a day early only to find the office closed. A few circles through town led us to the Boatslip where we got lucky. Not only did we get a room, we got a room with a tiny private balcony overlooking the harbor. Even though the room looked well-worn, the bed was surprisingly comfortable. The view was the tipping point. We woke up to the spectacle of the sun rising on the bay. We were lucky in that the weather was cool enough that we didn't need an air-conditioner – a good thing because the Boatslip doesn't have them.

We had to move again for our last two nights in Provincetown because the Surfside Hotel was booked. We lucked out a second time and landed a room with a spectacular view of the harbor at Enzo Guesthouse, above Enzo Restaurant, in the center of town. Our room was small but elegant and the marble bathroom was something out of *Better Homes and Gardens*.

If you haven't been to Provincetown in a while, or haven't been in the off-season, book your room now and get yourself out there. It's the perfect antidote to a world gone wrong. We all need a little shot of acceptance sometimes and it's hard not to feel good when you wake up in a room a view of the bay in a town where your expression of who you are is OK. It's especially wonderful to wake up in such a place if you're with great friends or someone you love.

Websites of interest:

Provincetown Gym: <http://www.ptowngym.com/>

Walter Baranowski: <http://www.driftwooddrift.com/index.html>

Whale watching information: <http://www.ptownchamber.com/whalewatching.html>

Bayside Bestsy's: <http://www.baysidebetsys.com/>

Boatslip: <http://www.boatslipresort.com/>

Surfside Hotel: <http://www.surfsideinn.cc/>

Enzo's: <http://www.enzolives.com/>

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