

What is Provincetown? by Steve Desroches

Where is Provincetown is an easy question to answer. It's all the way at the end of Cape Cod at the very tip of Massachusetts jutting into the Atlantic Ocean at 42 degrees North by 70 degrees West. But the more interesting question is what is Provincetown. By definition it is a small coastal New England town, but culturally Provincetown is a concept, a living idea, an institution of free thought, imagination, creativity, fun, freedom and equality. Provincetown is a continually evolving libertine phenomenon. It is a work of art with hundreds and thousands of visitors adding their own unique brush stroke to a collective portrait of a community. It is truly like nowhere else.

A quick history lesson helps to fully understand what makes the town so unique, and why it is such a popular tourist destination for visitors from around the world. Yes, it is a widely unknown fact that the Pilgrims landed here first before heading to Plymouth. And it is true that they wrote and signed the Mayflower Compact here, which is considered to be the first document in the New World that set the course towards democracy in motion. However, it is an often overlooked fact that half of the passengers on the Mayflower were crew, who were not Puritans. That was true for many of the ships that quickly followed to the new colony. These sailors were fond of gambling, drinking and other forms of merriment not just frowned upon, but that were deemed illegal by the stiff Puritans. Believe it or not, they even banned Christmas as it was thought to be too raucous! So where did these outsiders go to live how they wanted? They made their way back to the sandy spit now known as Provincetown, building the foundation for a place known to live on the edge and not only march to the beat of a different drummer, but its own orchestra!

So just how did a town full of pirates, outlaws, and outcasts become a place full of artists, bohemians, and entertainers? Modern day Provincetown was born in 1899, when Charles Hawthorne arrived to open the Cape Cod School of Art, bringing with him hundreds of artists from New York City's Greenwich Village. Soon to follow were actors and writers, including Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell, who began the Provincetown Players and helped give birth to American theater. In the 40's and 50's Provincetown hosted nightclub entertainers like Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday. Movie icons Montgomery Clift Marlon Brando and Richard Gere have all performed in Provincetown at some point in their careers. Pulitzer Prize winner Norman Mailer considered Provincetown home and cult film director John Waters spends every summer here. All these events and people created a consistent flow of progressive thought, liberal ideas, and often revolutionary ways that still fuels the creative engine of the oldest continuous art colony in America. It also helped to establish a place that not only tolerated, but celebrated gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people long before most other places in America, or indeed the world.

The significant presence of the LGBT community is apparent throughout the town's history. Poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, an early feminist, enjoyed the sexual openness of the town, where she and her husband explored the ideas of "free love" long before hippies found it fashionable. Tennessee Williams fell in love

for the first time here, and would heal his broken heart with frequent trips to the dunes with new paramours. John Waters and the lovely demented Dreamlanders found that in Provincetown, they were heroes rather than juvenile delinquents. Pulitzer Prize winning poet Mary Oliver writes and reads about her relationship with her female partner while Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Cunningham masterfully weaves the gay male experience into novels celebrated the world over. Provincetown isn't just a "gay tourist town" it's a crucible of important LGBT cultural, social, artistic and political ideas.

That all being said, Provincetown has its "pleasure dome" side. Just as the day can be spent visiting fine art galleries, listening to lectures by noted writers, or dining in some of the best restaurants in the region, the LGBT visitor can also lounge on the miles of gorgeous beaches, party at the daily tea dances, hookup for a vacation fling, meet Ms. or Mr. Right and socialize at the wide variety of dance clubs and bars along Commercial St. The top notch performance scene defies convention with one venue featuring a drag queen magician and another a production of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town", while one club is hosting an amateur drag king contest another offers a performance artist rolling around in honey and sequins. Provincetown is where some of the best underground and emerging talent spends the summer offering entertainment options usually only found in the big cities around the world.

At its heart, however, Provincetown is a year-round community of 3,500 people that grows to 50,000 plus in the summer, where each person brings their own diverse background to the fabulous collage of humanity that makes the town hum. People of all backgrounds, live, work, and play together to create one of the most dynamic and diverse communities in America. It's also one of the gayest, as census data shows that the P'town zip code of 02657 has the largest concentration of same sex couples of any place in America. It's also home to 1,000 same sex weddings a year since Massachusetts became the first state to extend marriage equality to gays and lesbians in 2004.

Natural beauty, a rich arts and entertainment scene, a vibrant LGBT community, and a three-mile stretch of town loaded with art galleries, shops, restaurants and a variety of accommodation options. Provincetown is a great place to visit, but an even better one to explore. Come and find your own personal Provincetown!