

*Provincetown's quaint accommodations, pristine beaches, fresh seafood, and colorful flowers and culture make this historic Cape Cod fishing village a very popular vacation spot.*





# Focus on Coastal Towns: Provincetown

By Arden Miller, CZM



Sometime between 16,000 and 20,000 years ago, melting glaciers retreated from what is now the Atlantic, and in the area we call the East Coast, a distinctive curling land mass resembling a human arm was formed. The arm sheltered a bay with depths up to 206 feet, and became a popular destination for fish, whales, and humans looking to explore new worlds, or find shelter from existing ones. Originally inhabited by the Wampanoags and Nausets tribes (who were primarily agriculturists and fishermen), the earliest known explorers to this area were the Vikings.

According to Norse legend, they found the harbor's shelter conducive to repairing Thorwald Ericson's boat, and stuck around at least long enough to build a stone wall. (Carbon dating, and style, attribute this wall—discovered in Provincetown in 1805—to Vikings, and estimate that it was built c. 1007 A.D.) Nearly 600 years later—in 1602 if you crave exact details—English explorer Bartholomew Gosnold, inspired by the notable number of cod fish (*Gadus morhua*), a valuable staple in early diets, named this area Cape Cod. Using Gosnold's map, *Mayflower* Captain John Smith entered the snug harbor in 1620, and the Pilgrims made their first landing not on Plymouth Rock, but rather onto the shores of the very tip of the arm: Provincetown.

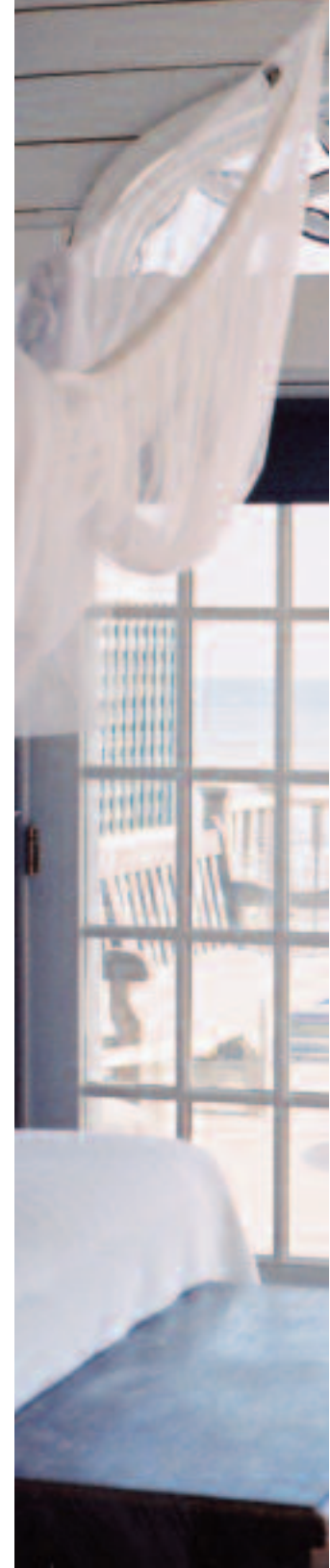
Rejected as a place to settle by the Pilgrims (they chose to go across the Bay into Plymouth instead), the "Province Lands," as they were originally called, have since been embraced by many. Through the 1700s, the fertile fishing grounds around Provincetown attracted a steady stream of fishermen to the area. But it wasn't until after the American Revolution (1775-1783), when an influx of Portuguese sailors hired to sail on U.S. ships settled in town, that Provincetown developed into the Cape's main commercial fishing center. From the early to the mid-1800s, a steady flux of immigrants, mostly from Portugal, moved to town to find work on fishing and whaling boats. With the maritime industry growing, associated maritime trades people—sail makers, riggers, blacksmiths—and their families made a living, and a home, here. By 1875, with working crews operating 61 ocean and coastal fishing vessels, 54 long wharves, 56 whaling ships, and as many as 700 ships crowded into the harbor at any given time, Provincetown was the largest working harbor in the state (sorry Boston!). As a whaling center, it was second only to New Bedford, its fishing industry second only to Gloucester, and the 3,475 residents had the distinction of living in the wealthiest town per capita in Massachusetts. And then, an act of nature, or a twist of fate, changed Provincetown's future history.

In 1898, the Portland Gale—a vicious storm named for the fishing boat *Portland* it completely annihilated—did serious damage to Provincetown.

(For more information, and some great photos of the ship's remains, see [www.stellwagen.noaa.gov/maritime/portland](http://www.stellwagen.noaa.gov/maritime/portland).) More than half of the wharfs, many of the properties close to the water, and numerous jobs, were destroyed. Rebuilding and recovery was gradual, but thanks to the lovely views, established businesses in town, and fresh salt air (not to mention mentions in then-popular publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post*), this developing 9.7-square-mile area was able to fill the economic gap with a new industry: tourism. By the early 1900s, this quaint fishing village—126 miles and worlds away from Boston—became a popular resort destination for people who summer (as a verb). It also caught the attention of a number of artists, writers, poets, and an assortment of their supporters and friends. The Provincetown Players, a forward-thinking theater company, established themselves in 1915 and produced a number of works, including those by such notable scribes as Eugene O'Neil, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Djuna Barnes.

And where you find writers and actors, artists aren't far behind. In 1935, abstract modernist Hans Hoffman opened his Summer School of Art (he already had a well-established art school in Manhattan). Classes were packed, and artists of all styles came to Provincetown to study and participate in his critiques. This mix of artists and writers with the pervasive "live and let live" Bohemian attitude attracted many to the area, including Pulitzer prize-winning playwright Tennessee Williams, who spent several summers there in the 1940s working on his award-winning dramas, *A Street Car Named Desire*, *Night of the Iguana*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. Other creative forces have added to the unique flavor of Provincetown over the centuries. Past and present full- and part-time residents include Village Voice founder and National Book Award winner Norman Mailer; Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Cunningham, Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz, abstract expressionist painters Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and *MAD Magazine* cartoonist Al Jaffee.

Honoring the arts, Provincetown celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary as America's oldest art colony in 1999. To mark the occasion, the





Provincetown International Film Festival—now an annual 4-day event—was established. Past Festival participants include John Waters (writer of the Tony award-winning *Hairspray*, and writer/director of *Pink Flamingos* and *Serial Mom*, among others), acclaimed singer Connie Francis, and actresses Kathleen Turner and Lili Taylor.

Walking down Commercial Street today, the past and present comfortably mingle. Within a few blocks on the pedestrian-friendly street, you can purchase freshly baked Portuguese rolls, browse antique and art stores, enjoy samples of home-made fudge, wonder why a shop selling water pipes and tie-dyed shirts is called “Spank the Monkey,” and have a mug of chowder made with local clams while listening to show tunes sung live at a piano bar.

But it’s not just all art, fudge, and culture. The term “the great outdoors” could have been coined for Provincetown. Nearly two-thirds of the land is part of the Cape Cod National Seashore. Designated as protected public land by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, the 40 miles from Orleans to Provincetown are an ecological treasure chest. Sand dunes, pristine beaches, sea grass, wildlife habitat, marshes, and wild cranberry bogs can be explored on bike, foot, or (with permits) by over-sand vehicle. And at the very tip of it all, just two and a half miles from the center of Provincetown, is Race Point—one of the few places on the East Coast where you can watch the sun set into the water. Want some history and information with your pretty sight-seeing hike? The National Park Service offers a number of informational guided tours along the Cape Cod National Seashore. (See Resources at the end of this piece for details.) If you’ve had enough nature, or it’s raining, the Pilgrim Monument awaits. The 252-foot granite tower with a museum at its base has been educating locals and tourists about Provincetown’s role in American history since 1910. Exhibits change regularly, and the hardy can climb to the top and enjoy panoramic views of the area. Whales, once hunted primarily for their oil (forget the eco-saver coil bulb, this was pre-electricity), are now admired from a safe distance. The *Portuguese Princess* whale watch has a research scientist from the Center for Coastal Studies (a nonprofit organization based out of Provincetown that studies and protects whales and other marine life) aboard each excursion.

Today, the year-round population of around 3,400 sees as many visitors over the course of just one week during the summertime. There are weekends, festivals, and lodgings geared toward most every type of tourist. Seriously. In addition to summer concert series, assorted fundraising events and benefits, and house and garden tours, here’s a sample from the 2008 calendar: Yankee Lambda Car Show and Parade, Gays for Patsy Spring Stomp, Provincetown Portuguese Festival, King Hiram’s Masonic Full Moon Party, International Women’s Flag Football Tournament, Blessing of the Fleet, Tennessee William’s Festival, Leather Weekend, Norman Mailer Society Conference, and Holly Folly (see Provincetown Calendar under Resources for links to details, dates, and associated costs).

If you are the planning type, you will want to check the Provincetown calendar to see what is scheduled during the week, and make advanced reservations. Or, if you like to be surprised and are looking for a fun daycation, the high speed ferry—90 minutes from Boston to Provincetown!—can take you there and back in a day. Either way, you are sure to see what has attracted such a wide range of people to this unique coastal community over the centuries.

## **Resources**

### **Providence Calendar of Events:**

[www.provincetowntourismoffice.org/provincetown-events.php](http://www.provincetowntourismoffice.org/provincetown-events.php)

## **Activities**

**National Park Service guided tours:** [www.nps.gov/caco/planourvisit/events.htm](http://www.nps.gov/caco/planourvisit/events.htm)

### **Whale Watch cruises and marine eco-excursions:**

[www.provincetownwhalewatch.com](http://www.provincetownwhalewatch.com)

### **Pilgrim Monument & Provincetown Museum:**

[www.pilgrim-monument.org/t3/index.php](http://www.pilgrim-monument.org/t3/index.php)

**Bike rentals:** [www.ptownbikes.com/ptb/rentals](http://www.ptownbikes.com/ptb/rentals)

## **Getting There**

**www.bostonharborcruises.com (fast ferry):** [www.boston-ptown.com](http://www.boston-ptown.com)

## **Lodging**

**Cape Cod Lodging Directory:** [www.capecodtravel.com/lodging/](http://www.capecodtravel.com/lodging/)