

← Choosing the Best Yankee Stories of the Year

Getting to Know Provincetown

Posted on [November 25, 2011](#) by [By Mel Allen](#)

There is no better way to know a famous tourist town than arriving off season, when the tourists have left, and the locals reclaim their streets, their beaches, their way of life that brought them here in the first place, perhaps generations ago. I rarely visit a beautiful place without daydreaming at some point about what it might be like to live there. And it was no different this time when we came to Provincetown, at the tip of the outer cape.



If you've been to Provincetown, Massachusetts in the height of summer, you know there are few more entertaining destinations in the country. You can pass a day simply people watching on Commercial Street, the three mile long living carnival of homes, shops and humanity that runs parallel to Cape Cod Bay.

You can walk for hours through the undulating dunes of the Province Lands in the Cape Cod National Seashore. You can simply throw down a blanket on the beach and let the enervating surf cool you down. And you can share all of this with some 50,000 plus like minded visitors, who are willing to wait for traffic to crawl through town, wait for restaurant tables, wait for parking by the beach.



Approaching Fisherman's Wharf by boat

Credit: Annie Graves

Which is why I love off season. There may be at best barely 3000 year-rounders to share the streets with you. Like bookend visits, I came to Provincetown in April and again this November, just before the town's famous Thanksgiving lighting of the Pilgrim Monument. The monument seems to follow your gaze wherever you are in town, or even on the wind swept dunes. The monument symbolizes the town's pride in its history—and reminds everyone that the pilgrims first made landfall right here in Provincetown Harbor, and signed the Mayflower Compact while anchored offshore. If you had forgotten that fact before coming to town, you won't soon forget it again after visiting the [Pilgrim Monument and Provincetown Museum](#).



Commercial Street beckoned with only a relative handful of cars and pedestrians, all of waving to each other as if we were all in on a wonderful secret.

The Outer Cape's ocean waters moderates temperatures—flowers bloom here earlier and stay longer. In April the lovely, well kept homes that hug the narrow, winding streets were already boasting flourishing gardens.



April flowers start the season with color.

Credit Annie Graves

And here I was just days before Thanksgiving, looking at roses refusing to relent to winter's black and white world.



If you want to know the details we checked into the [Anchor Inn and Beachhouse](#).

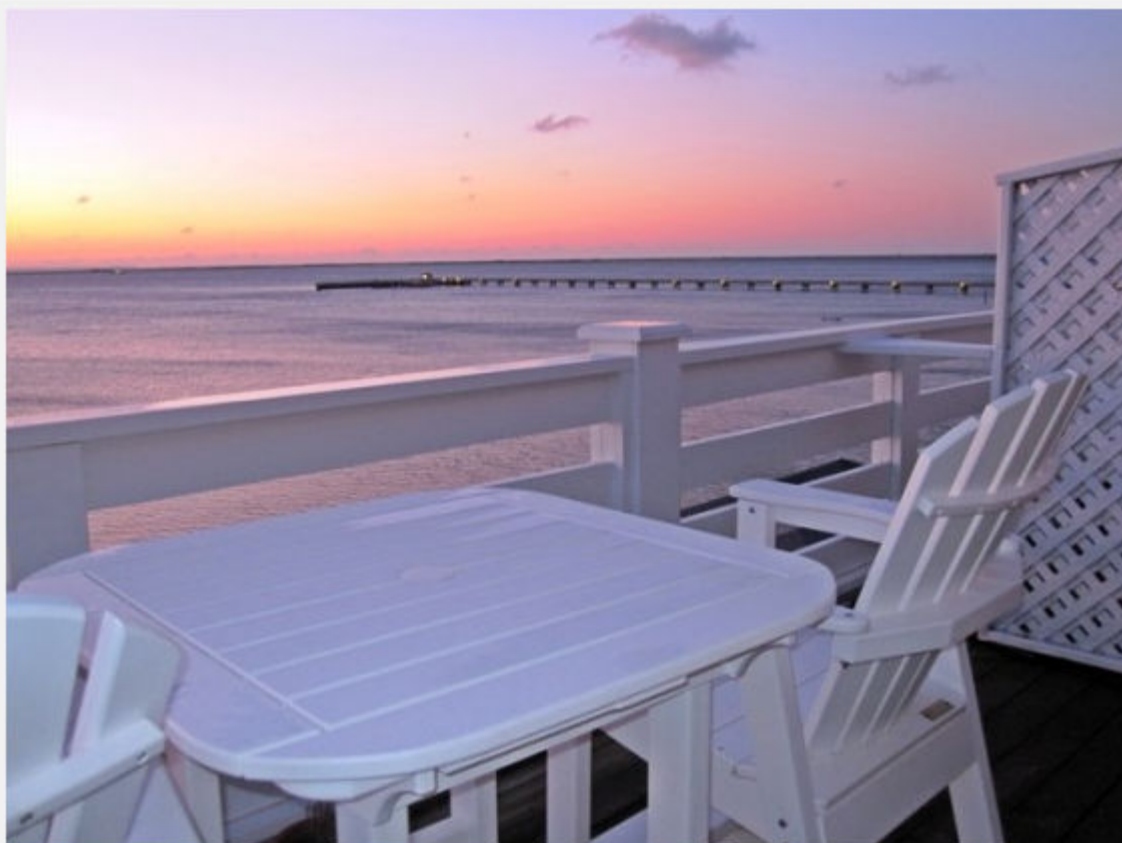


We were greeted by Molly, the resident Labrador. Provincetown boasts it is the most dog friendly town in America and that was certainly borne out as no matter where we strolled, we saw dogs and their owners—and you couldn't walk for more than a few minutes without seeing a welcoming dog dish filled with water.





To get a room at the inn with a sweeping view of the bay in summer would have required a reservation made perhaps in the dark heart of winter. But even though a number of B&Bs and inns close up after Columbus day, so too, there are always others who keep welcome signs posted year-round.



The venerable [Lobster Pot Restaurant](#) is famous for its "line out the doors and down the street," our waitress told us as she seated us. Sharing the dining room of this mother and son run restaurant was a couple huddled in one corner, and a playwright from New York City who said he'd been coming for nearly 20 years and celebrating his birthday right here each time at the Lobster Pot. We caught a break since the restaurant would soon close until April. Our meals: blackened tuna sashimi and sole almondine showed why even though it is one of Provincetown's most famous dining stops, it is one of those rare places that lives up to its following.



Mornings start early when your room faces the rising sun. Which is good because I was ready to explore. On foot. Off season when Commercial Street and the entire town hums to a different rhythm.

Breakfast could not have been more convenient—about five steps from the inn's front door. [Bayside Betsy's](#), with its tables looking out to the beach and the brightening sky, all made brighter by delicious and hearty fare. As is the case with so many of Provincetown eateries, your waiter (in this case Steve) had a personality that mixed serving with comedy.





After breakfast, several hours of meandering followed.

We saw workers fixing, repairing, battening up, at once getting ready for winter, and at the same time laying the foundation for the spring and summer ahead.



I don't think there is a dull block along Commercial Street. Whether exploring famous MacMillan Wharf with fishing boats bobbing by the dock,



Or walking to the end of the pier to look at the famous mural with its tribute to the women who sustained the fishermen on their long, dangerous voyages



or meandering down alley ways which peek onto the sand and water,



or just appreciating the trim cottages, or looking at the home where Norman Mailer lived and wrote (now a writer's colony since his death), a day unfolds at whatever pace you want.





Off season there are fewer shops open, sure, but also few people tugging at the stuff you want. I think every store had 50% off sales—and it's no surprise that the days after Thanksgiving leading to Christmas sees a surge of visitors who come for fun and bargains.



[Marine Specialties](#) is part shopping mecca and part vaudeville show—in this case the performers being the eclectic shelves filled with anything you might ever imagine to see if a store was stocked by someone with a great sense of humor. Pith helmets? If you've been looking, you've come to the right place.



There are any number of lunch stops, but I discovered [Napi's](#) one spring and we spoke about it for months afterward.



It is part art gallery, part repository of Provincetown memories, and for decades has stoked the fires of its customers. I asked our waitress for the recipe of its famous Portuguese kale soup and in moments she returned with a printed copy.



Portuguese Kale Soup

Recipe from Napi's in Provincetown, MA

Ingredients

1 lb. linguica
1 lb. chorizo (a spicier version of linguica)
1 bunch kale
1 lb. dried kidney beans or 3 cans of the beans
1 large onion, diced
2 large potatoes, chopped
2 small cans of tomato paste
Salt and pepper to taste
Cider vinegar

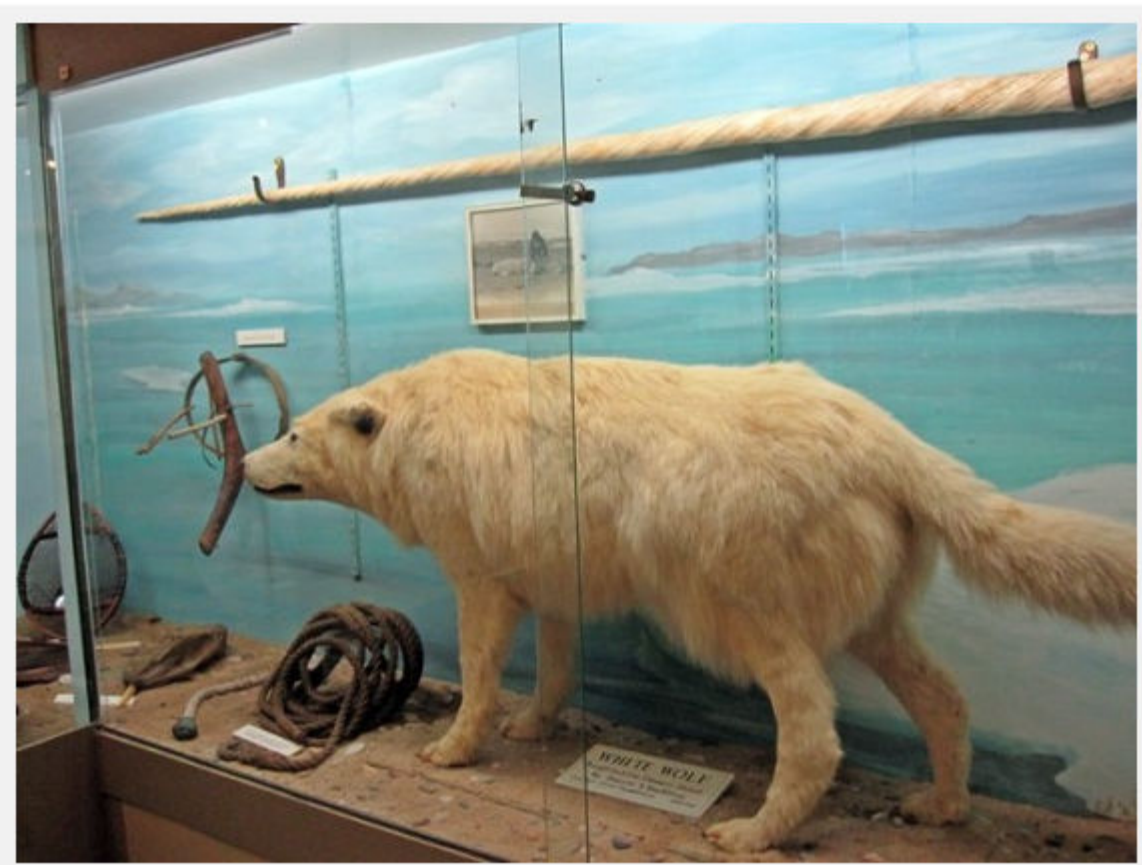
Directions

- Follow package directions for soaking beans (if you use canned skip this step)
- Cut linguica and chorizo into thin rounds and sauté in just enough oil to keep them from burning.
- Remove and place in soup pot.
- Sauté the diced onion in the pan. Add to soup pot.
- Add beans and enough of their water and plain water if necessary to cover to the soup pot.
- Add potatoes, and salt and pepper and tomato paste to taste.
- Cook gently until the beans are as tender as you like.
- Wash kale, remove stems and cut into bite size pieces. Add to soup.
- Cook until the kale is cooked to your taste.
- After the soup has been put into a bowl, add a splash of vinegar.

After lunch we had to climb the Pilgrim Monument, its tower rising over 252 tall. The walk is relatively easy, with gusts of wind at the top all but taking your breath away, but no more so than the hawk's eye view of the town, the bay, the distant dunes.



The museum itself is one of those treasures that can all too easily be overlooked. There is a room devoted to Polar explorer and Provincetown native Admiral Donald MacMillan's numerous explorations. And I guarantee you will come away with a greater appreciation of the pilgrim experience after visiting the Pilgrim Ewing and it's diorama of the Mayflower.



In summer you may share sunset watching at Race Point in the National Seashore with a hundred or more people—but on this November afternoon, with the wind billowing and sand swirling, we seemingly had the entire coastline to ourselves. When you are alone on the dune backed shoreline, it is easy to forget that only a mile or so away is a town filled with light and noise and camaraderie. In the Provincelands offseason at twilight it is lovely and lonely, as if on a deserted island.



A final Provincetown dinner had to be fish, fresh from the water just beyond our table at the [Central House at the Crown and Anchor Inn](#).



The last thing we did the following morning was to gather up those ubiquitous real estate brochures –with cottages and condos, and homes ranging from affordable (especially if you rent it out in high season) to this is great when we win the lottery.

Could we live in Provincetown? We could. Could you?

