

# Metro

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE FEBRUARY 14, 2010 | BOSTON.COM/LOCAL

Months before summer's crowds transform the streets of Provincetown, residents, businesses cope with a frigid desolation



BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2008

In warmer months, Provincetown's streets bustle.



JULIA CUMES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Provincetown resident Greg Wolfe and his chocolate Lab Scout had the beach at Provincetown Harbor to themselves earlier this month. In winter, the town's population shrinks from 30,000 to 3,500.

## WINTER HARDSHIPS FELT AT LAND'S END

By David Filipov  
GLOBE STAFF



'Now that we're in economic hard times, these last two years have been even slower.'

NAPI VAN DERECK,  
owner, Napi's Restaurant in Provincetown

**P**ROVINCETOWN — They peer out of frosted windows into empty streets, casting an eye to the heavens and to the mercury. The weather decides whether shoppers and diners come or not, and therefore whether their stores and galleries and restaurants will bleed or break even — much less turn a profit.

They are the defiant business owners who choose to stay open Down Cape in the down season in a down economy. And they are few in Provincetown.

Only the odd venue on this wind-blown scimitar of sand is open to the trickle of townies and tourists who happen by. Business, never robust here in winter, is as bad as ever. Some merchants report sales cut in half from a few years ago; many are cutting staff; some are choosing to trim hours further rather than spend money heating an empty store.

'We call them the quiet months,' said Candy Collins-Boden, executive director of the Provincetown chamber of

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'There's not much work here in the winter, and people that have work are not making much money during the winter months.'

DONNA VAILLANCOURT, owner of Wired Puppy

## Provincetown businesses cope with frigid desolation

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commerce. "It's quieter this year, of course, because of the economy."

Collins-Boden and other Provincetown officials and entrepreneurs drew encouragement from the news earlier this month that their town had been named a "distinctive destination" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. One of 12 communities across the country to win the honor, Provincetown was singled out by the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit for its storied history, its cutting-edge culture, its diversity, and its vibrancy.

At a ceremony in the unheated auditorium of the town hall, officials and business owners expressed pride in their town and the hope that the award would help bring people out before May. The question is whether the award will make a difference for businesses here in the coldest, darkest months.

Just 10 to 15 percent of shops, eateries, and galleries remain open year round, Collins-Boden said. For many owners, every day is like Groundhog Day in reverse. If it is sunny and mild, shoppers might venture out to the town some call "the end of the earth." Clouds and bluster cast a shadow on any chance of customers.

Provincetown is not the only Cape Cod quiet zone in the off-season: A drive down the peninsula reveals rows of empty motels, boarded-up beach cottages, and closed-down eateries. But nowhere is the contrast starker than at the tip of the Cape, where the population shrinks from 30,000 to 3,500 in the winter months.

The main drag, Commercial Street, a raging carnival of dining, drinking, shopping, and entertainment in summer, yields in winter to a bushed procession of shuttered storefronts, studios open by appointment only, and "closed" signs.

"Winter hours... very much weather-dependent."

"Not closed for season, but sure as hell thinking about it."

One snowy morning recently, the entrance to The Lily Pond, a gift shop on Commercial Street, opened to the rich sound of door chimes. But the store was unheated, unlit, and closed for business.

"Tomorrow's supposed to be a sunny day out, in the 30s," said the owner, Michele Couture. "Tomorrow I might decide that it's probably a good day to be open."

Some proprietors say they stay open because they like the year-round lifestyle, and their summer sales more than offset winter doldrums. Some work out of their homes, and therefore



PHOTOS BY JULIA CATES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A bicyclist didn't have to dodge traffic while riding past Commercial Street's shuttered storefronts. The main drag is teeming with tourists during summer.



have the same, fixed costs — heating, electricity — whether they are open or not. And some, like Couture, who also chairs the Provincetown board of selectmen, believe there should be retail and food available to anyone who does visit in winter, even if it means operating at a loss.

Napi Van Dereck agrees. He and his wife, Helen, have kept open Napi's restaurant — renowned for its hearty, homemade specials, its collection of paintings, and its art nouveau decor — year-round for more than three decades.

"If the weather is good, you

might say, 'Let's go down to Provincetown,'" he said, as his interlocutor polished off a homemade peach cobbler bread pudding. "The galleries will pop open, and they know that we're here."

Van Dereck estimates that the changing demographic of the town, as upscale condos replace

apartments and seasonal residents push out year-rounders, has cut his winter business 30 to 40 percent in the last eight years.

"And now that we're in economic hard times these last two years have been even slower," Van Dereck said on a weekday when he said he had sold 37 lunches, as opposed to the 75 to 80 he said would have sold a few years ago.

Like Van Dereck, Richard Cuencas thinks of his store, R. C. Handcrafted Jewelry, as a year-round destination.

"People have come from Connecticut and Boston and New York because they knew we are open," said Cuencas, who augments his signature earrings with a variety of knickknacks, as well as works by local artists ("If they make a buck or two over the winter it's a great help to them," he said).

But sales are "marginal," he said, forcing him to trim staff from seven to four "because finances are bad all around."

Other owners share his gloomy business outlook.

"There's not much work here in the winter, and people that have work are not making much

money during the winter months," said Donna Vaillancourt, owner of Wired Puppy, an Internet cafe where the latte line forms at the door on a summer's day. On a recent afternoon, Vaillancourt sat alone.

### WINTER PLAN

To watch a video of business owners discussing how to keep Provincetown alive in the winter, go to [www.boston.com/globe](http://www.boston.com/globe)

Some winter visitors appreciate the off-season quietude, said Bob Sanborn, the town's director of tourism, and also the owner of Prince Albert Guest House. From January through March he sells only 10 to 30 percent of his rooms, he said, but they go to bird lovers and eco-tourists, or writers and artists "working on their next novel or masterpiece."

Many year-round proprietors, too, find a silver lining in the relative solitude of boreal Provincetown. There is more time to chat, less day-to-day stress.

And, Vaillancourt said, "The sound of nothing and the light is just amazing."