Provincetown in the Off-Off Season

Just enough art, culture, good food—and conversation—“to keep you fully engaged”

by NELL PORTER BROWN

January in Provincetown can’t promise the carnival sizzle of summertime. But with the population whittled to around 1,000, and only 20 or so restaurants and bars open, the tip of Cape Cod offers, instead, “a wonderful, quiet romance,” says David Drake, artistic director of the Provincetown Theater—and no need to cope with the Commercial Street throng.

The theater itself hosts play readings, a weekend of “24 Hour Plays,” and The Mosquito Story Slam. Elsewhere, there are also art exhibits, films, a smattering of live-music performances, free community classes, and cozy lodgings for intrepid visitors. “And if it snows?” Drake adds. “It’s Disney—ridiculously beautiful.”

The natural drama of the ocean and the historic heart of the town are on full, bare-bones display. If the wind isn’t threatening to blow you down, it’s wonderful to bundle up and walk on the jetty and the beaches, or take some of the trails in and around the Cape Cod National Seashore. “You could be the only ones enjoying some of the most beautiful coastlines in the world,” says year-round resident Mike Miller, founder and publisher of the community media hub ptownie. There’s “a running joke in town that ‘Hey, I’ll see you at the Stop & Shop with your pajamas and slippers on.’ And I hate to say it—but it’s true!” he adds, laughing. “The supermarket is a very social place in January and February.”

Stopping to chat in the frozen-food aisle, in a community with so many creative people, can prove surprisingly illuminating. But, he assures, there are other, more formal activities and “just enough going on to keep you fully engaged—if you want to be.”

Ptownie’s seasonal guide highlights “year-round heroes”—the establishments that help keep the town’s fiery, artistic spirit alive during the fiercest months—plus communal gatherings that mitigate that otherwise ghostly feel of the Outer Cape, when the weather and remoteness can make it
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actions, you can always go in and have lunch at Far Land Provisions.” The corner store, deli, and full-scale bakery produces all food on site, and is a convivial spot, with several tables, during the winter.

Breakfast and brunch are also served—all day—at Chach, a bright, homey diner-ish place; try the Mexican green chili omelet and a side of hand-cut fries. Get eggs Florentine, brioche French toast, and Portuguese flippers (sugar-topped fried dough) at Lizz’s Café, Anybody’s Bar—a warm, stylish neighborhood restaurant with mismatched vintage touches, antique tables, oil paintings, and a polished bar made from an actual dory—but know that you might seem as if you are the last person left on earth. “We are so grateful to those people and places that stay open during the time we need them most,” Miller reports, so “you know that if you want to have human interactions, you can always go in and have lunch.

**STAFF PICK:** *Gloria Steinem: Her Story as History*

*Gloria: A Life*, at the American Repertory Theater January 24–March 1, is not a biopic. Instead, playwright Emily Mann ’74 and director Diane Paulus use the pioneering feminist’s iconic and personal journey to tell the wider, collective story of the modern women’s movement.

The play, based on Mann’s research and interviews with Steinem, now 85, was first produced off-Broadway in late 2018. Its text touches on Steinem’s journalistic exploits—*New York* magazine columnist, co-founder of *Ms.* magazine—and the challenges, like family instability and sexism, that she faced and has chronicled. Her rise during the 1960s and ’70s as the glamorous spokeswoman for women’s rights, however, is not spelled out. Steinem the character (played by Patricia Kalember, of the Manhattan production) appears on stage more to illuminate and punctuate a story that includes a cast of other landmark figures who rotate through scenes, animating history—among them former New York congresswoman and crusader for liberal causes Bella Abzug, radical African-American activist Angela Davis, and constitutional lawyer and antifeminist conservative leader Phyllis Schlafly, A.M. ’45. (Their presence may make the play especially useful for younger women.) Steinem’s mother, Ruth, a fragile, mentally ill woman whom Steinem has said was instrumental in shaping her views on social injustices and anti-women practices, looms large—and poignantly so.

Steinem has promoted the “talking circle” as a method for airing volatile issues. In the play’s second act, a talking circle actually takes place on stage, and audience members are invited to participate. In many ways, Mann’s play can be seen as a talking circle writ large, reflecting not only institutionalized feminism, but the organic, continuous movement of women. ~NELL PORTER BROWN
The protected harbor has historically sheltered boats and visitors from the elements—and nurtured creative spirits. By the mid 1700s, Provincetown was an established fishing community that grew exponentially, following the American Revolution, into a prime commercial port, with a large Portuguese population. In November 1898, however, the Portland Gale struck the coast and destroyed wharves and other fishing infrastructure, effectively wiping out the industry, prompting area leaders to rethink and rebuild the local economy through tourism. The influential Cape Cod School of Art—the nation’s first outdoor school of figure painting—was founded in 1899, and the town was soon attracting artists, along with performers, intellectuals, and other bohemians, notably from Greenwich Village. The New York-based Provincetown Players produced two seasons, mounting shows at a fish house on the town’s Lewis Wharf. The second season, in 1916, featured a debut play by a young writer named Eugene O’Neill—later hailed as the father of modern American drama.

Fast-forward to the 1960s, when Provincetown saw an influx of hippies, head shops, and free-wheeling lifestyles, and then to the 1970s, when it became home to a growing gay population, such that in 1978 the town saw an influx of hippies, head shops, and free-wheeling lifestyles, and then to the 1970s, when it became home to a growing gay population, such that in 1978 the town overhauled the interior and opened the library there in 1978. The grand and airy space has sunlit nooks for reading and writing, and displays of items from the heritage collection. A half-scale model of the Rose Dorothea, an “Indian head” schooner (the original boat was built in 1905 at a shipyard in Essex, Massachusetts), stands stalwart in the children’s room. The library is a vital community resource; check the website for public events.

Anyone can also join in Winter Wednesdays (February 5–March 25), a program of free, drop-in classes sponsored by several town agencies. Last year, classes ranged from woodworking and cake-decorating to drumming, Humphrey Bogart Movie Nights, and a very well-attended series of candid, open-ended discussions on “The Art of Dying.” The classes bring people together to learn something new. Combating the urge to stay home alone and hibernate. “I learned to sew last winter!” Miller says. “It’s like going to summer camp again.”

The Provincetown Theater ends its official production season with the December 20-22 performance of “Townie Holiday Extravaganza,” but the free “Winter Play Dates”—full-length readings of new works—start on January 28 (and are held every other Tuesday—February 11, 25; March 10, 24; April 7). Author, playwright, and educator Gary Garrison, former executive director of The Dramatists Guild of America, leads the effort, organizing writers and readers from Cape Cod, Boston, and New York City. There’s a Q & A with the playwrights following each reading, and a cash bar in the lobby.

Also on tap, during President’s Day weekend (February 14-16), are the “24 Hour Plays.” Licensed under the New York City-based 24 Hour Play organization, these impromptu productions are written, directed, staged, and performed, in a flurry of intensive collaboration, from Friday to Sunday. Typically, a few props—like a pair of fog glasses, a bucket, and a blow horn—must be incorporated into the play, Drake explains: “So these tend to be comedies and they’re funny, and the quality is varying—but that’s all part of the fun of it.”

The Mosquito Story Slam, started about seven years ago, is a live event and podcast produced by Boston-based filmmaker and educator Vanessa Vartabedian. It will take place at the Provincetown Theater every second Saturday from January through April. Story themes are announced in advance, and on the night of the performance, participants sign up at 6:30 p.m., and start slamming a half-hour later. “There are no judges, no prizes,” Drake says. “Just ‘come on down’ when your name is called.”

Before or after any show, head to restaurants and bars. Closest is Fanizzi’s Restaurant by the Sea—more like in the sea, separated by pilings. Sit at the large, well-stocked bar or in the dining room; meals center around traditional Italian-style entrées, like chicken parmigiana. The place provides its own theater during a storm, or when the waves are running high, and the ocean churns right outside, or water slams against the windows.

Mac’s Fish House, as implied, is all about fresh seafood—from swordfish curry and lobster fra diavolo to fried scallops and sashimi. It tends to hold “foozie evenings and specials,” Miller notes, “like sio noodle-bowl nights and wine-pairing dinners.” But The Canteen—walk-up counter, wooden tables, and basic nautical décor—has, arguably, the best lobster roll in town, along with crispy Brussels sprouts, fish and chips, a meatball melt, and falafel salad: something for everyone, and all cooked fresh, with care. For finer dining and more traditional classics, like Caesar salad, lemon chicken, and beef stroganoff, head to the Landing Bistro & Bar, at the Pilgrim House hotel. Events and entertainment are also planned this winter,
which makes rolling into bed afterward easy. Nearby, the Provincetown Brewing Company, launched in 2018, hosts “One Man’s Trash/Another Man’s Treasure” Wednesday movie nights, to be enjoyed with the brewery’s canned, and rotating draft, beers, and pub fare. Don’t resist the chicken sandwich with bacon, blue cheese, garlic aioli, pickled onions, and arugula on a ciabatta roll—along with fresh juices and smoothies, salads, and the giant Bavarian pretzel (for two).

Films, from art-house wonders to mainstream Hollywood hits, are also screened year-round at the intimate Waters Edge Cinema, operated by the savvy curators of the Provincetown Film Society. Local radio stations WORM and WFMR host “Thursday Night at the Movies”—classic 16-millimeter and 8-millimeter reel-to-reel films dating to the 1930s, some talkies and some silent, with occasional musical accompaniment.

Another bright light of winter is the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, where rotating exhibits through March offer works from its 3,000-plus permanent collection, including recent gifts. Starting January 10 (with a popular “opening night” reception on January 24), the museum spotlights works by visual artists from around the country who are completing 2019-2020

### ALL IN A DAY:

**Harvard’s White Mountain Cabin**

**In 1962,** a group of hard-working, eager Harvard Mountaineering Club members with limited construction skills and tools managed to erect a log cabin on the eastern slope of Mount Washington. It’s still there—and anyone who wants to can trek two miles up through snow, ice, rain, or fog and use the place between December 1 and April 1. “Most of the people are ice-climbers and back-country skiers,” says club president emeritus Vladislav Sevostianov ’19. “It’s the only full structure on the mountain where you can stay in the winter, which is part of what makes it so special.”

It’s certainly a unique place to spend time in nature—and off the grid. There’s solar-powered lights, a wood stove, propane for cooking, and an outhouse. Water is hauled in, or collected from a stream. About 16 people fit in the sleeping loft, and several nearby tent sites accommodate winter campers. To stay there, visitors merely check availability and sign up for space at the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, adjacent to the Tuckerman Ravine Trail that leads to a cut-off route to the cabin. (The cabin is completely separate from the more accessible Harvard Outing Club cabin, which is operated in conjunction with the Appalachian Mountain Club.)

The Mountaineering Club’s base is primarily used to access ski trails, snow-shoeing routes, and a variety of ice-climbs. Some paths extend from the cabin, or others from the main Tuckerman Ravine Trail, including the Lion Head Trail, which is considered the best winter ascent to the Mount Washington summit. Proper clothing and gear—including ice axes and crampons, or other boot-traction devices—are absolute necessities, as is close monitoring of weather conditions. Avalanches are not uncommon, and each year people are injured, or die, in the White Mountains. The Pinkham Notch Visitor Center offers daily weather and trail conditions. (The cabin’s on-site caretaker also has a radio for emergencies.)

The warnings aren’t intended to scare off visitors. Newcomers are always welcome, provided they learn to adapt to winter conditions. Ted Carman ‘63, among those who led the cabin-building brigade, has hiked and ice-climbed throughout the White Mountains—and beyond. A few years ago he celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday at the cabin, scaling the 500-foot South Gully: “It’s the easiest of the snow and ice climbs, but I got a big kick out of it!”

As undergraduates, Carman and fellow club members requested permission from the U.S. Forest Service, which owns the land, to build a new structure in early 1962 after a preexisting Harvard cabin fell into disrepair. Approval was granted, but only, Carman learned years later, because “they thought there was no way college students” would succeed. But that June, having identified a likely site near Huntington Ravine, and hauled in supplies from Tuckerman Ravine—boards, nails, roofing, and at least a tone of Sakrete for the foundations—the students got to work.

Robert B. Redmayne ‘65 captured the rookie exploits in amusing terms for the May 1963 Harvard Mountaineering Journal. “Clean healthy expectations of hard work in a spring scented forest were dulled into a dirty depression wrought by hours of clawing into the wet, sticky half-soil that covers the middle of slopes on the mountain,” he wrote. “And there is the procession of eager Harvard friends and acquaintances lured up by Ted Carman from weekend to weekend, shocked and appalled by the dirt and the work, exhausted and mute after two days.”

“We really didn’t even know how to get the trees, for the logs, down,” Carman recalls. “We’d cut them through and they’d tip, then just lean there, held up by adjacent trees.” Despite all that, after a few weeks of arduous 12-hour days, the neophytes had cleared the site, built nine foundation piers, bolted on the base logs, and installed the floor joists. Still, upon reflection, the group concluded it was time to hire professional help, which arrived in September in the form of an omni-talented local builder and woodman, Freeman Holden. He transformed the students into productive underlings, and by October, the cabin was finished. “That December, we put in the wood stove, and the cabin’s been in use ever since,” Carman adds. “And really, the most remarkable part is that over the last 57 years, undergraduates at the club have taken care of this cabin. Someone has always stepped up and said, ‘I will take this on,’ and they do.”

—NELL PORTER BROWN
residencies at Provincetown’s Fine Arts Work Center. The nonprofit center helps keep the local arts vital, and each season selects 20 emerging artists and writers for seven-month fellowships. It also hosts its own winter series of readings and solo exhibitions of fellows’ work, along with events with other guests artists and writers. “Energetic and intimate,” says Lydia Marie Hicks, the visual-arts fellowship coordinator, these gatherings are “an exciting way to see the future of the art and writing worlds unfold.” Check the website for schedule details.

Varying accommodations are open in January and February. Besides Pilgrim House, ptownie’s Miller cites the Aerie House, Anchor Inn Beach House, Benchmark Inn, Revere Guesthouse, and Gifford House. The lovely Carpe Diem Guesthouse and Namaste Spa is also open (except for the last three weeks in January), and Eben House and Stowaway (both closed for January) re-open February 1. Also note that both the Crowne Pointe Historic Inn (and its Shui Spa) and the Crown and Anchor re-open for the 2020 season on Valentine’s Day weekend. Although the usual spas and massage studios are not officially open, visitors can always find bodywork professionals and recommendations through the Provincetown Community Space on Facebook, Miller explains.

The off-season best suits city dwellers seeking a slow-moving, peaceful time, anyone immersed in creative projects, those who want to sit by a fire and read a book—and people eager to get outside and enjoy the volatile weather. “There are only about a thousand local people here, but they are some of the most interesting people you will ever meet,” he adds. “That’s what’s amazing about this place. There’s all this beauty—and people who appreciate that beauty, and art, and acceptance, people who appreciate everyone for their misfit qualities.”

Settle in for sunset views at Provincetown mainstay Fanizzi’s Restaurant by the Sea.