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This Small New England City Mixes Highbrow Arts and Lowbrow Fun

Walk from ice bumper cars to the ballet to a blacksmithing class.

By [Robin Catalano](#)

Published on 1/12/2022 at 4:52 PM



GoProvidence

Pop quiz: which New England city has more than 30 miles of waterfront, 400-plus restaurants, and a quirky cultural scene with experimental theater and historic walking tours? I could forgive you if you answered [Portland](#) or [Burlington](#) (and pretend you didn't say [Boston](#)), but the honor belongs to Providence. This city of artists, activists, and craft beer producers has so dramatically

transformed over the past two decades that each time I come back to my home city, I stumble across something new—from Southern comfort food to a makers' space for industrial arts.

While some crowd New England in fall and summer, winter holds its own romance here. Providence is buzzy, unpretentious, and walkable year round, but even in winter, you'll find a mixture of fun and artsy shenanigans to get into. Glide on skates or crash into other bumper cars on an ice rink. Cap off a provocative museum exhibit with a brewery crawl. Take a welding class, then try vodka distilled from oysters. Or sip an horchata latte while strolling over one of many stone bridges crisscrossing the lamplit river as gondolas glide beneath.

In a city where old brick meets new glass, brows can be both high and low at the same wonderful time. Here's what to do in the approachable yet busy capital of the country's smallest state.



Get around town via gondola. | GoProvidence

How to get there

The airport is an easy 20-minute drive, taxi, or bus ride to Rhode Island's capital city, though some arrive to Providence in old-world style via train. Amtrak's Northeast Corridor route, which runs from Norfolk to Boston, stops right in downtown. Meanwhile, the high-speed Acela runs from New York City in three hours, and Washington, D.C. in about six.

If you're not renting a car, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) offers unlimited trips for \$6 per day. You can also rent an e-bike or scooter from Spin, a low-cost "micro-mobility" service.



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Where to stay in Providence

January is Rhode Island Hotel Month, with up to 40 percent off regular rates at a variety of properties. Other hotels participate in the Go Providence Pass, which rewards guests with a \$100 Visa card with a stay of two nights or more. One of the latter is The Beatrice. The city’s newest hotel and first boutique accommodations in over a decade, The Beatrice has serene, comfortable rooms and an enviable location close to the riverfront, Memorial Park, the RISD Museum, and numerous restaurants.

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Or make an orderly conga line. | BankNewport City Center

Intentionally crash into people on the ice

Warmer seasons invite biking and kayaking along the Providence River and boating at Roger Williams Park. In the winter, BankNewport City Center transforms their corner of Kennedy Plaza into a skating and ice bumper car rink—and smashing into things is an especially satisfying way to safely release pandemic-pent-up energy.

For a combination of outdoor activity and culture, try one of a slew of self-guided walking tours. The powerful Early Black History Tour is one that confronts Providence's history of racial inequities and traumas that the city is working to bring to light.



All museums should have a disco ball IMO. | RISD Museum

Go from ballet to blacksmithing

In addition to public murals and sculptures, Providence is full of theater, industrial art, and modern design.

The Rhode Island School of Design Museum regularly puts on a “Raid the Icebox Now” series, started by Andy Warhol, where guest artists are invited to come curate the museum’s collection as they see fit. The RISD Museum also displays cutting edge design, modern fashion, temporary modern exhibits, as well as a permanent collection of Greek and Roman artifacts or furniture and porcelain from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



Some art is interpretive, some art states a clear message. | RISD Museum

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Meanwhile, the WaterFire Arts Center in the up-and-coming Valley neighborhood has a 15,000-square-foot exhibition space for contemporary art and live performance. Around the corner, industrial art center the Steel Yard hosts markets and classes in blacksmithing, welding, foundry, jewelry, and ceramics.

A marvel of gilding, marble, and decorative plasterwork, the Providence Performing Arts Center presents an array of movies and live performances from classical ballet to Broadway. Less than a half mile away, Trinity Repertory Company has been bringing thought-provoking theater to Rhode Island since 1963.



Books, clothes, and quirky crafts fill downtown. | GoProvidence

Shop for a big treasure in the smallest of states

Providence Flea is a weekly maker's market located outdoors from summer through fall. It moves indoors in the winter, to [Farm Fresh RI's](#) brand-new, 60,000-square-foot food hub. While you're there, visit one of their in-house vendors, including a coffee shop, taqueria, hot sauce producer, and toffee maker.

For clothing, home goods, stationery, and crafts, head to Wickenden, Westminster, Angell, and Hope streets. [Books on the Square](#) is a gem of disparate titles and knowledgeable staff. Lifestyle shop [NAVA](#) is a boho chic dream featuring African baskets, vintage clothing, artisanal jewelry, bath products, and more.



Who said souvenirs have to be so serious? | GoProvidence

For gifts with a sense of humor, pick up tote bags, pouches, T-shirts, and cards with cheeky sayings from [Frog & Toad](#). Looking for something a bit off-kilter? [Copacetic Rudely Elegant Jewelry](#) in an unassuming storefront on Weybosset Street features colorful wall clocks, gemstone jewelry, and WTF gadgets from more than 120 independent artists.



Enough seating for everyone in Rhode Island. | Moniker Brewery

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Drink the many craft beverages to keep your insides warm

The country's smallest state has twenty-four craft breweries, about six of which are in the capital city. [Trinity Brewhouse](#) and [Union Station Brewery](#) are Providence originals. The newest hops houses include [Moniker Brewery](#), a sleek space with 10 beers on tap, and [Lost Valley Pizza and Brewery](#), home of cult favorite [Revival Brewing](#).

Spirits fans: make a beeline for [Industrious Spirit Co. \(ISCO\)](#). This distillery crafts small-batch, sustainably sourced vodka, gin, and bourbon, plus fun cocktails made from them. Their newest product, Ostreida, a vodka distilled from local oysters, has a minerally, mildly briny flavor unlike anything currently on the market.



At Troop, you can practically taste the colorful setting. | Troop

Eat a bit of everything

How Providence has managed to fit [hundreds of restaurants](#) with an impressive range of cuisines in such a small area is a mystery, and one I have no interest in unraveling. Instead, I suggest planning each meal around trying something new.

[Little Sister](#) is a diminutive, tropical-inspired bakery. Run by a Puerto Rican-born pastry chef, it turns out some of the best sweet and savory pastries I've had in New England. Don't leave without a cardamom knot and a horchata latte.



Puerto Rican twists at Little Sister. | @littlesisterpvd

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For “eats, beats, and drinks,” head to [Troop](#). Eclectic and lively, it’s a great spot for everything from acorn-squash salad to pork belly banh mi and cocktails with pureed jalapeno or walnut bitters and maple whipped cream. [Kin](#) is the latest darling of the Providence food scene, with good reason. Warm and groovy, the restaurant serves expertly prepared Southern and soul foods, like fried green tomatoes, chicken and waffles, and shrimp po’boys.

If you want to splurge, make a reservation at [Bellini](#), on the ground floor of The Beatrice. Bellini’s exceptional staff serves elevated Italian fare. Standouts include the house-made pastas, precisely prepared seafoods, and a chocolate mousse so ethereal, one spoonful made me wonder if I’d entered an alternate foodie dimension. The restaurant is worth every penny . . . and you’ll spend a chunk of them here. Consider it the exclamation point on your Providence cultural adventure.

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[Robin Catalano](#) is a contributor for Thrillist.

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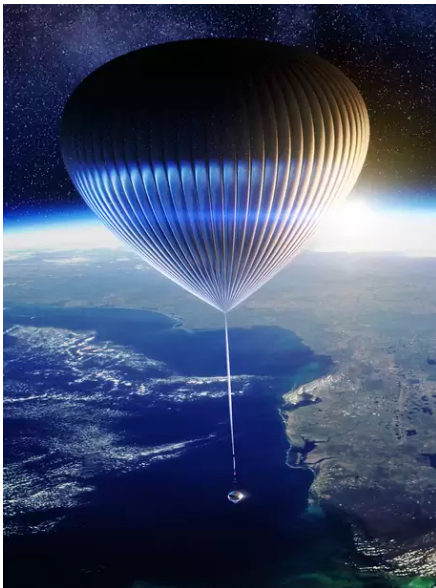
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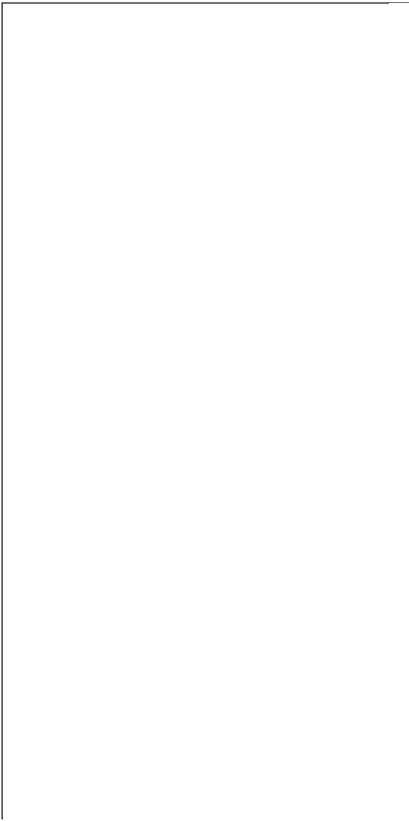


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