



13 Best Things to Do in Providence

With rich history, a flourishing, creative food scene and close proximity to outdoor adventure, Providence, Rhode Island should be at the top of your list for summer getaways this year. Explore what to see, do and eat in this New England city, according to a Rhode Island native.



Hang Out at WaterFire in Downtown Providence

WaterFire is exactly what it sounds like: Lines of on-fire braziers light up the three rivers flowing through downtown - the Providence, Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket - instantly changing the city's ambiance. It feels like the entire state of Rhode Island has come out of the woodwork to line the river and chat, people watch and just take a breather from the breakneck speed of life in the Northeast. Artist Barnaby Evans created the sculpture for a one-time lighting in 1994, but it was so popular that it became a regular event in 1997. You'll find buskers performing music and magic tricks and gondolas for hire for romantic cruises just feet from the fires, live music, food demonstrations and the TD Bank Ballroom, a square on Westminster Street that turns into a dance floor. Actors from performance group [Ten31 Productions](#) often pose as gargoyle statues in Memorial Park, trading fortunes on paper scrolls for tips. [Check the schedule](#) before you plan your trip—WaterFire is a quintessential summer-in-Providence experience, but it doesn't happen every weekend.



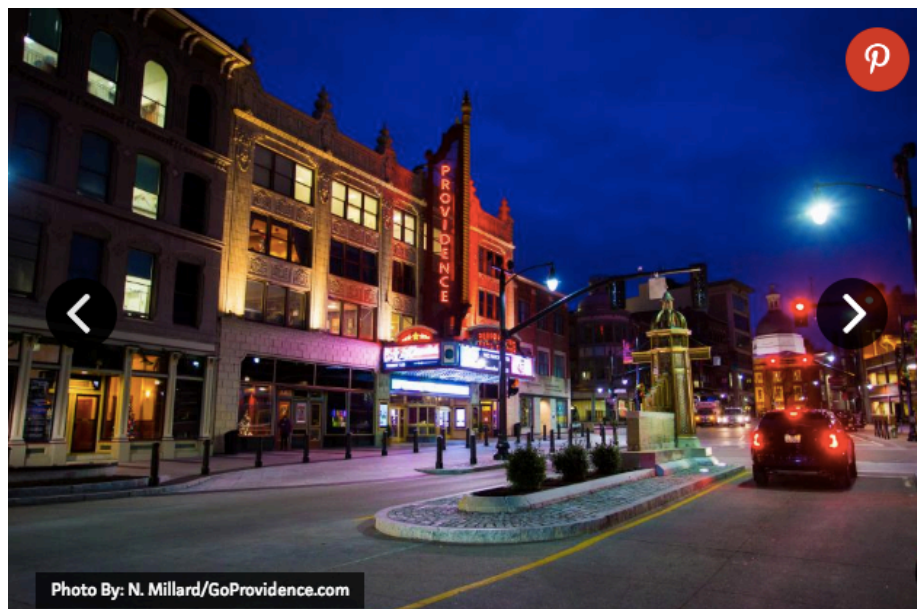
Visit the RISD Museum

Providence is home to some of the most prestigious institutions in the country—namely Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design—and their open campuses are worth a wander, nestled among some of the oldest buildings in the city. Set aside several hours for the [RISD Museum](#), if not a full day: It's easily one of the best museums New England has to offer. You'll find art ranging from the ancient—like an Etruscan bronze situla, or pail, from 500 B.C.—to the contemporary. The museum also houses large collections of costumes, textiles and photographs. If you're on a budget, visit on a Sunday or from 5 to 9 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month, when the \$15 admission fee is waived.



Go to PVDonuts

For decades, Rhode Islanders have gotten their doughnut fix at Dunkin' Donuts, which is somehow even more ubiquitous than the Catholic churches you'll find in every neighborhood. But Lori and Paul Kettelle, owners of [PVDonuts](#), have changed the game. The line often snakes out the door and around the corner, but no matter the number of blocks, it's worth your wait. The Kettelles make doughnuts into art with flavors like Cherry Honey Cake, Chocolate Peanut Butter Old Fashioned, Passionfruit, Lemon Trifle and vegan Maple "Bacon."



Catch a Show at One of Providence's Many Theaters

Providence has an excellent theater scene downtown, and there's always something to see. You'll find Broadway shows on tour at Providence Performing Arts Center and Veteran's Memorial Theater. Trinity Repertory Company's resident actors perform old classics as well as more edgy productions. You can walk to everything downtown has to offer from all three of these theaters, but consider [Los Andes](#), a little off the beaten path, for a pre-show dinner. Los Andes serves world-class Peruvian and Bolivian dishes for a fraction of what you'd expect to pay for such fine food—entrees are all under \$20. Creativity and thoughtfulness abound on the menu and in the presentation. There are no bad choices here, especially when it comes to seafood, but ordering off the specials menu is always the best decision. It's a small restaurant and the secret is now out, so reservations are highly suggested.



Photo By: Michael Ezzell/The Frog and Toad

Where to Shop in Providence, Rhode Island

Providence's thriving art scene makes it a great place to find boutique shops with unique gifts. You'll find scores of locally-owned shops all over the city, but outside of downtown there are a few areas in particular that you'll want to explore: Wayland Square and Hope, Thayer and Wickenden Streets on the east side of Providence (not to be confused with East Providence, which is a different city). Don't miss [Frog and Toad on Hope Street](#), where you'll find postcards, mugs, T-shirts and other gifts with inside jokes so Rhode Island, you'll need to ask a local to explain them to you.



Explore Downtown Providence

Providence was once known as the jewelry capital of the world. Now, it's known for its food, with fine and casual dining, nightclubs and cafes stepping in to fill the manufacturing voids in the city's former factories. It's no coincidence that one of the country's best culinary arts schools, Johnson & Wales, is just steps away from Providence's up-and-coming food scene downtown—or "downcity," as many born-and-raised locals call it. You'll find excellent boutique shops on Westminster Street, too.



Get Snuggly at The Duck and Bunny

[The Duck and Bunny](#) calls itself a “snuggery” for good reason. It’s the best place in Providence to relax with a cup of tea and a homemade cupcake, in creative flavors like Honey Lavender and Fauxstess (a riff on Hostess cupcakes). On a rainy day, settle into the pillows by the bay window. At night, wander out to the back patio, lit with string lights, and relax with a blanket, hot chocolate mixed with raspberry port and live music. Withhold your judgment of mixing wine and cocoa: You’ll find it hard not to order a second round.



Photo By: N. Millard/GoProvidence.com

Eat Like a Local

Few things are more Rhode Island than frozen lemonade, clam cakes, stuffies (stuffed clams), coffee milk and, oddly enough, [Olneyville New York System](#), a diner that’s been a local institution for more than 60 years. You’ll want to order a hot wiener “all the way,” with meat sauce, mustard and onions.

For ultra-fresh coffee milk—Rhode Island’s state drink—head to North Smithfield for a quick visit to [Wright’s Dairy Farm](#), where you’ll find some of the best milk the state has to offer, as well as some of the best pastries (not to be confused with Wright’s Farm Restaurant in Harrisville). Coffee milk is exactly like chocolate milk, except it’s made with Autocrat coffee syrup—which is rarely sold in grocery stores outside the state, so you’ll probably want to take some home with you.



Photo By: Shutterstock / LEE SNIDER PHOTO IMAGES

Satisfy Your Sweet Tooth

Famous for their frozen lemonade, [Del's](#) is the Rhode Island institution that has stands in many cities and roadside carts at nearly every summer event (keep an eye out for it at WaterFire). You'll find bits of actual lemon in their signature flavor, which sets them apart from other frozen lemonade purveyors. But for a real treat, seek out [Mr. Lemon](#), hidden in a neighborhood just shy of Providence College. You can't miss the bright yellow lemon, holding a stop sign, painted on the side of the building. Mr. Lemon changes up the flavors regularly, and all of them are good. Kids will love you for getting the extra-large carton and filling it with Tutti Frutti, a mix of their many fruit flavors stacked on top of one another like a parfait.

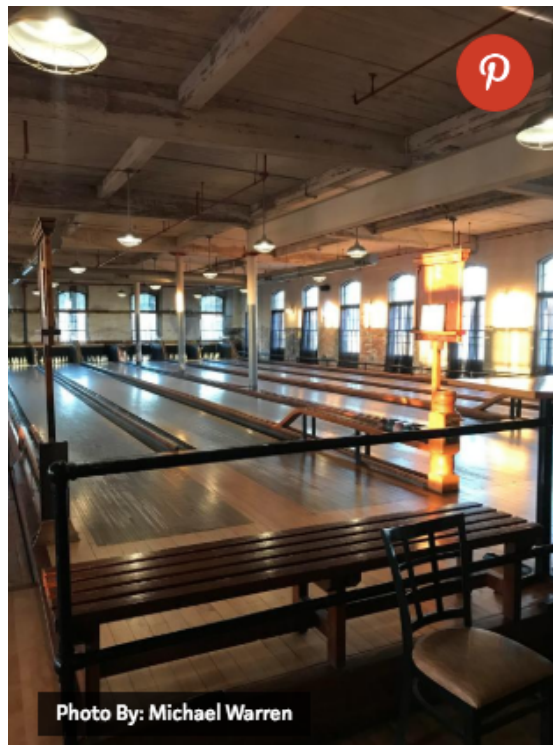
You'll also want to stop in at the kid-friendly [Newport Creamery](#) for an Awful Awful—an "awful big, awful good" milkshake.



Photo By: N. Millard/GoProvidence.com

Get Outdoors

With three rivers ripe for kayaking and the Narragansett Bay waterfront right at the edge of the city, Providence is the gateway to all kinds of outdoor adventure. Blackstone Boulevard has a long, narrow park running through the center of the street that offers a scenic, tree-lined stroll through one of the city's most beautiful neighborhoods—and alongside Swan Point Cemetery, established in 1846. Bikers and runners will enjoy the East Bay Bike Path, a 14-mile paved trail that starts at India Point Park in Providence and extends south to Bristol, a seaside colonial town known for its grand annual 4th of July Parade, which has been going strong since 1785, making it the oldest in the country. Streets on the parade route have red, white and blue center lines instead of yellow. Of course, you can always take a beach day, too. Scarborough State Beach, in Narragansett, is beloved; Newport beaches are more scenic as well as more touristy.



Bowl Like It's 1920

Anything beyond a 15-minute drive is considered “far” by Rhode Island terms, even though the state is really one big city. Providence’s next-door neighbor, Pawtucket, has gone from industrial hub to artisan village in recent years, and it’s worth a quick hop over the city line. On Main Street, you’ll find the [Hope Artiste Village](#), a massive former webbing mill built in 1889 that’s been beautifully renovated into a mixed-use space of shops, restaurants, galleries and entertainment. Be sure to make time for [Breaktime Bowl & Bar](#), a nearly 100-year-old bowling alley where the pins are still set by hand. It was built in 1920 by the Hope Webbing Company, which owned the mill, as a stopgap measure to placate workers when the company heard they were considering unionization. History buffs will also want to check out Slater Mill a few minutes away, on the banks of the Blackstone River, where the American Industrial Revolution was born.



Photo By: Katherine Gendreau/Courtesy of Rhode Island Commerce Corporation

Take a Day Trip to Block Island

From Providence, it’s only a 45-minute drive to your ticket to an island getaway. If you’ve got a day (or longer) to spare, take the ferry from Point Judith to Block Island, where you’ll find the state’s best beaches and clearest water. If you only have a day, make sure to hit the Mohegan Bluffs, where dramatic cliffs and a long staircase down to the beach deter most vacationers, and the Southeast Lighthouse, right nearby. You can drive your car onto the ferry, rent bicycles on the island or use taxis to get around, but it’s fairly small and you can easily reach most attractions by foot.



Wander Streets Full of Colonial Architecture

Providence was founded in 1636, and many of its first houses still stand. You'll find a large collection of well-preserved Colonial homes in the College Hill area. The streets are steep and narrow here, which can make for stressful driving and near-impossible parking, so ditch your car in favor of a stroll. On Congdon Street, you'll find the pocket-sized Prospect Terrace Park, with a statue of state founder Roger Williams and an unbeatable view of the city.