

Art On The Rhode: Take A Creative Vacation In Providence

by [Libby Zay](#) ([RSS feed](#)) on Jul 24th 2012 at 2:00PM



New England is known for its captivating coastline and rural charm, but it is also a great retreat for artists and art lovers. Sure, big cities such as Boston have thriving art scenes, but there are several smaller-sized cities with artsy vibes throughout the region. One such place is [Providence, Rhode Island](#), a city recently tagged "[The Creative Capital](#)" that has become a magnet for cultural action. Spend some time in Providence and you might agree the city could very well be the next [Austin, Texas](#), or [Portland, Oregon](#). Below are just a few of the ways you can immerse yourself in the arts while in the city.



Check Out A Gallery Show or Performance at AS220

Downtown Providence is home to [AS220](#), a community arts center with multiple exhibitions spaces, a performance space and artist workshops spread throughout several buildings. The galleries are worth a peek, especially if you are interested in scoping out some up-and-coming talent. There is also an AS220-run bar and restaurant, [Foo\(d\)](#), that uses locally-sourced ingredients and has plenty of menu options for vegetarians and vegans. Adjacent to the restaurant, the organization runs a venue hosting live music most nights of the week. If you come early or a band isn't scheduled, check out the locals-only jukebox in the restaurant for a true taste of Providence. In the summertime, AS220 puts on [Foo Fest](#), a block party featuring music, performances, art installations and more – but year round anyone can check out great art in their public spaces or sign up for a workshop to create some art of their own.



Take a Peek Inside Nazo Lab

Crammed with sci-fi stage props, larger-than-life puppets and other bizarre creations, [Nazo Lab](#) is the workshop of a local performance art troop called Big Nazo. The lab has an "open door" policy, meaning passersby are welcome to pop in and [check out what creatures the local visual artists and masked musicians](#), who call the lab home base, are working on. Past projects have include masks and body parts for Broadway shows and props for television commercials and Mardi Gras celebrations, while puppets made at Nazo Lab have been spotted on stage with the Flaming Lips, George Clinton and more.



Partake in a Workshop at the Steel Yard

If you'd like to pick up a new skill or hone a talent you already have, consider planning your trip around a weekend workshop at the [Steel Yard](#). Once a contaminated industrial wasteland, the Steel Yard is now a fully functioning, community-based space focused on technical training in the industrial arts. Individuals, couples or even entire families can take classes that range from blacksmithing to jewelry making. No matter what you choose, it's guaranteed you'll always walk away with a unique reminder of your trip. Free public tours are also available at the site every Wednesday at noon.



Browse Art at the Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art

With more than 86,000 works of art that range from ancient artifacts to contemporary pieces, the [Museum of Art](#) at the Rhode Island School of Design has a little something for everyone interested in the arts. Just a few of the famous names you'll find hanging in the museum include Picasso, Monet, Warhol, Koons and Twombly. Don't miss the enormous 12th-century Buddha, the largest historic Japanese sculpture in the United States. On Sundays, museum admission is pay-what-you-wish (normal admission is \$10 for adults).

Watch WaterFire

What is [WaterFire](#)? Well, I guess it's exactly what it sounds like. In 1994, artist Barnaby Evans began lighting bonfires that burn just above the surface of three rivers that converge in the middle of downtown providence on fire. Part performance art, part urban festival and part public art installation, the work forever transformed downtown Providence and has become known nationally and internationally. The event's symbolism can be interpreted however you choose, but one thing is certain: with an average attendance of 40,000 people per night, everyone seems to love the spectacle. WaterFire can be seen on select Saturdays from May through October, plus some additional dates on special occasions.



Shop for Goods by Local Artists

With so many artists around, it's natural that Providence would have a great collection of local shops, coffeehouses and restaurants. Take a stroll down Westminster Street and you'll pass by several shops worth peeking into, including [Craftland](#) (pictured above) where you can purchase shirts, prints and jewelry by local artists. Across the street is Symposium Books, where you can check out zines made by locals (while also browsing through beautifully-bound art books, a great collection of comics and more). Near to Symposium you'll also find [Queen of Hearts](#), a locally owned fashion boutique where you can purchase pieces by the shop owner and designer, Karen Beebe.



Celebrate Locally Made Foods

You'll probably be hungry after all that shopping, and what the heck – food is art, too. Take a break at Flan y Ajo (also on Westminster Street), a cute bohemian eatery with pictures of bullfighters on the walls and a pinball machine that serves up small bites in the form of tapas. As their [website advertises](#), they only have four stools and do not take reservations, but the wait is worth it. If, instead, you'd like to talk a walk around the Rhode Island School of Art and Brown College campuses, consider first stopping at [Duck and Bunny](#), a cozy "snuggery" with an unassuming pink facade. The white vinyl booths, lace window treatments and marble table tops will have you feeling like you stepped into Alice in Wonderland. Order afternoon tea and some finger sandwiches or go for dessert with a locally made cupcake or ice cream sundae. If the cafe sounds a little too ladylike, remember that the Duck and Bunny isn't all soft – there's also a beer and cigar menu. Ship Street Farmers Market (pictured at the top of the page) and other area markets also make for a great lunch option.

[All images by Libby Zay]

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