Explore Spring 2021 from Adobe Stock. Get first 10 images free. Get free images

DAY-TRIPPING

Got a day with no plans? Try visiting Wickford, R.I., in the winter

Here is the first in a five-part series of occasional stories highlighting quick trips — 100 miles or so — out of Boston.

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright Globe Correspondent, Updated February 24, 2021, 6:00 p.m.

Vacation is just a drive away
Vrbo
Family-friendly lakefront getaway

Wickford Harbor PAUL E. KANDARIAN

There's plenty of pent up desire to travel, to get out of town, to see and experience something different. But boarding a plane? Staying at a resort? Not so much. Though we're eager to get out of the house, we still want to stay close to home. Enter: the day trip. Even a short getaway can do wonders to rejuvenate your spirits.

Here is the first in a five-part series of occasional stories highlighting quick trips — 100 miles or so — out of Boston. First up? Wickford, R.I.

A village's rich history

"This is a village that reeks of wealth," says Tim Cranston, historian and president of Historic Wickford. "It speaks to how wonderful the situation was here."

Advertisement
Vrbo
Lakefront
Book early

We were walking through the village of Wickford, one of the oldest preserved Colonial villages in the country, boasting the largest collection of Colonial and Federal homes in the country that are still privately owned. The pretty enclave, set on Narragansett Bay across from Newport, its well-known neighbor, has nearly 100 historic homes, many built by wealthy shipbuilders and sea merchants.

ADVERTISING

Get HomeFront in your inbox

The Weekender is temporarily HomeFront, your guide to the best ways to stay entertained at home any day of the week.

Enter Email
example@email.com
Sign Up

ilovewickfordvillage
Wickford Shipyard
View Profile

View More on Instagram

263 likes
ilovewickfordvillage

Even our seafarer friends are getting in the spirit. Thank you Julia McKay for capturing this photo last night at Wickford Shipyard. Take a stroll over to enjoy all the boats that have been adorned in lights by our maritime community. By land or by sea, Wickford is our bright light this holiday season!
@mckaysfurniture
@mrsmcpage
@newenglandboating
@sori
@dominiczachorne
@wickfordboats
@heyrhody
@theindependentri
@boatinternational
#seafarer #holidaydecorating #boatsofinstagram #newengland_igers #newenglandliving #coastalboat #wickford #festiveboats #rhodylove #boatswithchristmaslights #holidayspirit #boatingmagazine #holidaylove #wickfordri
view all comments

Add a comment...

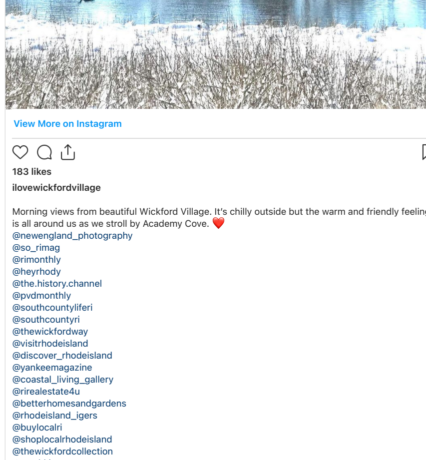
In fact, the entire town, filled with homes from the 1700s through Victorian times, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Visitors come to stroll the streets, take horse and carriage rides through the village, and to browse the cluster of well-curated, independently owned shops. It would be a great place for holiday gift-shopping, with a stroll along the cove, and perhaps lunch at one of the restaurants, say Wickford on the Water or Tavern by the Sea. The village, located on what was once an island, is especially pretty in winter when homes and shops are decked out in finery and twinkling lights. It's a delightful, step-back-in-time experience, plucked out of a snow globe, or a George Durrie landscape painting.

Advertisement

We love the vibe and the scenery, but it's the village's rich, interesting history that really intrigued us. Historic Wickford has developed a DIY walking tour, leading to 13 interpretive markers that offer a peek. (You can download a self-guided map at www.histwick.org/walking-tour; maps are also available in shops and restaurants throughout the village.) It's a must-do for visitors.

We started at Gardner's Wharf at the end of Main Street and near the entrance to Wickford Harbor, where an interpretive sign tells the story of the town's once-thriving oyster business. Shucking houses, like the prosperous Wickford Oyster Company, once lined the shores of Narragansett Bay, and 22 percent of the bay's bottom was leased to oyster barons during the early 1900s.

ilovewickfordvillage
Historic Wickford Village
View Profile



View More on Instagram

183 likes
ilovewickfordvillage

Morning views from beautiful Wickford Village. It's chilly outside but the warm and friendly feeling is all around us as we stroll by Academy Cove. ❤️
@newengland_photography
@so_rimag
@rimonthly
@heyrhody
@the.history.channel
@pvdmonthly
@southcountyliferi
@southcountyri
@thewickfordway
@visitrhodeisland
@discover_rhodeisland
@yankeemagazine
@coastal_living_gallery
@rirealestate4u
@betterhomesandgardens
@rhodeisland_igers
@buylocalri
@shoplocalrhodeisland
@thewickfordcollection
@northkingstown
@srinewspapers
@theindependentri
#newengland #newenglandliving #newengland_igers #newenglandphotography #mynewengland #academycove #wickfordri #wickford #rhodeisland #littlerhody #401love #boatinglife #villagelife #historichomes #colonialvillage #shoppingday #dogfriendly #daycation #staycation #daytrip #winterwonderland #getoutside #pictureoftheday #winterstyle #walkaroundtown #welivehere #warmandfuzzy #homesweethome #historicwickford #narragansettbay

Add a comment...

Earlier, during the 1700s through the mid-1800s, the harbor was a prominent commercial fishing port, and the second largest maritime community on Narragansett Bay. "Back in the day, this would have been loaded with boats," Cranston says. "It was a very important protected, deep-water seaport."

We walked Main Street, lined with center-chimney Colonials, to the grand Updike House, originally deeded to Captain Lodowick Updike, the founder of Wickford. The property later went to his grandson, Captain John Updike, not the famous author but a prominent, wealthy person in his own right. Lodowick was a member of the Narragansett Planters, with large agricultural lands, forests, and plantations located throughout southern Rhode Island. It was he who developed the village, and sold lots to shipbuilders, sea merchants, investment bankers, and workers. During its shipbuilding and fishing heyday, the village was a bustling community. One interpretive sign shows a scene of Main Street, dubbed The Grand Highway, during the late 1770s, filled with shops, horses, workers, and townsfolk.

Advertisement

During the Gilded Age, Wickford experienced another lucky turn of fate. "It was an ugly trip from New York to Newport for the top 400," says Cranston. So, Cornelius Vanderbilt and other investors built a small railroad into pretty Wickford Village and ran a ferry service back and forth from the village to Newport. Soon, Wickford was filled with prominent people heading over to Newport. And folks who weren't on the same level of, say a Vanderbilt or Rockefeller, quickly discovered that they could afford a place in the village. "From 1870 to 1920, nearly every historic house was bought, and often renovated, by wealthy visitors," says Cranston. It's another reason why Wickford remains so well-preserved. "A unique set of circumstances allowed Wickford to survive," Cranston says.

Wickford DEB HARIG

We passed the 1707 Old Narragansett Church and the site of the Quaker Meeting House, before stopping in front of the Black Mariners House. "I kept coming back to this house because I couldn't figure it out," Cranston says. After closely examining deeds and documents, he discovered it was owned by Dominic Smith, a former Black enslaved person. Many enslaved people worked in the Narragansett Planters' plantations. "But people wanted to get the most out of their investment," Cranston explained, "so they often taught their slaves different skills so they could be rented out." Smith was trained as a mariner, so when he was finally freed, he could make a living, and afford to buy a house. "On a ship it doesn't matter what your skin color is; you're all equal. You just want to make it home alive," Cranston said.

Advertisement

We returned to Main Street, passing shoppers and dog walkers, joggers and strollers, when Cranston pointed out the 1805 Ben Fowler Narraganset Bank, a larger, prominent brick building near the center of the village. "Nineteenth century historians wrote about the importance of the bank and the work Fowler did," Cranston said. "But they left out the fact that he bought it from his sister." Fowler's sister and her husband operated a small bakery in the back of the bank; when he died, she improved and expanded the business and eventually became a wealthy property owner and businesswoman. "There were lots of successful women in Wickford who were also very involved in the running of the village," Cranston said. "They had opportunities here that they didn't have in other places." The reason was largely a matter of practicality: The village needed to keep operating even when the men were out to sea. Also, there was a Quaker influence, a religion that believes in the equality of all persons. "Can you imagine a wealthy owner coming down from Boston to check on his ship?" Cranston asks. "Here are women running businesses and Black men owning property."

Advertisement

Long before the shipbuilders, sea merchants, and wealthy arrived, Wickford and its surrounding area was home to the Narragansett Tribe, which roughly translates as "The People of Small Point." We walked through the lovely Bush Hill Nature Preserve to a point overlooking an expanse of salt marshes and fields. It was here in the 1600s when the Narragansett met with English colonizers. An interpretive sign, featuring a painting by a member of the local Narragansett Tribe, depicts how life might have been during that time. We paused to take in the tranquil sight, then headed back into town, and back on the road.

Wickford is about 75 miles from Boston. For more information, visit www.southcountyri.com and www.histwick.org.

Diane Bair and Pamela Wright can be reached at bairwright@gmail.com

Show comments

BOSTON GLOBE VIDEO
Two men killed at construction site SHARE
0:53
Officials said two men were killed Wednesday at a downtown Boston construction site and their bodies were recovered from a hole. (Charlie McKenna/Globe Correspondent)
NOW PLAYING Two men killed at construction site
The history of Super Happy Fun America in Boston
Baker announces residents over 65 to be eligible for vaccine

MOST POPULAR ON BOSTONGLOBE.COM
1. 'It was a panic': Accident at construction site in downtown Boston leaves two dead; city suspends utility company involved
2. The emperor of nothing
3. Massachusetts hospitals to resume offering COVID-19 vaccine
4. Parents can care about education and still be OK writing this school year off
5. Is there any end in sight to the Celtics' woeful stretch?
6. Reopening schools will help, but won't end Mass. child mental health crisis, experts say
7. Why Republicans are suddenly against the COVID relief bill. And why their bet might pay off
8. School suspensions don't work. It's time for something better.
9. Where have all the work friends gone?
10. Life sciences companies face supply constraints as they look to offer vaccination sites for their employees

VIEWS FROM OUR COLUMNISTS
YVONNE ABRAHAM
Making student debt relief stick
KEVIN CULLEN
John Connolly was the FBI's fall guy
THOMAS FARRAGHER
In an icy driveway, these neighbors find warmth and comfort as a merciless pandemic rages around them
SHIRLEY LEUNG
Boston's new contracting goal could steer an additional $160 million to entrepreneurs of color over the next few years
JENEÉ OSTERHELDT
The Black history I carry with me: Ariel Pesante
ADRIAN WALKER
What happens now with Police Commissioner Dennis White?

MORE ON GLOBE.COM

SPONSORED BY: HARVARD PILGRIM HEALTH CARE
Income inequality creates poorer overall health outcomes
Children in struggling families are more likely to deal with chronic conditions such as asthma or diabetes throughout life. This is "the vitality gap."

'It was a panic': Accident at construction site in downtown Boston leaves two dead; city suspends utility company involved
Two workers were killed Wednesday at a construction site in downtown Boston after they were hit by a truck and knocked into a hole in the road, a grisly accident that horrified onlookers and left grief-stricken relatives crying out for answers.

OPINION
The emperor of nothing
How does a deposed leader with untrammeled ambition and a massive sense of injured self-importance deal with a world in which nothing more can happen?

Reopening schools will help, but won't end Mass. child mental health crisis, experts say
Experts say the state's mental health care system for youth has long been overtaxed. The challenges are deep-seated — and will likely persist long after students return to classrooms.

ANALYSIS
Why Republicans are suddenly against the COVID relief bill. And why their bet might pay off
Republicans are making an audacious bet with their opposition to the latest round of COVID relief — and politically, it might pay off for them in the end.

Massachusetts hospitals to resume offering COVID-19 vaccine
A week and a half after abruptly cutting off new supplies of COVID-19 vaccine to hospitals, Massachusetts officials have reached an agreement with hospitals and health systems allowing them to rejoin the massive state effort to vaccinate all residents.

GARY WASHBURN | ON BASKETBALL
Is there any end in sight to the Celtics' woeful stretch?
The Celtics are at the lowest point they have been in the Brad Stevens era after Wednesday night's debacle in Atlanta.

Where have all the work friends gone?
The pandemic has emptied downtown buildings, and along the way, done a number on office plants, gossip, and relationships, even with people you didn't know you'd miss.

PANDEMIC PARENTING
Parents can care about education and still be OK writing this school year off
I basically have zero expectations when it comes to grades and standardized tests. It's a time of leveling up life skills and identifying self-directed passions.

Johnson & Johnson one-shot vaccine appears to fare better against worrisome COVID-19 variants than first reported
New trial data were released in advance of a Friday advisory panel meeting on whether to recommend the vaccine as the third one cleared for emergency use in the US.

MOST READ IN THIS SECTION

PANDEMIC PARENTING
Parents can care about education and still be OK writing this school year off

Where have all the work friends gone?

NAMES
George Clooney spotted in Watertown and Lowell filming 'The Tender Bar'

YOUR DAILY DISTRACTION
When the sky's the limit, literally

Where did 'Me Too' come from? Activist Tarana Burke, long before hashtags

Recipe for Boston baked beans

NAMES
Kennedys join Cheryl Hines on Walk of Fame

OUTDOORS
Flock to these winter birding hot spots around Boston

Competition for summer camp spots is heating up, despite many uncertainties

FOLLOW US
SUBSCRIBE NOW
Digital Access
Home Delivery
Gift Subscriptions
MY ACCOUNT
Log In
Manage My Account
Customer Service
CONTACT
Help & FAQs
Globe Newsroom
Advertise
MORE
Newsletters / View The EPaper / Order Back Issues / News In Education / Search The Archives / Privacy Policy / Terms Of Service / Terms Of Purchase / Work At Boston Globe Media / Do Not Sell My Personal Information
©2021 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC