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There Will Always Be An Ogunquit

2010 Where to Stay Features South Coastal

BY: CYNTHIA ANDERSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: SARA GRAY

Ask Clark Frasier what it's like to live in Ogunquit, and the reserve with which the famed restaurateur describes other aspects of his life drops away. "I love it here!" says Frasier, who grew up traveling in Asia and worked in San Francisco before moving to Maine to open Arrows twenty-three years ago. "Ogunquit is a special town. There are glorious beaches, wonderful nooks and harbors. It's laidback but it has a lot of culture. And there's a historical mix of people — straight, gay, rich, poor, all religious backgrounds."



For several minutes Frasier extols Ogunquit's virtues: openness, the abundance of art, proximity to Boston and New York (where Frasier and his partner drove most recently to accept the James Beard Foundation award for Best Chefs in the Northeast). Then he pauses, settles back in his chair to gaze outside into Arrows' tenderly kept flower gardens. "I mean, look at this," he says. "And in my backyard at home I have a rock wall and a stream. What could be better than that?"

That sentiment, of Ogunquit as a good, a great, place to live, is echoed all over town — in cafés and bars, the library, on front porches. "Ogunquit is deeply loved by many, many people," says town manager Tom Fortier.

People do seem to like it here, even on the craziest Sundays in July when the population is exploding, when if you want to jog the Marginal Way you'd better do so before dawn or well after sunset. Surely part of the appeal is the town's physical beauty: three miles of pristine, white-sand beach, ledges, the broad Atlantic. But there's something else, a certain Ogunquit energy that draws people and holds them here or at least keeps them coming back summer after summer.

Six months after the repeal of the state's gay marriage law, one might expect bitterness in Ogunquit, but there's little evidence of that. The mood is upbeat, albeit perhaps with an undercurrent of determination to see that next time things go differently. In the meantime, it's Ogunquit-as-usual: artsy, quirky, sometimes crowded, occasionally rowdy, always interesting. And functional — in spite of the recession, in spite of what could easily be the different agendas of disparate groups, Ogunquit seems to be a town that works.

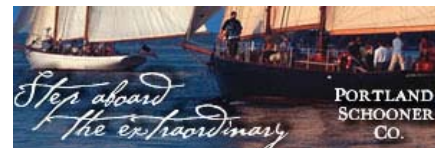
Not that the place is a poster child for post-Millennial harmony; like any town it has factions, but it also has historical precedent of factions working together rather than in opposition. The origins date back more than a hundred years, to when fisherfolk and gentry joined forces to build a bridge across the Ogunquit River. Several decades later an unlikely coalition of artists, fishermen, year-round and summer residents persuaded local property owners to cede their rights to the now-famous Marginal Way footpath. Then, as now, the alliances were less altruistic than pragmatic. Then, everyone wanted access to the beach on the other side of the river and an unfettered coastal walkway. Now, people want thriving businesses, safety, a clean environment. Retired, young, childless or not, gay, straight, whatever—everyone wants a town that runs smoothly.

It helps that the population is, on the whole, active and informed. "Ogunquit is politically astute," says Fortier. "The shakers and movers are often CEOs of successful companies or businesses. As a result, they are leaders who know what they want and have influence in the community."

After his Saturday night show at Oxygen, Khris Francis, who has the longest running one-man comedy act in New England, explains why he made Ogunquit his home. "It's a beautiful place, even if parking can sometimes be a bitch." And there's more: "People respect each other here. We may not always agree, but there's respect.

We look after each other. We watch each others' backs. I'm referring to the whole community. I have just as many straight friends as I do gay, and we're equally attentive to each other."

In describing a typical day off, Clark Frasier talks about how he rides his bike to the gym and then heads to the beach for a few hours. After that he might go into town to Native



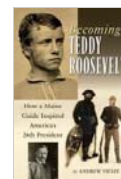
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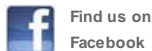


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Grounds for coffee or to the Front Porch for drinks. "The lounge there can be extremely mixed," he says. That word, mixed, comes up a lot in conversations about Ogunquit. It means more than straight and gay, because people refer to Ogunquit's variety in ethnicity, age, and economic status as well as sexual orientation. Indeed, at Francis' show the demographics of the crowd are mixed in many ways. Francis, an equal-opportunity affronter, ribs a mother/daughter pair out for the evening with their partners, four friends on a bachelorette party, and a man there with his wife and friends to celebrate her birthday.

The man gets the worst of it. After a ration of razzing, the guy having been ousted from his table to join Francis up front, Francis orders him to dance with him. "Hold me," Francis croons. "Hold me. Take me in your arms and hold me." The guy demurs, steps back. Francis moves closer. "Come on," he says. Finally the man capitulates. There, in the pink light of the stage, back-dropped through the sheer curtain by cars passing mere feet away on Main Street, the man reaches out and for a few awkward moments takes Francis in his arms.

Settled in 1641 as part of Wells, the village of Ogunquit took its name from the Abenaki term for "beautiful place by the sea." Shipbuilding and sawmilling were early industries, although fishing provided the livelihood of most colonists. They kept their boats in what was then known as Fish Cove, which was vulnerable to storms.

At night the crafts had to be hauled ashore, out of reach of the surf. Wanting better anchorage, as well as easier access between their homes along the Josias River and their dories, the fishermen dug a trench across a field adjacent to the Josias. When the trench was finally cut through to the river, water rushed in "with a roar that could be heard up to Pine Hill," soon eroding a channel through which the fishermen could bring their boats.

The resulting tidewater basin would be called Perkins Cove, now one of the most visited and photographed locations in southern Maine. Stand on the famous draw-footbridge that spans the channel into the harbor, and it's easy to see why the place can draw thousands on a sunny Saturday. Almost every gallery or seafood shack is within view of the cove or the open ocean, which offers up a steady breeze. Dories bump against a dock in the green-black water, and a fishing boat pulls up to unload at the pier as gulls wheel overhead.

A convertible with women seated atop the back seat threads its way through the narrow streets, making slower progress than the pedestrians who exit one shop only to walk a few steps to the next. There are French fries, ice cream, jewelry and art. Parking spaces designated "lobstermen only" are filled with pick-up trucks. To the east, seaward, lush lawns dotted with Adirondack chairs give way to ledge and the rocks below. A motorboat passes beneath the bridge to exit the harbor, its engine barely audible above the buzz of the crowd on Barnacle Billy's deck.

But Perkins Cove is as historic as it is picturesque. Its narrative, too, suggests the series of cultural collisions and subsequent alliances that have made Ogunquit what it is. In 1888, a Boston painter named Charles Woodbury happened upon the cove during a summer trip to Maine. The only place to stay was the old Ogunquit House. "They told me it had been a great season," Woodbury would later recall in a newspaper interview. "Four strangers had been there." That would soon change. Deeming the fishermen's docks and weathered dories "an artist's paradise," Woodbury chose the location as a school for his followers — mostly young women who became known locally as the Virginal Wayfarers. The school flourished, and artists began showing up in droves.

By the turn of the century, Ogunquit was a well-established arts colony. Photographs from that time show artists' quarters alongside fish shacks and the first of the town's B-and-Bs. Fishermen and postimpressionist painters alike plied their wares in Perkins Cove. It didn't much matter if they understood one another culturally; each had a commodity to sell, and each benefited from the other's presence. Tourists who showed up in town for the art ate fish caught by locals, and matrons who came to the cove to buy fish for Friday's supper might have taken a look at some paintings.

The town's arts base kept expanding: In 1933 Walter and Maude Hartwig opened the Ogunquit Playhouse, and in 1952 Henry Strater, a friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, founded the Ogunquit Museum of American Art, later deemed "the most beautiful small museum in the world" by a former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Restaurateurs followed — for a small town, the place has one of the most diverse culinary scenes in Maine, everything from the exclusive, highlight-of-the-summer Arrows to Footbridge Lobster in Perkins Cove, which sells take-out lobster rolls so loaded with meat it's hard to imagine the place can turn a profit. Many artists have lived or summered here — Edward Hopper, Marsden Hartley, Peggy Bacon and Walt Kuhn among them.

Galleries abound.

Gays, who started coming to Ogunquit about the same time as the artists, have made an indelible impact, economically and artistically. Many businesses are gay-owned, and their contributions to the town coffers are significant. (Ogunquit receives very little General Assistance from the state, says Fortier, who calls the town "recession-proof.") The artistic contributions of the gay community, if less quantifiable than the political

maine's working waterfronts in their heyday. Historic photographs and informative text round out this rich and varied portrayal of a past way of life.

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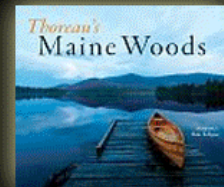
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and economic ones, are no less substantive — ranging from one-person shows in galleries to a presence on the governing board of virtually every arts group in town.

Not unexpectedly, a certain fluidity exists among the various arts and theater organizations in Ogunquit. “There’s a lot of crossover and cooperation,” says Stuart Nudelman, a fine arts photographer who is also a board member of several groups including the umbrella Arts Ogunquit. “You don’t find the backbiting that you might elsewhere. The organizations actually work together and share and make things better for each other. It’s all about functionality and connectivity.”

No trip to Ogunquit is complete without a walk along the Marginal Way, which runs between the village center and Perkins Cove. Expect a lot of company, don’t wear heels, and bring a camera because the scenery is noteworthy in its variety and depth. Just over a mile long, the footpath winds through bayberry and *rosa rugosa*, opening to a new ocean vista each time it rounds a corner. Benches located at strategic points along the way provide an opportunity to pause and take in the view; birches and evergreens offer shade. Adventurers can leave the path to explore the tidal pools and rocks below, and the truly intrepid can wade in the icy water.

On a recent Saturday, visitors mostly kept to the paved path, although several people sunned themselves on the quartzite ledges near Perkins Cove, and a woman and a boy flew a kite from a small scrabble beach. Gulls and terns swooped overhead. The briny air grew brisker on the open rocks, and the wind hurried a sailboat in from the open sea. Toward town, the outgoing tide from the Ogunquit River met the surf in a band of chop. The beach—preserved and free of houses—stretched white and wide to the Wells town border.

The formation of an alliance to acquire the Marginal Way occurred a century ago under the watch of the village’s unofficial but feisty “mayor,” F. Raymond Brewster. Apprehensive about what was happening to ocean access in neighboring towns, the group approached a local landowner, Josiah Chase — who in 1884 had bought a twenty-two-acre strip of property along the ocean — to preserve the “margin” as a public walkway.

When Chase eventually — and perhaps reluctantly, according to public accounts of the transaction — ceded his rights, the group used his generosity as a “shining example” with which to approach other shorefront owners.

The political astuteness Fortier has ascribed to the people of Ogunquit apparently was in place even then.

In any event, the Marginal Way was a big score for a place that couldn’t even call itself a town. That didn’t happen until 1979, when the State Legislature passed an act making the village of Ogunquit, upon approval of its citizens, a “Town Unto Itself.” In the local referendum that followed, Ogunquit residents voted overwhelmingly in favor. The official designation only underscored the obvious: the place is an original, different from other bohemian, postcard-pretty towns up and down the eastern seaboard. “A lot of times we’re compared to Provincetown,” says Fortier. “But P-town is more flashy and outward. Ogunquit is more reserved.

It really is unique.” Possible translation: more Maine than Massachusetts. And perhaps — as Maine as any other town, yet with its own distinctive flair.

Or, as Gertrude Stein might put it, “Ogunquit is Ogunquit is Ogunquit.”

BY: CYNTHIA ANDERSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: SARA GRAY

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