

Providence Tours go Viral: A monumental scavenger hunt



There is a lot of history hidden throughout Providence in plain sight. The memorials, monuments or statues you may encounter in your daily travels probably pass you by without you ever noticing what they stand for or where they came from.

The Providence Tour Company normally would take you on a fun-filled amble through local history. But under coronavirus, tours have understandably been a whole different animal (the company will do private tours, on request). Founder Bradley VanDerStad wanted to find a way for people to enjoy PVD history without a group or hands-on guide. There are plenty of self guided tours online, of course, but even the least droning of voices can lull you into a gentle sense of boredom when there's little challenge or interaction.

So Providence Tour Company developed an interactive scavenger hunt approach to bringing a little PVD history to life — a technique that's social-distance-friendly, but entertaining enough that you'll have fun with it long after quarantines have lifted. (We're betting PVD history will outlast the invasion by our viral antagonists.)

Motif writers had the honor of taking the first official Scavenger Hunt, and it worked exactly as promised. There were five clues, and it took us just over two hours — 30 minutes of which were spent

arguing with our GPS about what state we were in, which was no fault of the game.

Each clue involved a little figuring out, even if we were already familiar with the location. Each was also linked to an historical celebrity of local proportions. Sometimes we could identify the person, but didn't realize there was a monument or where it was. You're encouraged to use the internet, so all things can eventually be puzzled out there. Just make sure your phones are charged — you don't want to be that person, going, "What does it say, what does it say?" while others thumb their phones.

We found all the puzzles engaging enough to make us talk to each other and having Googlers talk through the next clue while the driver brings the group to the current location was pretty efficient. You do have to work with your current germ circle — being in the same car is a must. We found it enjoyable with two, three or four people.

The clues were also themed to their periods in history, each doing a great job of invoking an era while staying fun and amusing. They included poems and songs and other indirect references.

Providence Tour Company emails a clue every 10 minutes; we fell behind pretty quickly (thanks GPS), but if you don't try a side-trip to Connecticut for no reason, the pace should keep you on track. Eventually you end up with a few clues you can try to solve in any order. They all lead to landmarks; once you've gotten close, they're pretty easy to identify. You take a selfie with them, and send that to the Tour Company. They give you a thumbs up or thumbs down, and there's a point system where — like a good escape room — you can ask for hints. Bradley gets right back to you if you have any questions or concerns. We only hit him up twice, but he responded immediately and with just the right level of cryptic-but-helpful. The driving around was pretty minimal; you cover much of the city, but not the farthest flung parts, and if you know where you're going each drive was 15 minutes or less. Surprisingly, as Rhode Islanders, we also didn't have much trouble finding parking at each spot!

Overall, it was a really fun way to spend a few hours — especially if the weather is nice — without having to get near anyone but while still exploring a sample of the rich history of Providence (Pro tip - no matter what the internet seems to tell you, no clues take you outside of the city). And once you're familiar with your set of landmarks, you'll probably spend months pointing them out to others whenever you find yourself nearby.

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