

The Best of Boston

Way back in the 20th century, the most prominent structure in downtown Boston was an ugly elevated highway that separated downtown from the water. Motorists fumed in gridlock, and getting around on foot was both disagreeable and a little dangerous.

Fast-forward to today. The expressway is gone, and parks and pathways are springing up on the waterfront real estate where pedestrians once fled ill-tempered pigeons. A gorgeous bridge spans the Charles River. It took over 15 years and cost \$14.6 billion, but the Big Dig highway construction project is looking like a success. Traffic flows through a tunnel beneath downtown (as does leaking water, but repairs are under way and—well . . . out of sight, out of mind).

The new highway runs beneath a modern metropolis that's also a relentlessly historic destination. Throughout the Boston area, you'll see buildings of all ages and styles, from colonial-era to Frank Gehry's latest brainstorm. On the South Boston waterfront, once a wasteland of parking lots and industrial buildings, hotels and restaurants are springing up to accommodate visitors to a new-ish federal courthouse, an enormous new convention center, and a dazzling new art museum. The ongoing building boom may overshadow Boston's famous 18th- and 19th-century architecture, but even rampant development can't change the colonial character of the central city.

It's not perfect, of course. Nightmarish traffic, daredevil drivers, and grating accents don't help any city's reputation. Although Boston is the biggest college town in the world, it doesn't have much of a late-night scene. And far from gone is the inferiority complex epitomized by the description "like New York, but smaller." Still, as it has for over 375 years, Boston offers cosmopolitan sophistication on a comfortable scale, balancing celebration of the past with pursuit of the future.

Here's hoping your experience is memorable and delightful.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **A Sky Full of Fireworks:** To celebrate the country's birthday and the start of the New Year, the firmament flashes and flares. The Fourth of July fireworks are over the Charles River; the First Night show explodes above the Inner Harbor. See "Boston Calendar of Events," in chapter 2.
- **A Ride on a Duck:** A Duck Tour, that is. Board a reconditioned amphibious World War II landing craft (on Huntington Ave. near the Prudential Center, or at the Museum of Science) for a sightseeing ride that includes a dip in the river—for the Duck, not you. See p. 175.
- **An Afternoon Red Sox Game:** Since 1912, baseball fans have made pilgrimages to Fenway Park, the "lyric little bandbox of a ballpark" (in John Updike's words) off Kenmore Square. Most of the seats are uncomfortable, the food is expensive, but you won't

care a whit as you soak up the atmosphere and bask in the sun. See p. 186.

- **A Walk Around the North End:** Boston's Little Italy (but don't call it that!) has an old-world flavor you won't want to miss. Explore the shops on Salem Street, wander the narrow side streets, enjoy some pasta, and be sure to stop for coffee and a pastry at a Hanover Street *caffè*. See "Welcome to the North End," on p. 170.

- **An Off-Season Day Trip:** Destinations that overflow with out-of-towners in the summer and fall become more manageable when the weather turns cold. Don't let the CLOSED FOR THE SEASON signs put you off: Under a cloudless sky, against the indigo Atlantic, an all-but-deserted suburban town has a unique appeal. See chapter 11.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Charles Hotel**, 1 Bennett St., Cambridge (☎ 800/882-1818). Steps from the hubbub of Harvard Square, the Charles is a sanctuary of contemporary design and traditional pampering. Unfailingly elegant and tasteful, the Charles is a favorite with visiting celebrities. See p. 94.
- **Eliot Hotel**, 370 Commonwealth Ave., Back Bay (☎ 800/44-ELIOT). Everything from the location of the hotel to the layout of the suites makes the Eliot feel like a luxury apartment building. The business features and elegant traditional furnishings contribute to the atmosphere, a seamless blend of commerce and comfort. See p. 84.
- **Four Seasons Hotel**, 200 Boylston St., Back Bay (☎ 800/819-5053). The best hotel in New England has everything—and what it doesn't have on the premises, the incredible staff will track down. Superb service, plush accommodations, and lavish amenities make a stay here unforgettable. See p. 82.
- **InterContinental Boston**, 510 Atlantic Ave., Waterfront (☎ 800/424-6835). Dazzling architecture and a great location combine to make this brand-new hotel—the hyper-luxury chain's first New England entry—the one to beat in downtown Boston. See p. 72.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Charlesmark Hotel**, 655 Boylston St. (☎ 617/247-1212). The Charlesmark's thoughtful features—plush bedding, free local phone calls, friendly service, custom-designed everything—more than make up for the modest size of the rooms. Bonus: Units at the front of the building overlook the Boston Marathon finish line. See p. 88.
- **Doubletree Guest Suites**, 400 Soldiers Field Rd., Brighton (☎ 800/222-TREE). Prices at busy times are at the high end of the moderate range, but this hotel is still a great deal—every unit is a spacious two-room suite. The location, straddling Boston and Cambridge, is especially good if you're driving. See p. 91.
- **Harborside Inn**, 185 State St., downtown (☎ 888/723-7565). Rooms in this renovated 19th-century warehouse feel like little lofts, with hardwood floors and exposed-brick walls. A stone's throw from Faneuil Hall Marketplace and the New England Aquarium, it's also perfect if you have business in the nearby Financial District. See p. 73.

- **MidTown Hotel**, 220 Huntington Ave., Back Bay (☎ 800/343-1177). A unique combination of comfortable, no-frills rooms and a handy location make this hotel the most motel-like lodging in central Boston. And the cheapest guest parking in the Back Bay can save you as much as \$25 per day. See p. 90.
- **Newbury Guest House**, 261 Newbury St., Back Bay (☎ 800/437-7668). This place would be a bargain even if it weren't ideally situated in the heart of Boston's best shopping. Room prices even include continental breakfast. See p. 90.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Durgin-Park**, 340 Faneuil Hall Marketplace (☎ 617/227-2038). This Boston institution has packed 'em in since 1827. It serves classic New England fare in abundant portions at communal tables, delighting everyone from local tycoons to visiting toddlers. Well, almost everyone: The famously crotchety staff is so much a part of the legend that some people are disappointed when the waitresses are nice (as they often are). See p. 115.
- **Legal Sea Foods**, 255 State St. (☎ 617/227-3115), and other locations. Like the culinary equivalent of a medical specialist, Legal's does one thing and does it exceptionally well. It's a chain for a great reason: People can't get enough of the freshest seafood around. See p. 108.
- **Mr. Bartley's Burger Cottage**, 1246 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge (☎ 617/354-6559). Trends in food and fashion come and go, and this neighborhood sees them all. Luckily, Harvard Square has a place that puts the "comfort" in comfort food. Bartley's is famous for its juicy burgers, incredible onion rings, and a down-to-earth atmosphere that's increasingly rare in these parts. See p. 133.
- **Pizzeria Regina**, 11½ Thacher St. (☎ 617/227-0765). My friend kept looking around, insisting that a film crew had to be hiding somewhere. And with its red-and-white-checked tablecloths and fiery oven, Regina's does look like Hollywood's idea of a pizza joint. After one bite of that slightly smoky crust, you'll be sending Martin Scorsese to the back of the line. See p. 113.
- **Ye Olde Union Oyster House**, 41 Union St. (☎ 617/227-2750). Wise guys sneer about all the tourists, but the Union Oyster House is a local favorite for a reason—the locals eat there, too. The unbeatable combination of historic atmosphere and traditional food has drawn crowds since 1826. After just a few minutes of gobbling fresh seafood and being hypnotized by the shuckers, you might feel sorry for the people who wound up with the pearls instead of the oysters. See p. 114.

5 The Best Free (Or Almost Free) Things to Do

- **Picnic by the Water**. Head for the harbor or river, perch on a park bench or patch of grass, put away your watch, relax, and enjoy the spectacular scene. Whether it's sailboats or ocean liners, seagulls or scullers, there's always something worth watching. My favorite spot is the end of Long Wharf, not far from Faneuil Hall Marketplace, but it's just one of thousands of pleasant spots. See chapter 6.

- **Visit a Museum:** Schedule your visit to take advantage of free or reduced admission at certain times. The **USS Constitution Museum** is free all the time; the **Museum of Fine Arts** is free after 4pm Wednesday; the **Institute of Contemporary Art** is free after 5pm Thursday; the **Harvard University Art Museums** are free before noon Saturday; and the **Children's Museum** costs just \$1 after 5pm on Friday. See chapter 7.
- **Relish a Vicarious Thrill:** Without so much as lacing up a sneaker, you can participate in the world-famous Boston Marathon. Stretch a little. Drink plenty of fluids. Stake out a slice of sidewalk with a front-row view of the course and cheer as the runners

thunder past. Then put your feet up—you must be exhausted. See p. 188.

- **Prowl Newbury Street:** From the genteel Arlington Street end to the cutting-edge Mass. Ave. end, Newbury Street—Boston's legendary shopping destination—is 8 blocks of pure temptation: galleries, boutiques, jewelry and gift shops, and more. Fortunately, window-shopping is free. See chapter 9.
- **Check Out a College Concert or Show:** Countless student groups just want an attentive audience, and the free or minimal admission can pay off in the long run. Imagine the credit card commercial: "Ability to say you recognized the talent of [insert name of big star] in a student production? Priceless." See chapter 10.

6 The Best Outdoor Activities

- **A Ride across the Harbor:** The ferry that connects Long Wharf and the Charlestown Navy Yard is a treasure hidden in plain sight. You might notice the boat traffic on the Inner Harbor as you make your way around downtown; for just \$1.70, you can be part of it. See chapter 4.
- **An Interlude at a Cafe:** When it comes to good ideas, outdoor seating in a place with great people-watching is right up there with fire and the wheel. A passing parade of shoppers and students (on Newbury St. and in Harvard Sq.) is more interesting than suits and ties (downtown and the rest of the Back Bay), but if the breeze and the iced cappuccino are cool, what's not to like? See chapter 6.

- **A Free Concert:** The Boston area's cultural scene has no real off season. During the summer, many musicians and musical groups take their acts outside—to parks, plazas, and even a barge (behind the Boston Harbor Hotel). Plan well and you can enjoy music alfresco almost every night. See chapter 10.
- **A Stroll (or Jog) along the River:** The bike path that hugs both shores of the Charles accommodates pedestrians, runners, and rollerbladers as well as cyclists. The Esplanade (adjacent to the Back Bay) offers an unbeatable combination of people-watching and gorgeous trees and shrubs; the Cambridge side has abundant seating and fabulous views of the Boston skyline. See chapter 7.

7 The Best Museums

- **The Concord Museum:** I think of this suburban treasure as a Goldilocks museum—it's not too big, it's not too small, it's just right. Always informative, never overwhelming, it shows

and tells visitors enough about the town's history to help them make the most of a visit to this fascinating community. See p. 250.

- **The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum:** In an extremely unscientific poll of local travel experts conducted by me, this idiosyncratic museum tied for third-most-popular thing to do. The Gardner is a magnificent repository of art and nature in a building that's as impressive as anything hanging on the walls. See p. 143.
- **The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum:** Calling a presidential library unique is both obvious and a bit of a cop-out—of course it's unique; they're all unique. This one captures the personality of its charismatic namesake as well as

the spirit that continues to make the Camelot era so compelling, even 4 decades later. See p. 144.

- **The Museum of Fine Arts:** The phrase “one of the best in the world” starts to lose its meaning with overuse, which happens all the time in the Boston area. Consider the colleges, the Symphony, the drivers (just kidding), the sports teams. The MFA truly is world-class—and all over the place, you'll stumble on masterpieces so familiar that seeing them is like running into an old friend on the street. See p. 145.

8 The Best Activities for Families

- **A Visit to Faneuil Hall Marketplace:** Kids can't decide where to look first. Street performers, crowds from all over the world, an enormous food court, restaurants, bars, and shops make Faneuil Hall Marketplace (you'll also hear it called Quincy Market) Boston's most popular destination. It's conveniently located across the street from the harbor, where a stroll along the water can help your crew decompress. See p. 142.
- **An Exploration of the Museum of Science:** Children's natural curiosity takes over as they troll the displays and exhibits that cram this enormous institution. Every branch of science and field of inquiry comes into play, but always in the most accessible way imaginable. Your youngsters will have so much fun, they probably won't even notice that it's (shh!) educational. See p. 146.
- **An Excursion to the Public Garden:** Low-tech pleasures abound in this lovely park, the perfect retreat during

or after a busy day of sightseeing. Ride a Swan Boat, admire the real birds, visit with the Mallard family of *Make Way for Ducklings* fame, and then marvel as the whole family starts to unwind. See p. 163.

- **A Trip to the Children's Museum:** Younger kids (under 10 or so) practically vibrate with excitement as they approach Museum Wharf. The hands-on exhibits, noisy galleries, and overall air of discovery and excitement make the Children's Museum catnip for the elementary-school set. See p. 173.
- **A Thrill “Ride”:** The Mugar Omni Theater (at the Museum of Science) and the 3-D Simons IMAX Theatre (at the New England Aquarium) offer intrepid visitors hair-raising experiences in the safety of a comfortable auditorium. Most of the large-format films concentrate on the natural world. See p. 147 for the Mugar Omni Theater and p. 147 for the Simons IMAX Theatre.