

The Best of Boston

Over the past 25 years, downtown Boston has changed in some significant way almost daily. A gargantuan construction project with a cute name (the Big Dig) proceeded slowly but unstoppably, making a mile-long strip of prime real estate look like a scene from a horror movie. Today, the elevated highway that once sliced across the city like a green scar is a distant memory, the park that took its place is lovely, and the green we see everywhere is the color of trees, plants, and flowers.

A subterranean highway carries traffic through the new Boston, a modern metropolis that's also a relentlessly historic destination, with buildings of all ages and styles, from colonial-era to a Frank Gehry brainstorm. From the South Boston waterfront, once a wasteland of parking lots and fish carcasses, to the Back Bay, Boston's architecture is newer, taller, and more dramatic than before. Walking around downtown provides a good reminder: The new buildings may overshadow the city's famous 18th- and 19th-century architecture, but even rampant development can't change central Boston's colonial character.

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. Still, as it has since 1630, Boston offers cosmopolitan sophistication on a comfortable scale, balancing celebration of the past with pursuit of the future.

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **A Sky Full of Fireworks:** The Fourth of July fireworks flash over the Charles River; Boston greets the New Year with the First Night show flaring above the Inner Harbor. See “Boston Calendar of Events,” in chapter 3.
- **A Ride on a Duck:** 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 boat, not you. See p. 168.
- **An Afternoon Red Sox Game:** Since 1912, baseball fans have made pilgrimages to Fenway Park, the “lyric little bandbox of a ball park” (in John Updike’s words) off Kenmore Square. Soak up the atmosphere and bask in the sun. See p. 179.
- **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, and be sure to stop for coffee and a pastry at a Hanover Street *caffè*. See “Welcome to the North End,” on p. 163.
- **A Back-to-School Moment:** Cambridge bustles just beyond the brick walls that surround the heart of the Harvard campus, where visitors are welcome. Wander beneath the majestic canopy of trees sheltering the Old Yard, counting the years since the college was founded, in 1636—or just enjoy the chatter of current students scurrying past. See p. 159.

2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **Boston Harbor Hotel**, Rowes Wharf, Waterfront (☎ 800/752-7077). Dazzling architecture, a great location between the waterfront and the Rose Kennedy Greenway, and maniacal attention to detail add up to pampering on a suitably dramatic scale. See p. 68.
- **Charles Hotel**, 1 Bennett St., Cambridge (☎ 800/882-1818). Steps from the hubbub of Harvard Square, the unfailingly elegant Charles is a sanctuary of contemporary design and traditional hospitality. See p. 91.
- **Eliot Hotel**, 370 Commonwealth Ave., Back Bay (☎ 800/443-5468). Location and layout give the Eliot the feel of a luxury apartment building. Business amenities and elegant traditional furnishings contribute to its seamless blend of commerce and comfort. See p. 82.
- **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. 80.
- **Mandarin Oriental, Boston**, 776 Boylston St., Back Bay (☎ 866/526-6567). The legendary service, residential atmosphere, and East-meets-West vibe make the city's newest luxury property a can't-miss destination. See p. 83.

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. 87.
- **Doubletree Guest Suites**, 400 Soldiers Field Rd., Brighton (☎ 800/222-8733). Every unit here is a spacious two-room suite. The location, straddling Boston and Cambridge, is especially good if you're driving to Boston. See p. 89.
- **Harborside Inn**, 185 State St., downtown (☎ 888/723-7565). Exposed-brick walls give this updated 19th-century warehouse a residential feel. Close to downtown attractions, it's convenient to the nearby Financial District. See p. 72.
- **The 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. 88.
- **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. 88.

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—quite often—the waitresses are courteous and pleasant. See p. 110.
- **Legal Sea Foods**, 255 State St. (☎ 617/742-5300), 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. 102.
- **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. 127.

- **Pizzeria Regina**, 11½ Thacher St. (☎ 617/227-0765). With its red-and-white-checked tablecloths and fiery oven, Regina's looks like Hollywood's idea of a pizza joint. After one bite of slightly smoky crust, you'll be sending Martin Scorsese to the back of the line. See p. 108.
- **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 unbeatable combination of historic atmosphere and traditional food that's drawn crowds since 1826. See p. 109.

5 THE BEST FREE (OR ALMOST FREE) THINGS TO DO

- **Picnic by the Water**: Head for the harbor or river, relax on a park bench or patch of grass, put away your watch, 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 Sargent's Wharf, on the edge of the North End, but it's just one of thousands of pleasant spots. See chapter 7.
- **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; and the **Children's Museum** costs just \$1 after 5pm on Friday. See chapter 7.

- **Ride on a Swan**: A *Swan Boat*, that is. The engagingly low-tech vessels ply the waters of the Public Garden lagoon at a stately pace, allowing an up-close view of the barely wild wildlife that flourishes in the heart of the city. Bostonians and visitors have embraced this unique experience for well over a century. And for a family of 4, it costs all of 8 bucks. See p. 157.

- **Take a Ranger-Led Tour:** The National Park Service is such a good use of tax money. Free and cheap tours of historic attractions all over eastern Massachusetts elevate a visit to a park, a house, a neighborhood, or even a government installation (the Charlestown Navy Yard) from good to great. See chapters 7 and 11.
- **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. Claim a piece of sidewalk with a front-row view of the course. Cheer as the runners thunder past. Then put your feet up—you must be exhausted. See p. 182.
- **Prowl Newbury Street:** From the genteel Arlington Street end to the cutting-edge Massachusetts Avenue 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.
- **Commune With the Bard:** One of the city’s jewels, the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company mounts outdoor performances against the green backdrop of Boston Common. Rent a beach chair and picnic as the sun sets, then enjoy a top-notch—and free—production. See chapter 10.
- **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 Island Excursion:** The Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area is something of a hidden secret, just offshore but a world away. Magnificent views combine with natural and manmade features to create a destination so accessible and interesting that you won’t believe how uncrowded it is. See chapter 7.
- **An Interlude at a Cafe:** Outdoor seating in a place with great people-watching is a good idea 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 8.
- **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 both people-watching and gorgeous trees and shrubs; the Cambridge side has abundant seating

and fabulous views of the Boston skyline. See chapter 7.

- **A Walk Back in Time:** Head for Concord to experience nature as Henry David Thoreau did in the mid-19th century. Through a nearly magical combination of circumstances, Walden Pond looks much as it did when the author and naturalist lived there from July 1845 through September 1847. See chapter 11.

- **A Seaside Saunter:** Gorgeous Marblehead is a quintessential New England town, with crooked lanes leading down to a broad harbor jammed with yachting and fishing vessels. Great shopping, good food, interesting architecture, arresting scenery, and plenty of places to sit and watch the waterborne action make it one of my favorite destinations anywhere. See chapter 11.

7 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **Concord Museum:** Always informative, never overwhelming, it shows and tells visitors enough about the town's history to help them make the most of a visit here. See p. 251.
- **The Institute of Contemporary Art:** Literally and figuratively a trip—it's on the South Boston waterfront and unlike any other cultural institution in Boston—the ICA is a blast. See p. 136.
- **Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum:** 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. 137.
- **John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum:** This library captures the personality of its charismatic namesake as well as the spirit that continues to

make the Camelot era so compelling, all these years later. See p. 137.

- **Museum of Fine Arts:** 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. 138.
- **Peabody Essex Museum:** Yes, it's possible to spend a day in Salem and not give witches more than a passing thought. The Peabody Essex greeted the 21st century by expanding in size and soaring in reputation; its Asian collections are especially noteworthy. Check ahead for information about special exhibitions, or just show up and take in the marvels of the permanent collections. See p. 263.

8 THE BEST ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES

- **A Visit to Faneuil Hall Marketplace:** Street performers, crowds from the world over, the 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. 132.
- **An Exploration of the Museum of Science:** Your kids will revel in the displays and exhibits that cram every branch of science and inquiry into this enormous and child-accessible institution. See p. 139.
- **An Excursion to the Public Garden:** A perfect retreat during or after a busy day of sightseeing. Ride a Swan Boat, visit with the Mallard family of *Make Way*

for *Ducklings* fame, admire the real birds, and marvel as the whole family starts to chill out. See p. 157.

- **A Trip to the Boston Children's Museum:** The hands-on exhibits, noisy galleries, and overall air of discovery and excitement make this excursion catnip for the elementary-school set. See p. 166.
- **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. 140 for the Mugar Omni Theater and p. 141 for the Simons IMAX Theatre.
- **A Tour of Fenway Park:** Nearly a century old, the Red Sox' creaky, cramped home is a baseball shrine that entrances visitors with even a passing interest in the sport. Adolescents too cool to admit that they're having fun at other attractions tend to drop any pretense of boredom here, and younger kids unabashedly love it. The parents saving a bundle of cash by not paying for game tickets tend to agree. See p. 179.
- **A Spell in Salem:** A 12-year-old of my acquaintance—now a college student who cringes when I tell this story—returned from a visit to Salem proclaiming that he wanted to become a witch. Manageable size, interesting attractions, and plenty of green space for running around make the Witch City a great choice for an all-ages day trip. See chapter 11.

9 THE BEST SHOPPING

- **Every Museum Gift Shop in Eastern Massachusetts:** The diversity of the institutions' collections means a variety of items that leaves cheap souvenir T-shirts and refrigerator magnets in the dust. The educational relevance (a requirement for nonprofits) isn't always immediately apparent, but well-made, well-designed merchandise predominates. See chapters 7 and 11.
- **Barbara Krakow Gallery,** 10 Newbury St., 5th floor, Back Bay (☎ 617/262-4490). With a handful of notable exceptions, the refrain that haunts the Boston arts scene is "nice, but it's better in New York." Barbara Krakow runs one of the few galleries that gives New Yorkers the inferiority complex. See p. 200.
- **Black Ink,** 101 Charles St., Beacon Hill (☎ 617/723-3883), and 5 Brattle St., Cambridge (☎ 617/497-1221). A funky desktop trinket, a retro toy, a beautifully designed kitchen gadget, a gorgeous card—you may not come out of these little treasure chests with what you went in looking for, but you'll almost certainly find something you love. See p. 210.
- **Calliope,** 33 Brattle St., Cambridge (☎ 617/876-4149). Even if the children's clothing, shoes, toys, and stuffed animals here weren't adorable—which they are—I'd stop by to see the window displays. See p. 208.
- **Galería Cubana,** 460 Harrison Ave., South End (☎ 617/292-2822). It's not the easiest place to find, but this amazing gallery captures the experience of visiting Cuba without a single bit of red tape. See p. 200.
- **International Poster Gallery,** 205 Newbury St., Back Bay (☎ 617/375-0076). One of the high points of any visit to Newbury Street is a stop here. If you have any interest in graphic design

or contemporary art—heck, if you’ve ever tacked a page of a magazine up over your desk—you’ll find something wonderful here. See p. 201.

- **Joie de Vivre**, 1792 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge (☎ 617/864-8188). Just stepping in here puts me at ease. Somewhere in the thoughtful selection of inventive gifts, toys, cards, jewelry, and inspiring tchotchkes is just the right gift (for someone else or for me), and finding it is more than half the fun. See p. 210.
- **John Lewis, Inc.**, 97 Newbury St., Back Bay (☎ 617/266-6665). The

exquisite craftsmanship—executed on the premises by John Lewis himself—makes this jewelry store a favorite with several generations of in-the-know Bostonians. If you see nose prints on the front window, they might be mine. See p. 213.

- **Upstairs Downstairs Antiques**, 93 Charles St., Beacon Hill (☎ 617/367-1950). Even when I don’t wind up buying something here, I come away inspired by the layout of the well-edited merchandise and the knowledge of the helpful staff. See p. 198.