

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Boston

In This Chapter

- ▶ Searching out the city's best activities, sights, and experiences
- ▶ Finding the top places to stay, dine, and shop
- ▶ Seeing the most enjoyable local historical sites and attractions
- ▶ Discovering the best spots for kids to have fun

people from all over the world seem to feel a connection to Boston. Even if you haven't visited the city, you probably know something about it. Maybe your best friend went to college here, your internist did her residency at Massachusetts General, or your next-door neighbor got a tattoo after the Red Sox won the World Series. You see *Cheers* reruns and the Boston Pops' Fourth of July concert on TV, Fidelity manages your retirement savings, or you remember something about a tea party. You're thinking that Boston sounds like a fun place to visit. You're right.

The city's historic and cultural attractions, entertaining diversions, and manageable size make Boston a popular vacation, business, and convention destination. To help you plan the most enjoyable trip, in this chapter I let you in on my favorite places and activities.



Throughout this book, the “Best of the Best” icon flags the establishments and experiences I like the most.

The Best Travel Experiences

If you want choices, Boston's got 'em. Whatever you prefer — strolling through gardens, exploring museums, watching live sports, sight-seeing (on land and water), shopping, or wandering through historic neighborhoods — this city has something for you.

- ✔ Dotted with tulips, covered in snow, choked with tourists, or framing a wedding party, Boston's **Public Garden** is unforgettable in any season. The first botanical garden in the country, established in the mid-19th century, is also home to an admirably diverse collection of statuary. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Two of the best art museums around are in Boston's Fenway neighborhood — they even share a T stop (cleverly named “Museum”). The **Museum of Fine Arts** offers an incredibly wide-ranging overview; the **Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum** focuses on European and American works beloved by its founder and eponym. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ A visit to **Fenway Park** incorporates the past, present, and future of baseball. The oldest park in the Major Leagues benefits from the attention of some of the most visionary owners in professional sports. The team constantly introduces new features, from seating in unusual places (such as the top of the left-field wall, or “Green Monster”) to year-round tours. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ A **Boston Duck Tour** explores the city and then hops into the water for a cruise around the Charles River Basin on an amphibious sightseeing vehicle. It's a unique perspective and an entertaining experience. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Shopping on **Newbury Street**, the “Rodeo Drive of New England,” can cost as little or as very, very much as you like. Take the window-shopping and people-watching route or wear out your gold card at a dazzling variety of stores and boutiques. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ Sightseeing is great, but sometimes a little **loitering** can be even better. A picnic lunch near the river or the harbor or an aimless walk through an unfamiliar neighborhood (try the North End or Beacon Hill) can show you aspects of Boston that a guided tour can't. Build a little downtime into your travel schedule; you won't regret it.

The Best Hotels

All travelers have the same basic needs, but who wants to settle for basic? The following lodgings offer something extra for everyone from the jaded business traveler to the once-a-year vacationer. Splurge or save on your accommodations by choosing one of the fine establishments listed here. For more in-depth descriptions of these hotels and others, see Chapter 9.

- ✔ The **Four Seasons Hotel** isn't just the best hotel in Boston — it's the best hotel in New England. It offers top-of-the-line everything, from beds to spa treatments, plus service so good that you almost forget how much it's all costing.

- ✔ Spectacular water views literally set the scene at the outrageously plush **Boston Harbor Hotel**. Beautifully appointed rooms, a 60-foot lap pool, great business amenities, and easy access to the Financial District are a few of the features that make it the top downtown hotel choice.
- ✔ The **Marriott Residence Inn Boston Harbor** also overlooks the water. The views aren't as breathtaking as the Boston Harbor Hotel's vistas, but neither is the bill. Rates even include breakfast. Every spacious room has its own kitchen, and families can spread out in a one- or two-bedroom unit.
- ✔ The **Charlesmark Hotel** has its own version of a marvelous view: the Boston Marathon finish line. The reasonable prices include such extras as local phone calls and continental breakfast, so there will be plenty of money left in your budget for shopping on Newbury Street, just a block away.
- ✔ **The MidTown Hotel** is another great deal: Rates include parking (for one car), which saves you at least \$25 a night in this convenient neighborhood. Kids enjoy the seasonal outdoor pool, and you can book them a connecting unit if you don't feel like sharing a room.
- ✔ The best lodging in Cambridge is **The Charles Hotel**, located in a prime spot between Harvard Square and the river. Luxurious but not frilly, it's a superb choice for travelers who need every business perk and vacationers who want to take advantage of the excellent spa, pool, and restaurants.

The Best Restaurants

In the name of research, I'm constantly trying out new places to eat — for better or (more often than you'd think) worse. My favorites are the restaurants I return to because I want to, not because I have to. From seafood to pizza and from high-end dining to neighborhood cafes, you'll have no trouble eating well in Boston. For more detailed listings of these and other eateries, see Chapter 10.

- ✔ The first two steps of the quintessential arrival in Boston are unpacking and ordering a lobster, and not necessarily in that order. The best place for lobster and anything else fishy is **Legal Sea Foods**. I know, I know — you're expecting to hear about a little place in a back alley, and I'm suggesting an internationally famous (oh, the horror) chain. Trust me.
- ✔ Speaking of alleys, **Casa Romero** is a place you can walk past a thousand times and never notice. In an alley a stone's throw from Newbury Street, this romantic hideaway serves flavorful traditional Mexican cuisine.

- ✓ In chain-store-choked Harvard Square, **Mr. Bartley's Burger Cottage** is a welcome slice of authenticity. A mom-and-pop place that serves yummy burgers (beef, turkey, and veggie) and phenomenal onion rings. A quirky delight.
- ✓ For fine dining in an elegant town-house setting, try **Mamma Maria** — the best restaurant in the North End. It's a romantic special-occasion destination that deftly combines the traditional (great *osso buco* and short ribs) with super-fresh ingredients and creative techniques (excellent seafood specials).
- ✓ At the other end of the culinary spectrum but only a few blocks away, **Pizzeria Regina** is the classic North End pizza parlor. The ferocious brick oven produces a superb crust that perfectly complements the tasty toppings. Just don't get in the way of the whirling-dervish waitresses.

The Best Stores

From cheap to chic, boho to bourgeois, the Boston area boasts consistently excellent shopping. For more information on these top retail destinations and others, see Chapter 12.

- ✓ Boston's excellent museums have excellent gift shops. (See Chapter 11 for more specific information on museums.) I particularly like the options at the **Museum of Science**, the **New England Aquarium**, and the **Children's Museum**, which feature educational but not homeworky toys and games. My favorite is the **Museum of Fine Arts**, which carries everything from jewelry based on pieces in the museum collections to a huge selection of books. The MFA's satellite location in Faneuil Hall Marketplace offers a wide range of quality goods as well.
- ✓ **Filene's Basement** is the big name in New England discount shopping. The enormous selection and great prices bring out the hunter and gatherer in every bargain shopper who walks through the doors.
- ✓ The **Newbury Street gallery scene** isn't as intimidating as you may think; if you're curious, wander around. Whether the gallery's specialty is painting or photography or antique botanical prints or modern sculpture, dealers and other staff members are on hand and (usually) eager to explain why they fell for the work that's on display. Don't miss the **International Poster Gallery**.
- ✓ My idea of a great gift is something the recipient absolutely loves but never thinks to buy for him- or herself. Of the dozens of worthy competitors in the Boston area, my top destination is **Joie de Vivre**, outside Cambridge's Porter Square. If you want to borrow my "one for them, one for me" rule and pick up a game, card, or even kaleidoscope for yourself, be my guest.

The Best Ways to Explore History

Colonial Boston is as tangible as the 21st-century city. In ways both big and small, all of New England preserves and celebrates the past, and the Boston area, in particular, has an especially rich legacy. I promise you that walking around and seeing historic sites in person is more fun than reading about them. Here are some excellent places to investigate.

- ✓ The **Freedom Trail** may be a cliché, but like most clichés, the 3-mile path attained its status for a reason. I have two favorite ways to approach it: as a guide to downtown Boston's most interesting historic attractions and as the jumping-off point for innumerable entertaining detours. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ The most interesting stop on the Freedom Trail, the **Paul Revere House**, recalls the days when downtown Boston consisted almost entirely of flammable wooden buildings. Built around 1680, the house stands within sight of downtown's glittering glass towers, allowing you to take in nearly 400 years of history without even taking a step. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ The main **Harvard University** campus captures more than 350 years of history in a couple of verdant quadrangles surrounded by brick and granite structures that no longer drip with ivy (it damages the building materials). Stroll around, imagining yourself walking in the footsteps of everyone from George Washington to Natalie Portman. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ A visit to **Concord** is a trip back in time — not just to the dawn of the Revolutionary War, but also to the heyday of 19th-century transcendentalism and *Little Women* author Louisa May Alcott. This one-time country village, now a lovely suburb, celebrates its past all over town. See Chapter 14.

The Best Experiences for Kids

What can the kids do in Boston? A better question may be “What *can't* the kids do in Boston?” Whether your goal is family togetherness or just getting everyone home in one piece, a visit to a fun attraction can help. Here are some of my favorite child-friendly excursions, all thoroughly road-tested by members of the “Are we there yet?” set.

- ✓ Little kids (younger than about 10 years old) can't get enough of the **Children's Museum**. The interactive exhibits encourage everything from climbing around to blowing soap bubbles. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ The **Museum of Science** appeals to a wider age range — even teenagers won't be *too* embarrassed to be seen with the 'rents. It offers hundreds of interactive displays and fun activities, as well as

IMAX movies and a planetarium that schedules laser shows. See Chapter 11.

- ✓ Did you follow *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little* with E. B. White's other children's classic, *The Trumpet of the Swan*? Then your family will definitely want to check out the **Swan Boats**, which ply the lagoon in the Public Garden from mid-April through mid-September. The employees pedal while you try to convince the kids that you see Louis, the trumpeter swan. (The resident swans are actually named Romeo, Juliet, Castor, and Pollux.) See Chapter 11.
- ✓ Less tame, longer, and considerably more exciting is a **harbor cruise**. It doesn't have to be a full-length sightseeing excursion, either — a ferry ride between Long Wharf, on the downtown waterfront, and the Charlestown Navy Yard is both fun and cheap (\$1.70 one-way). See Chapters 8 and 11.
- ✓ Every day trip from Boston I cover in this book offers countless family-friendly activities and diversions. Ask your friends who grew up in the area — particularly popular school field-trip destinations include **Concord**, **Salem**, and **Plymouth**. See Chapter 14.

The Best Walks

When I'm sprinting across an intersection where the traffic lights have a seven-second "walk" cycle, the nickname "America's Walking City" doesn't seem to suit Boston particularly well. At other times, when I'm contemplating a small-scale architectural detail, a tree in full bloom, or a particularly enticing window display, it makes perfect sense. Here are some excellent routes for pedestrians.

- ✓ Yes, it's obvious, but the **Freedom Trail** springs to mind because there's nothing else quite like it. Banish "should" and "must" from your vocabulary for a little while and consider the fact that you're walking in nearly four centuries' worth of other people's footsteps. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson led his mother's cows to graze on Boston Common each day before he headed to school on School Street. See "The Best Ways to Explore History," earlier in this chapter, and Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Commonwealth Avenue** ("Comm. Ave." to the locals) begins at the Public Garden, the loveliest park in downtown Boston. You can confine your walk to the Public Garden — make sure to swing by the *Make Way for Ducklings* sculptures — or wander the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, which is basically a long, narrow park between lanes of the Parisian-style boulevard. Comm. Ave. begins across the street from the equestrian statue of George Washington in the Public Garden, and its 19th-century architecture is a welcome distraction from the random collection of statuary on the mall. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ One block away, **Newbury Street** is a festival of retail and one of the city's best venues for people-watching. From the elegantly coiffed matrons wandering into the luxe boutiques to the extravagantly pierced students devouring ice cream, it's a cross section of Boston. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Harvard Square** is both a pedestrian paradise and the intersection of several great walking routes. **John F. Kennedy Street** leads past John F. Kennedy Park to the banks of the Charles River, both lovely places to take a break. On **Brattle Street**, retail gives way to gorgeous residential architecture, which peaks at the exquisite Longfellow National Historic Site. See Chapter 11. Finally, on **Mass. Ave.**, Cambridge's main artery, the people-watching is as good as it is on Newbury Street. A stroll north to Porter Square or east to Central Square exposes you to some of the Boston area's best shopping. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ The path around Concord's **Walden Pond** has been a popular route for hundred of years — and for good reason. Whether surrounded by winter snow, spring buds, summer sunbathers, or (best of all) fall foliage, the pond is a wonderful destination all year. See Chapter 14.