Old-school Boston

Seafood, sport and style — this city is the USA at its most civilised

Sophisticated the capital of Massachusetts may be, but stuck up it ain’t. This city knows true style is not about how many greenbacks you have (here, the billionaires all wear baseball caps), but about local pride in Boston’s heritage — and its unique sense of humour. Here, hip and historic go hand in hand. You might call it ‘old-cool’. By Rob Crossan
Home to Boston's elite for two centuries, the bow-front houses that line genteel Beacon Hill's cobbled streets (10 on map) seem to gleam on a summer's day. (They're called bow-front because the double curve of their windows makes them look like gift-box 'bows'). Boston By Foot offers absorbing, knowledgeable tours run by volunteers—ask for architectural whizz Bob Perkins if you want the lowdown on the city's buildings.

Unchanged over its one-hundred-plus years, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (gardnermuseum.org; £11.50) — named after its intellectual founder—is a recreation of a 15th-century Venetian palace. A time-warp treat, it's filled with works by the Old Masters, including Veronese and Titian. This place has a fun side, too: if you can prove your name is Isabella, you get in free.

Boston would be nothing without the Red Sox, its major league baseball team. Its emblem is on every cap worn by everyone around town, from toddlers to senators (and local heroes Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who seem glued to theirs). Buy yours from the Fenway Park Stadium gift shop before catching a real game (nabbing one at the airport doesn't count). The season runs March to September and tickets are easy to buy if you're happy to sit up in the gods (from £11, mlb.com/redsox; ③). Hot dogs obligatory.

Formerly a reviled elevated concrete motorway that took nearly two decades to rebuild underground, the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway is now a green and glorious wonder (rosekennedygreenway.org; free). At almost 3km long, it has been transformed into a strip of lush gardens, dotted with installation art works, giant murals and food trucks. Wear your Red Sox cap to fit in.

You'd never know it, but the beautiful swan-shaped boats that float across Boston Public Garden's lagoon are fitted with twin tractor seats for passengers who have to use pedal power to glide about (swanboats.com; £3). It's a gracefully gorgeous scene. You're not encouraged to feed the wildlife, but be sure to coo over Romeo and Juliet, the resident real-life swans that call this place home.

Once this warehouse stored ventilation shafts — now Boston Public Market (bostonpublicmarket.org; free) is filled with the aromas of cheeses from Appleton Farms, sushi from Red's Best, coffee beans roasted by George Howell and dozens more foods, all produced in New England.

Admission is steep at £19, but Boston's Museum of Fine Arts delivers (mfa.org; ⑦) — it's worth a trip just to see its light, airy Norman Foster-designed Art of the Americas wing. Here you'll find the solid silver Liberty Bowl, adorned with the names of the 'Glorious 92' politicians who, in 1767, protested against British imposed taxes — a move that prompted the American Revolution.

Harvard's heavenly campus (⑧) has been seen on screen in everything from Love Story to The Social Network (Mark Zuckerberg is an alumnus, but don't let that put you off). It's no less sumptuous in reality. It's an easy train commute (less than 30 minutes), or a 15-minute cab from Boston, and is free to mooch about — or take one of the (also free) student-led walking tours (harvard.edu). The undergrads will reel off Harvard's list of past students (Barack Obama, Bill Gates, supermodel Tyra Banks...), but the tour also gives you a chance to quiz them on life at an Ivy League college.
**EAT**

- **Golden oldie**
  **UNION OYSTER HOUSE** (Chowder cup from £5)
  **Because:** Come to check out the US's oldest restaurant (open 1826), but stay for the clam chowder, often voted the best in Boston. **Travel's tip:** All wood and stained glass, this place is dark and cozy, so don't waste a sunny day — come after dark. 41 Union St; 00 1617 2272750, unionoysterhouse.com; @.

- **Swishy-samaries**
  **PARISH CAFE** (Mains about £10)
  **Because:** Famed local chefs have invented their own sandwich creations, which range from healthy to decadent. **Travel's tip:** There are more than 100 beers to choose from here. Beware of the Harpoon Levathan — it's a knockout 10% ABV. 361 Boylston St; 00 1617 247 4777, parishcafe.com; @.

- **Seafood special**
  **LEGAL SEAFOODS** (Mains about £20)
  **Because:** A Massachusetts Institution, Legal Seafoods outlets do exactly what you'd expect: steamed lobsters, crab cakes and fried clams. Buckets, bibs and tool kit provided. **Travel's tip:** This branch has waterfront views and is a good place to wait for a whale-watching trip or Old Town trolley tour. Long Wharf; 00 1617 742 5300, legalseafoods.com; @.

- **Imaginative indulgence**
  **MERITAGE** (Mains about £30)
  **Because:** Chef Daniel Bruce is a New England legend. Superb creativity and bold flavours abound — try 'Crab Sunset' served on black rice and LED lights. Yes, really. **Travel's tip:** Move to the ground-floor bar, all red leather and dark wood, for your digestif. 70 Rowe's Wharf; 00 1617 439 3095, www.meritagetherestaurant.com; @.

- **Discreet and decadent**
  **TASTING COUNTER** (Tasting menu from £53)
  **Because:** A dimly space in the back of a bakery. Tasting Counter serves a masterful three-course lunch in just an hour, which, incredibly, doesn't feel rushed. **Travel's tip:** Harvard Square is just a 30-minute walk away. Go explore then take the Red Line 'T' downtown. 14 Tyler St, Somerville: 00 1 617 299 6362, tastingcounter.com; @.

**DRINK & SHOP**

- **Raffish late-nighter**
  **MET BACK BAY**
  **Because:** A warren of rooms, this bar/restaurant brings old-school glam to this central 'hood. **Travel's tip:** There is a bar-food menu, but if you just want to drink, ask nicely and you may get breadsticks and soft cheese. 279 Dartmouth St; metbackbay.com; @.

- **Jazz giant**
  **WALLY'S CAFE**
  **Because:** Since 1947, this basement hideout has been hosting live jazz, blues and funk nights without a cover charge (unusual for the US). **Travel's tip:** The pros start at 9pm, but the early-evening sessions for newcomers are good, too. 427 Massachusetts Ave; wallyscafe.com; @.

- **Vintage nirvana**
  **TWENTIETH CENTURY LIMITED**
  **Because:** This place sells a vast range of earrings and other glam jewellery, from Victorian to contemporary. **Travel's tip:** Ask owner Paul to show you his vintage cufflinks — most are out back. 73 Charles St; boston-vintagejewelry.com; @.

**STAY**

- **Literary with history**
  **OMNI PARKER HOUSE** (Doubles from £140, room-only)
  **Because:** Dickens once stayed and Malcolm X worked here — it's the oldest continually operating hotel in the USA (opened 1855) and has an unruffled charm (lots of cherry-wood furnishings!). **Travel's tip:** Romantics should ask for table 40 in the restaurant — it's where a young JFK Kennedy proposed to Jackie. 60 School St; omnihotels.com; @.

- **Immaculate & homely**
  **THE GRYPHON HOUSE** (Doubles from £150, B&B)
  **Because:** A century-old brownstone with the feel of a late 19th-century literary salon. Gryphon's eight rooms each have a different theme — from Arts and Crafts to Neo-Gothic — but all have supremely comfy beds and lovely gas fireplaces. **Travel's tip:** Unless you're fit, ask for a room on a lower floor, as there's no lift. 9 Bay State Rd; innboston.com; @.
Pillows for pros

ELIOT HOTEL (Doubles from £169, room-only)
Because: Rooms with a rarefied vibe (French mirrors and stucco aplenty) are yours at this prestigious old-timer in Back Bay — it was originally built for professors at Harvard University.
Travel’s tip: You’re just 15 minutes from Copley Square Farmers’ Market — it’s on every Friday and is a must-do Boston feed.
370 Commonwealth Ave; eliotelhotel.com; @.

Luxury newcomer

HOTEL VERITAS (Doubles from £196, room-only)
Because: This newcomer is just off Harvard Square, so it’s a great base for exploring Cambridge on foot.
Rooms have Art Deco hints and, despite the low rates, bathrooms come with posh Etro bath lotions.
Travel’s tip: It’s worth paying for a Karma Pass at the Front Desk (£15) — it’ll get you into the yoga studio and gym across the street. 1 Remington St, Cambridge; thehotelveritas.com; @.

MONEY-SAVING TIP
Stack up on wine and cheeses at nearby DeLuca’s market to save on dinner spends. If you’re in a suite, ask for a fridge.

Beacon Hill beauty

THE WHITNEY (Doubles from £208, room-only)
Because: Once a boarding house for nurses, this new improved hotel has a brilliant location on the doorstep of chi-chi Beacon Hill — even the cheapest rooms have views over Charles River.
Travel’s tip: Formerly John Jeffries House, the Whitney will open — after a new glam extension project — on July 1.
170 Charles St; whitneyhotelboston.com; @.

Grand dame

BOSTON HARBOUR HOTEL (Doubles from £385, room-only)
Because: She may be an old classic of a hotel, but she’s moved with the times — and judged it finely. Huge rooms awash in marble and blue hues create a luxurious cruise-ship feel, with stellar views over the harbour.
Travel’s tip: Get the concierge to book you a water taxi back to the airport (£10, one-way) — the pick-up is right outside the back of the hotel.
70 Rowes Wharf; bhh.com; @.

GET ME THERE

GO INDEPENDENT
Norwegian (Norwegian.com) flies non-stop from Gatwick, from £295 return.
BA (ba.com) flies from Heathrow, from £253 return.

GO PACKAGED
My America Holiday (myamericaholiday.co.uk) has three nights in three-star accommodation from £429pp, room-only, with Heathrow flights. Escape Worldwide (escapeworldwide.co.uk) has three nights at the five-star Boston Harbour Hotel, from £860pp, room-only, including flights from Heathrow.

FURTHER INFORMATION
The city’s official tourism page is boston.gov/visiting-boston. Uber is widespread throughout the city and there are also water-taxi services that run from Logan airport to numerous locations around the city. Visit bostonharbourcruises.com to view all the timetables and buy tickets in advance.