

Seizing Boston by the scruff of the neck

MICHAEL R. BALL

"I haven't been in Boston in years," said the overdressed exurban matron in Copley Plaza. "I don't even recognize it."

Well, I hate to shock you, but it isn't Boston. You could stick that glorified shopping center near any big city and the only difference would be that you wouldn't have to pay for parking. Copley Plaza is a game retailers and politicians play and has precious little to do with Boston.

I spent a decade in Manhattan and found nearly all my coworkers running to their suburban castles each work evening. They'd come to town semi-annually, once with the kids to a museum and once as a couple for dinner, a show, and a terrified scurry back to safety. From what I hear from the locals in my five years here, it is much the same.

Manhattan is more intimidating – more dangerous, more vital, an assault to the eyes, ears and intellect, a real sensual and emotional shock to the sheltered. In contrast, Boston is small, relatively safe and quiet, while still offering some fine cultural activities.

I say let the cowards in Canton, Sharon and Bedford stay there. I do not want them clogging up my museums. It is hard enough to get tickets to what is laughingly called the "Theater District" here, without the hicks coming in for their annual bite-see-and-run. Boston would suffocate if they overcame their irrational terror of immediate death upon being in town at dark (gasp) or getting lost in Roxbury (shudder).

Boston is a tiny town. You can walk that fist of land that makes up the central city in 20 minutes. In contrast, Manhattan is 14 miles long.

You can own Boston in a few hours. You can see it all, get cultured, get ethnic, get happy in minutes. Many natives and longtime residents don't realize that, because they don't walk it. Jokes aside, with one-way and circular streets and strangling congestion, driving across town can take much longer than walking and almost as long as using the T, and all you see from the car are bricks, signs, people, and an occasional statue.



After three years on the Hill and 18 months in the wonderfully central, but hideously ugly, Charles River Park, I had a pretty good sense of the city. In each of those, I was amazed to hear the locals – those who could and who couldn't say "r's" – admit they didn't leave their neighborhoods. They are as bad as the rubes by Rte. 128.

I know people who have lived on Beacon Hill for years who had not been to the South End until they visited us in our new apartment. I've met longtime Back Bay residents who know little of the Hill or North End.

The news to all of them is that Boston can be had, quickly, safely, and cheaply. You can seize Boston by the ears and say, "Mine!" You'll look around and think, "Gee, this is much closer than I thought," and "I thought this was supposed to be a rough neighborhood."

Admittedly, white people may not want to frequent black nightspots in Roxbury, as black people may not want to frequent the North End for an evening. Police statistics back up such limits set by racists and other fools. However, that's true in any large city and with very few off-limits rules, the rest is yours for the taking.

The three of us – husband, wife and son – already knew the city and surrounding areas pretty well when we moved to the South End. When we wanted to see something, whether a museum, neighborhood or restaurant, we have always picked up and gone.

Recently, we began claiming the south and western parts of town. We're like urban guerrillas striking out on social and cultural raids from our home base. I walk down Columbus Avenue and above the new train tracks to the YMCA for a swim; suddenly many new stores, Bob the Chef's restaurant, the Museum of Fine Arts and two new grocery stores are mine. We take day trips to Washington Street and find new Middle Eastern restaurants and shops. We are closer to Chinatown and spend time there as we used to in the Haymarket and North End.

Friends and relatives in other states ask me what I think of Boston. I must admit that given the choice, I'll take Manhattan – a much larger, busier, more vital city. But while I'm here, Boston is mine. I am not a captive to some dreadful urban place in which I must live. It is mine. You'll find me (and my wife and son) on the streets reveling in the sights, smells and other pleasures.

If you are a resident or suburbanite who hides from and hates this city, lock your door, for God's sake. But don't feel sorry for anyone who relishes Boston's urban buffet. You'll not have to experience the diversity of art, music, food, cultures and sciences that make up this tiny town. We'll not feel sorry for you, since you have chosen to feel safe physically, emotionally and intellectually.

But, when you do scurry into town, feel free to ask me or any other confident-looking resident. I'll be glad to share directions to a few places to go. After all, it's my city.

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