

THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

A BOSTON FOR ALL SEASONS by HADLEY HENRIETTE



In the past few decades, Boston has evolved into a much hipper, more international city. Fenway park has been rebuilt, and some of the neighborhoods have a decidedly “fresher” atmosphere, namely Back Bay and the South End. And, aside from an encouraged jaunt down to the picturesque Charles River, it’s safe to say a person can see the best of Boston without ever leaving those adjoining quarters, especially if a holiday shopping trip is on the agenda.

In fact, more and more travelers are passing on the inflated rates in New York City and heading to Bean Town in December to get a taste of a New England Christmas, complete with over-the-top décor, top-shelf shopping and even a little ice skating.

But what would shopping in one of the country’s most charming cities be without the power lunches in between? Good grub is easy to come by in Boston, as the city crossed the foodie-friendly line some years ago, when local Todd English opened Olives and put Boston on the culinary map.

Perhaps the best and most luxurious jumping off point is **The Mandarin Oriental**. Located on Boylston Street and connected to

the Copley Place (the weather-proof passage to nearby streets and the Prudential Center), The Mandarin was completed in 2008 and boasts well-appointed rooms, Frette linens, a cushy spa, a state-of-the-art gym and, perhaps the shiniest jewel in the hotel’s crown, the famed restaurant **Asana**.

Asana’s dining room sparkles with crystal, pinpoint lights and oceans of plush surfaces befitting the hotel. The menu offers Asian and American cuisines, but fortunately, not a fusion of both. Chef Nicholas Boutin manages to get everything right, from the buttery halibut with curry and rice and fresh herbs to the wine list that includes great organics, such as Yorkville from Mendocino. Even breakfast is exemplary, offering items such as freshly squeezed fruit and vegetable juices, Irish oatmeal, a Japanese-style breakfast that commences with miso-sou and a pastry basket better than most in Paris.

In close proximity to The Mandarin lies **Clio Restaurant** on tree-lined Commonwealth Avenue, the most buzzed-about gourmet eatery in the city. Even New Yorker Laurent Tourandel mentioned he was looking forward to stopping by the

new French restaurant that’s already won numerous local and national awards. Just be sure to make reservations and bring the charge card with the second-highest limit – save the highest for shopping on Newbury.

For those looking for something a bit more casual in Back Bay, **Toro**, the newest tapas bar, will hit the mark, as will **Sel de la Terre**, a buzzing French wine bar with daily specials and more cheese than a French rat would know what to do with.

Of course, sometimes there isn’t time to eat a leisurely lunch while shopping, and for quick service, **Stephi’s** on Newbury is perfect. Although it will almost certainly be packed, the good people there are accustomed to the crowds, so orders are taken and served like clockwork. Stephi’s isn’t exactly what most would call a foodie hotspot, but it is an institution that’s been there for 20-plus years.

The shops on Newbury are located on the lower levels of 19th-century brownstones with residences above, making it a perfect experience that countless developers across the country have tried to replicate. This great blend of old and new, high-end and hip, shows there’s nothing like the real thing. Predictable shops like H&M, True Religion and Cole Haan rub shoulders with independents like **LIT Boutique**, **Poor Little Rich Girl Vintage Shop** and **The Closet**.

Another cool thing about Newbury is the concentration of hair salons. There are no less than 51 salons in an eight-block stretch, so it’s impossible to ever be more than a stone’s throw away from a good blowout or a quick mani-pedi. It’s hard to pick a winner, but **Stilisti Hair Salon** is definitely among the best of the best.

Fancy a cup of tea before that styling

appointment? Duck into **Deluxe Café** to warm things up. This cute little shop has gourmet snacks and knowledgeable “teatenders” to help customers navigate the extensive menu of teas, ranging from South Indian Tiger Hill Nilgiri Tea to Hibiscus-infused Papaya Pineapple infusions.

To satisfy a fierce sweet tooth, consider taking the tea to go and head to **Sweet Cupcakes Bakery**, which has the best cupcakes in Boston. Sweet makes their cakes from scratch, with top-notch ingredients like Madagascar bourbon vanilla and Callebaut chocolate.

A trip to nearby South End, which retains just a pinch of the grit it was famous for more than a decade ago, reveals a trove of affordable shops. Now trendy restaurants like **B&G Oyster** — situated just across from **The Butcher Shop** — are the norm. The warm and cozy semi-subterranean eatery holds fewer than 50 people and reservations are a must. Exquisite Lobster Rolls and a host of other well-priced, seafaring dishes make this place a local favorite and a visitor’s dream.

A quest for brunch in South End should lead you to the **South End Buttery**. A perfect blend of bakery and café, only the Buttery has dishes like scones with homemade jam, oatmeal terrine and clotted cream or turkey chili with greens with goat cheese, and toasted pumpkin seeds. After a warm brunch, stroll boutiques like **Uniform** — a unique men’s shop on Tremont and home décor shops like **Devi Home**.

Of course, there is much more to do in Boston, such as take a trip down the Charles River or visit Faneuil Hall market, where real fishmongers and tourists hit up **KingFish Hall** and **Atlantic Fish**. But it’s safe to say that some of the best of Boston can be seen in a few beautiful square miles between Back Bay and South End. There’s no getting around holiday shopping, but doing it in these ’hoods would make it an experience almost as good as the feeling of giving.

For more information on the venues featured here, as well as others, visit www.944.com/articles/a-boston-for-all-seasons