

The Boston Globe

Make room for five historic Boston hotels



By Kathleen Pierce | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 08,
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Dine in the spot where “Paul Revere’s Ride” was penned. Stay on the top floor of what was once the tallest building in Boston. Try molecular gastronomy where your ancestors canoodled over champagne.

Boston history is not confined to duck tours and statues along the Freedom Trail. To get up close and personal with the city’s past you need to slip between the sheets and bed down in a historic hotel.

We start at the Eliot Hotel, where it doesn’t take long to turn back the clock. At the front desk a receptionist hands you an actual key. It’s heavy and made of brass. Just turn it in the lock and step into a gracious prewar suite.

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With a private vestibule giving way to a wet bar, we half expect a butler to appear to escort us into our

relaxing chamber. Inside these elegant but not too plush rooms, old luxury meets subtle modern touches. Telephones, a classic desk, and a high-thread count beckon.

Located among rows of stately brownstones and baronial-style mansions, the Eliot is the last standing remnant of a once crowded hotel row along the Champs Élysées-styled Commonwealth Avenue.

Most rooms have classic Boston views, but among the very best is the top-requested corner Room 704. With the State House in one direction, the Citgo sign in the other, we didn't know which way to look. "Hotels used to be in areas where you'd look out your window and it would be pretty," said Arthur Ullian, whose father bought the hotel in 1939. Arthur now runs it with his wife, Dora.

Anyone who lived in the Back Bay in the 1950s and '60s will remember the Eliot Lounge, one of the first singles bars in Boston. Martinis were sipped in banquettes as an organ player filled the room with

Cole Porter classics. Then it became a sports bar - a marathon bar to be exact. Elite runners and their counterparts would down beer with rowdy crowds every April.

To walk into the gauzy, white Clio today is to not recognize the space. Ken Oringer is at the helm of this French restaurant with Asian touches that anchors the Eliot on Mass. Ave. Hardly a newcomer, for 15 years a generation of Bostonians have made memories here. Try the fresh-dug beets and hand-foraged mushroom ravioli for an off-the-charts epicurean experience. But bring your plastic. Dinner can easily cost more than your room.

If you are looking for a night at the museum, visit The Fairmont Copley Plaza. Now in its 100th year, this Boston landmark is getting a royal renovation.

Updated rooms, a health club with an outdoor deck, and a new concept where the Oak Bar once dazzled generations of travelers are being unveiled this spring and summer. All told, \$20 million is being spent to

keep this grand dame on her toes.

When guests check into the hotel, which bears a striking resemblance to The Plaza in New York (same architect), “They look up,” said Suzanne Wenz, the hotel’s regional director of public relations. And when they do, the heavens open. A stunning Tiffany blue and gold coffered ceiling sets the stage for a retro reverie. Throughout the hotel dolphins cavort in the details, a popular motif in the mansions of Newport, leaving anyone who appreciates interior design agog.

Enter through Peacock Alley off St. James Avenue, and you will swear the Baroque musicians just exited stage left. Rooms are nicely turned out, but a bit of a letdown after the over-the-top elegance of the lobby and ballrooms where so many weddings, the movie “Bride Wars,” and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy’s debut took place.

Long before it was known for its well-executed cocktails, and the place to pop the question, the Oak Bar was the Merry-Go-Round Bar from the 1930s to

the '70s. Inside the wood-paneled interior with 30-foot-high ceilings a lively cocktail scene turned nightly. Now closed, the space will reemerge this summer as the Oak Long Bar & Kitchen. The staff is keeping details under wraps for now, but this we do know: Come June Boston's new al fresco headquarters will be the corner of Dartmouth Street and St. James Avenue.

If you are a bibliophile with a sweet tooth, there is only one hotel for you: the Omni Parker House. Located on the Freedom Trail, the oldest continuously operated hotel in the country had its own Algonquin Round Table, called The Saturday Club. Because the hotel was located near the publishing house Ticknor and Fields, literary lights such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, and a handful of scribes who need no first names - Longfellow, Emerson, and Dickens - gathered in the library, now Parker's Bar, to share their writing. According to hotel lore, the oak-paneled room across from the Old City Hall is where Longfellow wrote "Paul Revere's Ride" on the back of

a menu. “The Scarlet Letter” was first read here, and names such as Marley and Scrooge first fell on American ears. On his stateside tour, Dickens shared “A Christmas Carol” with the club.

And about the sweet tooth? Order a Boston cream pie martini (the real deal was invented here in 1867), and enjoy a modern update on the hotel’s eponymous rolls, now beef sliders.

In keeping with its 1855 origins, rooms start at 120 square feet. But students of history do not come here for a palatial pad. After all, back then bathrooms in your room were luxuries.

Across Boston Common, E.M. Statler is credited with this invention at The Boston Park Plaza Hotel & Towers. Tucked behind Boylston Street, this hospitality marvel, originally called the Hotel Statler, Boston, is the site of many hotel firsts.

Statler created the “occupancy indicator,” known as the “Do Not Disturb” sign, and was the first hotelier to

put telephones and radios in every room. The Park Plaza is also one of the first mixed-use developments in the United States. A city within a city with lobby shops, restaurants, a shoe shine, and airline ticket offices offered modern amenities in a grand setting. Twentieth-century notables such as John Wayne, Bette Davis, and Winston Churchill stayed here.

Although occupying a full city block, the Park Plaza somehow gets lost in highly developed Park Square. When it opened in 1927 just the opposite was true. It was the tallest structure in the city at 14 stories. Today, many of the antique vestiges remain. Perhaps the most noticeable is in the basement, where a clutch of barbers cut hair the old way, with scissors and a straight razor. The hotel once had a sprawling barbershop, where 22 barbers kept the gents of the day in fashion.

At 941 rooms, the Park Plaza is still one of the largest urban hotels in New England. Under new ownership, some emblematic touches, like the swan motif, are

being airbrushed out. But postcard views of the Public Gardens and its Swan Boat rides keep this graceful image alive. The doors still retain the built-in cabinets where dry cleaning could be left.

Almost three decades earlier, The Lenox went up in the Back Bay and soon became the favorite spot of celebrities who liked the plush accommodations so much they moved in. Judy Garland and Red Auerbach both have suites dedicated to them in the Boylston Street beauty.

Garland lived here in summer 1965 for her concert series on Boston Common. Her suite was recently refurbished and “it’s very lavish,” said Scott Grigevich, director of sales and marketing.

With an Irish pub and martini bar flanking the lobby, The Lenox can be noisy on weekend nights. Perhaps that rabble-rousing spirit is a carry-over from its past.

If you check into Room 300 and catch a faint whiff of cigar, there is a ghost of a chance it’s Red. “He had

legendary poker games when he lived here,” said Grigevich.

If you go...

Elliot Hotel

370 Commonwealth Ave.

617-267-1607

www.eliothotel.com

Room rates \$255-\$545 for one-bedroom suites.

Fairmont Copley Plaza

138 St. James Ave.

617-267-5300

[www.fairmont.com/copley plaza](http://www.fairmont.com/copley_plaza)

Standard room to presidential suites, \$269-\$3,500.

The Lenox

61 Exeter St. at Boylston

617-536-5300

www.lenoxhotel.com

Standard rooms to one-bedroom suites, \$199-\$1,250.

The Boston Park Plaza Hotel & Towers

50 Park Plaza at Arlington Street

617-426-2000

www.bostonparkplaza.com

Room rates \$89-\$380.

Omni Parker House

60 School St.

617-227-8600

www.omnihotels.com

Room rates \$99-\$499.