

# Travel

The New York Times

FRUGAL TRAVELER | SETH KUGEL

## A \$100 Weekend in Boston

PHILADELPHIA MIGHT CLAIM Benjamin Franklin as its own, but I can think of two ways he's more closely tied to Boston. First, he grew up there. Second, I just spent a weekend in Boston for the value of the bill that bears his portrait.

For the latest in my series of \$100 weekends (nytimes.com/100dollarweekends has more), I darted from fancy food trucks to old-school pizza joints, took in a morning church service and an evening of neighborhood storytelling, held the Freedom Trail true to its first syllable and connected all the dots via the early-to-bed transit system known as the T. (There's even an upside to that: in a city where the subway nods off shortly after midnight, entertainment budgets shrink accordingly.)

### Friday

Starving after a late-afternoon bus ride from New York, I took the subway to Copley Square in search of one of Boston's most popular food trucks, Mei Mei Street Kitchen (meimeiboston.com). Fridays from 4 to 7:30 you'll find the Chinese-American-themed truck on Clarendon Street near Boylston, almost in the shadow of the John Hancock Tower. I tried the Double Awesome (\$7), a messy semi-sandwich of poached eggs, pesto and Vermont Cheddar wrapped in a scallion pancake; not bad, but a bit over the top for me. I'd rate it a Single Awesome.

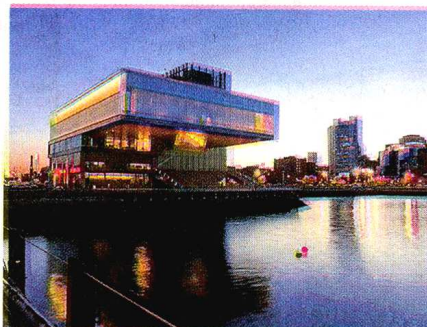
After wandering the just-look-don't-buy boutiques of Newbury Street, I hiked a mile over to the South End, home to Wally's Café (wallyscafe.com), a narrow, no-cover decades-old staple of the jazz scene that still packs in one of the more diverse crowds (by race and age) you'll see at a Boston bar. A \$5 beer (and \$1 tip) buys you an evening of energetic jazz bands battling an equally energetic crowd. (Arrive before 9 and you'll probably get a seat.)

At first glance, my final stop for the night would seem an unlikely one: Clio, a French restaurant where entrees start around \$30. But after 11 on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, the space also hosts Uni Sashimi bar, a sort of restaurant-within-a-restaurant with several varieties of "late night ramen" for \$10. I ordered the luscious short-rib kimchi version, sipped water and chatted with the friendly crowd, whose bills were much higher than mine.

Friday total: \$28.50

### Saturday

Just two subway stops under the harbor from downtown, East Boston is virtually



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SETH KUGEL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. BOTTOM RIGHT, JODI HILTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ignored by tourists (though a controversial proposal to build a casino and resort at a local racetrack might change that). Yet the working-class neighborhood has two real attractions: Piers Park's brilliant skyline views across the harbor, and a cluster of cheap Latin American restaurants near the T stop at Maverick Square. I had a \$4 breakfast of pupusas at Taco Mex (tacomexboston.com), where the cooks, unlike the décor, are Salvadoran. The pupusas, thick corn tortillas with a variety of stuffings including pork and cheese with loroco (an edible flower), were served hot off the grill and accompanied by curtido, a chilled slaw, just like in El Salvador. I had two and was stuffed.

Boston is often criticized for its outside feeling of self-importance — a recent Onion headline read "Pretty Cute Watching Boston Residents Play Daily Game of 'Big City.'" But back in the era of the founding fathers, Boston was indeed all that, as you'll realize if you do even a portion of the

Freedom Trail, best tackled in D.I.Y. fashion.

Walking the 2.5-mile trail is free and easy, though some of the historic buildings along the way charge admission. I skipped those, but made the very good decision to shell out \$6.95 for Charles Bahne's "Complete Guide to Boston's Freedom Trail." The 80-page booklet is as lighthearted and riveting as a live guide, with fascinating who-knew historic tidbits.

My favorite site was the Granary Burying Ground, full of crooked 18th-century gravestones with macabre carvings and "Here Lyeth the Body" inscriptions. The early-18th-century brick building that once housed the publishers of "Walden" and "The Scarlet Letter" was my least favorite — it is now, depressingly, a Chipotle.

I was thankful that I didn't need the Chipotle to eat cheaply and well along the way. At open-air Haymarket, I picked up fresh fruit. Crossing the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway, I picked up some

Clockwise from top left, a statue of Paul Revere in the North End, with the Old North Church behind; old trolleys run on the Red Line from Ashmont to Mattapan; the Institute of Contemporary Art in South Boston; pupusas are \$2 at Taco Mex, which despite its name has a Salvadoran cooking staff.

sweet potato soup (\$3) from the Clover food truck. In the Italian North End, I stopped at cavernous Galleria Umberto for a sauce-slathered slice of Sicilian pizza (\$1.55) and a paper cup of Carlo Rossi Burgundy chilled to within an inch of its life (\$2).

From Charlestown, I took a bus to the next town over, Somerville, where I spent the early evening at Storied Nights, a jam-packed storytelling event run by the Somerville Arts Council (somervilleartscouncil.org) at a local cafe. (Cost: \$2.95 for a "red Zen" tea.) From there, a 15-minute walk across the Cambridge border led me to my dinner at Punjabi Dhaba, where filling, authentic Indian meals (served on mess-hall-like metal trays) start at \$5.95 and don't go much higher.

Saturday total: \$39.25

### Sunday

My plan for my final day involved an unusual combination: a church service followed by a hot dog brunch in far-flung Mattapan, accessible by taking the Red Line to Ashmont and transferring to the charming and ancient orange trolleys whose last stop is in Boston's most heavily African-American neighborhood.

My friend Jon joined me from Cambridge, bringing along delicious jelly doughnuts from Verna's (vernapastry.com). We attended a welcoming, overflowing and music-filled service at Jubilee Christian Church (jubilee-boston.org), then crossed the street to Simco's, an 80-year-old hot dog stand outfitted with a sign that looks precisely that old. Since Jon had covered the doughnuts, I paid for footlong chili dogs (\$3.75) and a spicy sausage with mustard (also \$3.75), all made to order and served on buttered, toasted buns. They were so good, I questioned my lifelong loyalty to the hamburger side of America's great cookout divide.

I had just enough left to cover the \$15 entrance fee at the Institute of Contemporary Art (icaboston.org), in a 2006 cantilevered building that stretches to the water's edge on a South Boston pier. The institute is just my style. Particularly appealing was Cornelia Parker's "Hanging Fire (Suspected Arson)," a mesmerizing installation of spinning charcoal fragments collected from a suspicious fire (part of the permanent collection). What does it say about me that I loved that piece as much as I loved the creepy 18th-century headstones the day before? Maybe that I love Boston.

Sunday total: \$31

Weekend total: \$98.75