

50 STATES: Massachusetts

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THE Wonderland Greyhound Park wasn't at all as I'd remembered it. Thirty years ago, when my grandfather and I took the T from Boston to the track out in the blue-collar suburb of Revere, it had seemed such an exotic adventure.

There was the crowded grandstand, the clubhouse filled with men smoking, sipping cocktails and talking odds, the announcer's cry of "Here comes Sparky!" as the sleek hounds whipping around the course.

Today, the place is nothing more than a windswept OTB, a few dozen die-hard fans wagering on televised races. Massachusetts banned dog racing this year.

Now, I'm well aware that nothing stays the same. I also now know that a dog track in Revere could never be mistaken for exotic. What was amazing to me on a three day tour of the city and the adjoining North Shore region, was how much, in fact, hadn't changed. Also, how much had changed for the better. As a teen, I often visited my grandparents in their Beacon Hill townhouse, and though they were quite indulgent, it was understood that there were parts of the city that were definitely off-limits. One was Charlestown, which in the early '80s was Irish mob turf (detailed in the book/film "Mystic River"). The other was gritty South Boston, where I now found myself in a room at the new Renaissance Waterfront Hotel, overlooking a swath of recent construction, including a convention center, glassy hotels and condos and the splashy Diller Scofidio + Renfro-designed Institute of Contemporary Art.

Even the dilapidated industrial warehouses in nearby Fort Point Channel had been revived, now housing art galleries, design studios and cocktail bars. None of these places were around when I used my fake ID to get into the area's infamous live music club The Channel. In fact, back in the '80s, you wouldn't dare hang out on the sketchy South Boston waterfront. Today, there's a paved trail that runs the length of the harbor and spiffy bridges connecting the area to the city proper.

As I headed up Route 1 to the North Shore, the day turned cold and rainy — some things in New England are a constant — but even the nasty weather couldn't dampen the charms of Newburyport, 40 miles away. A center for whaling and shipping in the 19th century, the picturesque town now brims with gift shops, galleries, antique stores and pet boutiques; along the red-brick sidewalks, windows are studded with well-tended flowerboxes and gourds are artfully piled on stoops.

But you can't go far in Newburyport without being reminded of its past. Turn a corner, there's a historical marker. Brass plaques on the Colonial, Federal and Victorian homes commemorate the dates they were built, the sea captains and shipbuilders who'd lived there, the Revolutionary War figures who'd popped by for tea. Interesting, to be sure, but I thought a plaque was warranted for the circa-1900 diner/newsstand Fowle's, where I tucked into a hearty late breakfast of eggs, apple bacon and pancakes at the bustling marble counter, only \$9. Afterwards, I checked out the goods at Oldies Marketplace, where anchors, ship wheels and other nautical knick-knacks share space with vintage jewelry and second-hand furniture.

Rather than a B&B in town, I'd opted to stay on Plum Island, 15 minutes to the east. The 11-mile-long island is mostly nature preserves with a handful of residential enclaves, and there are no businesses save for one cafe and a single resort, Blue Inn on the Beach.

The 14-room inn is open year-round, and you can see the appeal of the place even in late fall. The back door of my airy, clapboard cottage opened right onto the beach, with the crashing waves of the Atlantic just beyond. In the living room was a wood-burning fireplace (smaller rooms in the main hotel have gas-burning ones) and shabby-chic, white-slip-covered furniture. I grabbed a plush bathrobe and the complimentary bottle of chilled wine and headed for the outdoor Jacuzzi and some brisk ocean air (blueinn.com; off-season rates from \$250).

The next day I awoke to miraculously bright, sunny skies; a perfect day for sightseeing and boating. I drove south to Essex, a town famous since the 1900s for its exceptionally tasty clams. Woodman's of Essex is a perennial favorite, but its lines are notoriously long. On my visit it was no exception. So, I crossed the street to Tom Shea's, which sits right on the Essex River, and ordered a huge plate of tender, lightly breaded fried clams. It was no exaggeration to say that these were, in my 35-odd years of eating the bivalves, the best I'd ever had. There was, as they say, something in the water.

Out on that water was where I headed, for a 1½-hour tour aboard Essex River Cruises, with Captain Bob navigating the coastal waters while detailing the area's rich history. It wasn't all "ye olde" stuff, either; Hollywood also figured into it. Take Choate Island, where the captain pointed out the surviving Choate family farm (ca. 1730), also the setting for 1996 witch flick "The Crucible," starring Winona Ryder. And perched high above the ocean in Ipswich is Castle Hill, a baronial, 59-room summer property built by the Chicago plumbing magnate Richard T. Crane, Jr. It most famously served as Jack Nicholson's devil's lair in "The Witches of Eastwick," but other films shot there include "Flowers in the Attic," "Ghosts of Girlfriends Past" and most recently, "The Box."

But juiciest is the true saga of the Crane family, which I learned during my tour of the 1926 Stuart-style mansion. Richard Crane, Jr.'s son, Cornelius, married a woman who'd had a daughter by a previous marriage; he adopted her and she became Cathalene Crane. When the two divorced, Cornelius disowned Cathalene and she lost her rights to the family fortune. Cathalene eventually married and gave birth to a son, naming him after the man who would have been his grandfather, Cornelius Crane Chase. He later went by his nickname, Chevy. It's rumored that in the 1980s, when his acting career was foundering, Chevy Chase sued to get his hands on Castle Hill, but was unsuccessful.

I could have stayed for hours, wandering the estate's 165 acres of rolling green lawns and the grand allee overlooking Ipswich Bay, but it was time to head over to the Cape Ann peninsula and the coastal town of Rockport.

Like its neighbor Gloucester (of Gordon's fisherman fame) Rockport still retains vestiges of its salty self. The town is undoubtedly quaint — just try to resist photographing that iconic red fishing shack — but it also has a working harbor, with bona fide lobstermen hauling in real crustaceans. (At the restaurant My Place By the Sea, you can get both — amazing water views and just-off-the-boat Rockport lobster, expertly prepared.)

And while there's no shortage of shops selling blown glass and handmade jewelry, along with the tourists that buy such stuff, you can find the real deal here, too. Like anadama bread, made of sweet cornmeal and molasses that Rockport natives claimed to have invented — try it at Flav's Red Skiff, a tiny diner that uses thick slices in their French toast recipe and tops it with local blueberries.

Final day, and I headed back to Boston with a detour to Salem — home of the infamous witch trials. I hadn't been since I was 9-years old and dressed as princess for Halloween and must have thrown quite a hissy fit for my mother to have agreed to take me to this circus. The narrow, brick streets were jammed with tourists, and everywhere there were people hawking witch T-shirts, mugs and hats, dream catchers and \$20 haunted house tickets. I wasn't sure if Salem was always such a madhouse (this was pre-Halloween), but save for the tour of the House of the Seven Gables (the setting of the novel by native son Nathaniel Hawthorne), I might have skipped this town altogether.

I arrived back in Boston to hear that the Red Sox were out of contention for the World Series. This hadn't dampened the spirits of the folks at the stylish Liberty Hotel, where a Standard/Meatpacking-like scene was unfolding in its hot downstairs bar, Alibi.

Of all the transformations I'd witnessed on this trip, this was perhaps the most dramatic. Formerly the Charles Street jail, the 1850s building housed prisoners up until the 1970s when it was closed and sat empty for decades. In 2007, it opened as the Liberty Hotel, with parts of the original building refurbished and a 16-story guest tower added. The soaring, central rotunda of the jail, where the guards once observed prisoners, has been refashioned as the lobby and lounge. The exposed brick, original circular windows and enormous, medieval-style chandeliers make for a truly striking gateway to the 298-room hotel.

I had a vague recollection of the jail, but what struck me was the hotel entrance, where Buzzy's "Fabulous" Roast Beef had stood for 45 years. The humble sandwich shack, with a buzzard as its logo (something that even at age 10 struck me as unsavory), had served a pile of roast beef, slathered with its own barbecue sauce and a slice of white American cheese on a warm, slightly damp bun for \$6. Today, rooms at the swanky Liberty start at \$275. How times have changed.

For more information, visit massvacation.com.

THE LOWDOWN

SLEEP

- + Curl up next to the fireplaces at the 14-room **Blue Inn** (off-season rates from \$250; 20 Fordham Way, Plum Island; blueinn.com).
- + Crash at the swankiest former prison this side of the Mississippi at **The Liberty Hotel** (from \$275; 215 Charles St., Boston; libertyhotel.com).
- + You'll hardly even know you're in South Boston at the **Renaissance Boston Waterfront** Hotel (from \$169 on weekends, \$189 midweek; 606 Congress St., Boston; marriott.com).

EAT

- + Elephantine breakfasts of pancakes and bacon at **Fowle's Diner and News** (17 State St., Newburyport, 978-463-9824).
- + Tender, fried clams at **Tom Shea's** (122 Main St., Essex; tomsheas.com).

DO

- + Shop for nautical bric-a-brac at **Oldies Marketplace** (27 Water St. Newburyport; oldies-ma.com).
- + Take a 90-minute cruise helmed by Captain Bob at **Essex River Cruises**, operating May through October (35 Dodge St., Essex; essexcruises.com).