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Boston: City Life Pictorial Guide

Jon Marcus
Voyageur Press (October 1998)
Unknown $24.95 (96pp)
978-0-89658-362-7

Boston is a city of superlatives—“the oldest,” “the first,” “the largest.” And the photographs in this slick book make the most of what Oliver Wendell Holmes said is—in the most super of superlatives—“the hub of the solar system.”

Whether delving into the luscious history of Boston or just getting up close with the Emerald Necklace of parks downtown, this book makes you not only want to visit Boston, but pick up and move to one of the quaint, quirky areas explored in the chapter devoted to neighborhoods.

The introduction is the only part of the book written like an actual book. The rest of the chapters are photos with captions. But, boy, those captions—written and thoroughly researched by Boston Magazine senior editor Jon Marcus, a native Bostonian—are packed with information. Who knew Samuel Adams inherited his father’s brewery after graduating from Harvard, “but turned out to be better at brewing rebellion than beer.” Or that the reflecting pool outside the I.M. Pei-designed First Church of Christ Scientist building actually cools the building besides just looking nice.

People who already live in Boston (as opposed to those of us who are going to move there after looking at all these pictures) may very well ride the efficient mass transit system (“oldest in the Western Hemisphere”) under “elegant Newbury Street” on their way to the bridal event at Filene’s Basement (sale record: 50 seconds) and talk about these things, but the typical visitor or newcomer will find all sorts of fascinating tidbits to make chit-chat with.

The photos of Boston’s landmarks (the protruding form on City Hall is the mayor’s office), universities (an entire police car was reassembled atop the MIT dome, complete with a box of doughnuts in the front seat) and parks (six acres for every 1,000 people) vary from season to season, although the abundance of sunny days and fluffy clouds is pretty obvious. Photographer Susan Cole Kelly lives in Boston’s North End (Italian immigration there began in the 1890s) and looks like she could enter the St. Patrick’s Day red hair competition (the winner gets to be in the South Boston parade).

The index is very thorough and listed everything I looked up, no matter how trivial. This book is more of a “pretty” travel guide than an actual here’s where-to-shop and eat-chowder-here kind of a travel guide, but it would look splendid on the bedside table in a room at the Copley Plaza Hotel (Frank Keenan’s been a bellman there for more than 40 years).

But buy extra. These won’t stay on the bedside tables very long.

JODEE TAYLOR (December 16, 1998)

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