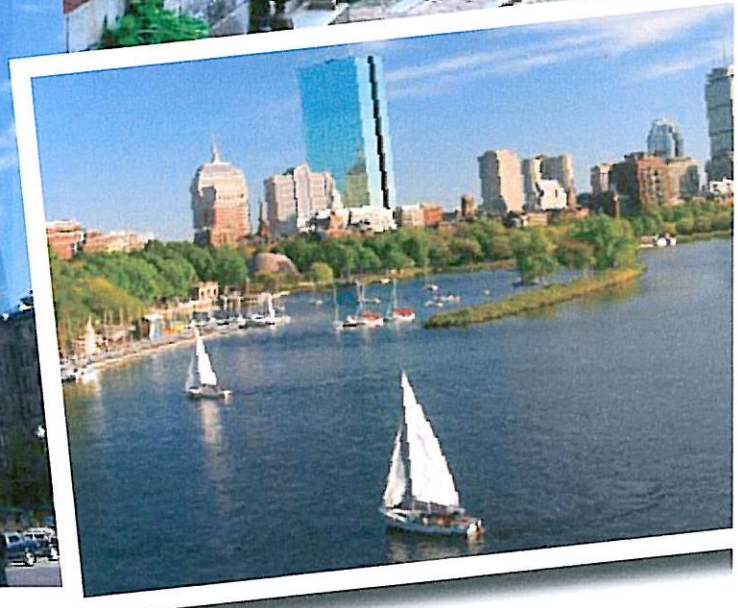
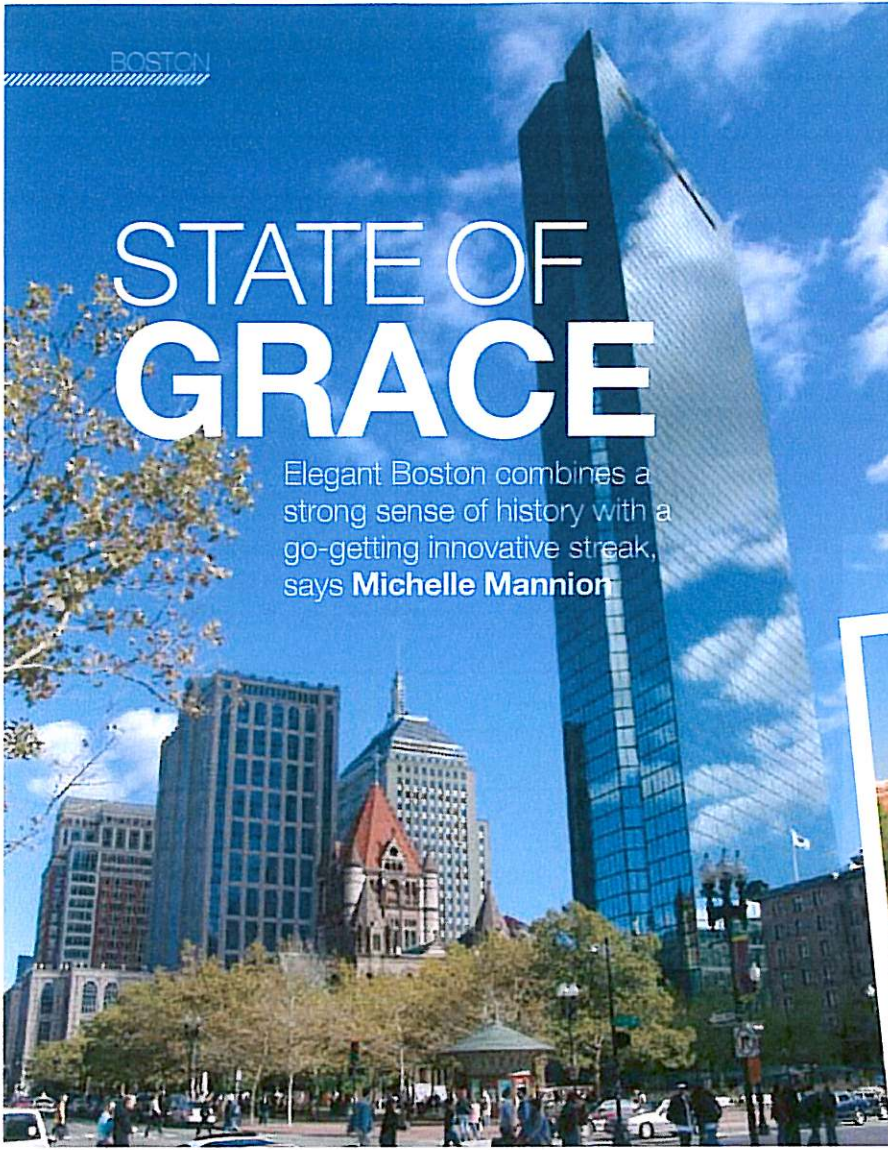


# STATE OF GRACE

Elegant Boston combines a strong sense of history with a go-getting innovative streak, says **Michelle Mannion**



**T**ake ten paces in Boston and you're bound to walk past one of four things – an old church, a Revolution-era monument, a college, or a branch of Dunkin' Donuts. The popularity of Homer Simpson's favourite snack in this most refined of American cities seems strange – there are about 1,100 outlets within an 80km radius of the city – but the prevalence of the other three is no surprise.

Boston is, after all, one of the oldest cities in the US – founded by Puritans in 1630, it was the scene of several battles in the American War of Independence. It's also a revered seat of learning, with Harvard and MIT (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) across the river in Cambridge, and many other venerable institutions based here. This is a history that seeps from every corner of the city, and one its

**Clockwise from above: Copley Square; Beacon Hill; view of city from Charles river**

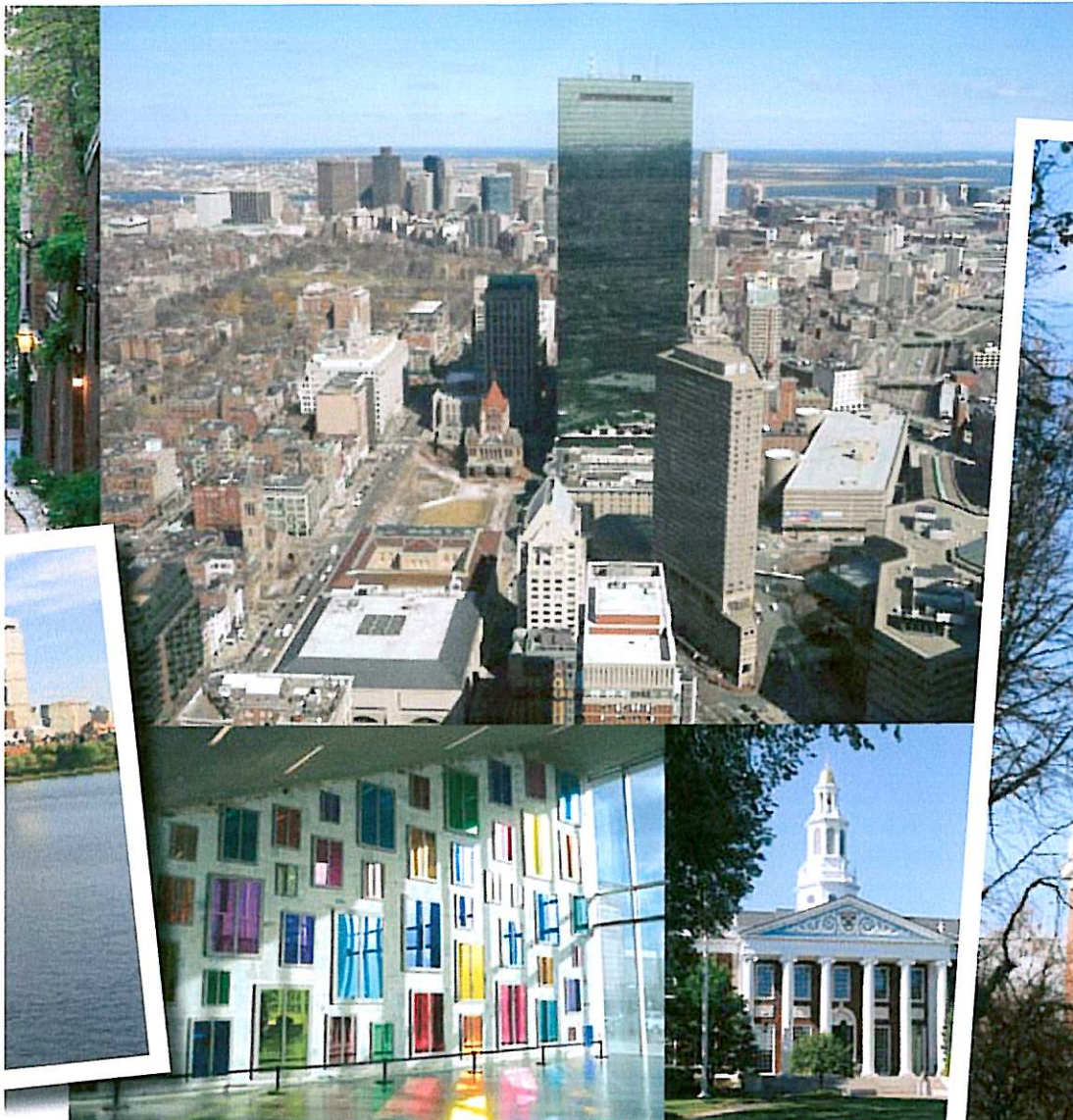
residents are proud of. They love to recount Boston's "firsts" – did you know that Harvard was America's first university? Or that Boston Common is its oldest city park? ("They used to hang witches in it," my guide tells me.)

It's also a place of paradoxes. Bostonians may delight in the role their state played in liberating America from the British, but the well-groomed roads of the central Back Bay area are laid out in an alphabetical grid system named after English dukes. And while there's still a conservative and civilised feel to the former Puritan outpost (even the prison looks like a state building, staring serenely across the Charles river towards Harvard, as if willing its inmates to improve themselves), it is at once vibrant and forward-thinking.

## There's still a civilised, conservative feel to the former Puritan outpost

"This is a city of innovation and adventure," says Patrick Moscaritolo, chief executive of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau. "It's an entrepreneurial economy, and that's because of all the students who come here to study and then stay to start companies." To stress this innovative spirit, Moscaritolo throws out a few more firsts – Boston was where Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, was the first US city to operate a subway system, and was also where the internet was first developed, at MIT in the 1960s.

The universities are in many ways the lifeblood of Boston and Cambridge, and work closely with industry. Moscaritolo breaks down the city's business base into five sectors – education and knowledge-based companies; healthcare and medical services; technology; life sciences and biotechnology; and financial services. Of those, the



one to have been hit hardest by the worldwide recession is the last one.

"Over the years, financial services firms went through a rapid hiring of people as the industry and stock market boomed, but that really started hitting the wall last summer," Moscaritolo says. "There has been a steep drop-off in jobs." In contrast, the education and life sciences sectors are holding their own. "If anything could be defined as recession-proof, it would be these two," he says.

The hotel trade is also suffering. Luxury hotel group Mandarin Oriental opened its new Boston property on October 6 last year, the day when stock markets all over the world crashed. "It was certainly an interesting time," recalls the hotel's general manager, Susanne Hatje. She admits it was challenging to open a high-end property during this period, but says she is "cautiously optimistic" about the future. Boston was an important city for the group

to open up in, she adds, because of the diversity of business and its strength as a leisure destination.

"For a European it's easy to spend time here," Hatje says. "It's very walkable and people understand the need for work-life balance." Moscaritolo agrees that Boston's compact layout is a selling point. "Walk around and you'll see the blend of old and new – it has a European flair but it also represents the modern American metropolis, though not on the scale of the skyscrapers you find in New York," he says.

Moscaritolo believes this is a main reason why many of the students who come to Boston never leave. "They feel comfortable here and it's not

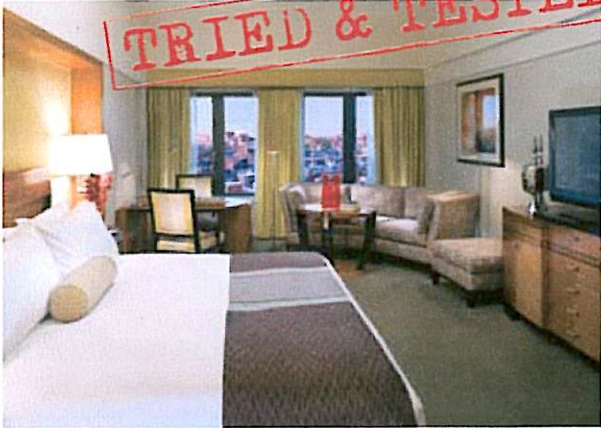
**Clockwise from top left: view from Prudential Tower; Old North Church; Harvard; Institute of Contemporary Art**

overwhelming. It's also a good place to raise a family," he says.

The Mandarin Oriental is located in the Back Bay. Traditionally the historic heart of the city, the area is home to the John Hancock Tower, Boston Public Library and other landmarks, as well as upscale residences, restaurants and shops. If you want to see the picturesque Victorian brownstone houses Boston is known for, you'll find them here.

The area was so named because it was in fact the bay until the mid-19th century, when it was filled in as part of the biggest land reclamation project in US history. Now the city is shifting back to the sea, with extensive development taking place on the waterfront. Dubbed the



**HOTEL CHECK** BOSTON**Mandarin Oriental**

**WHAT'S IT LIKE?** This 14-floor new-build property opened in October last year. Like all Mandarin Orientals it seeks to combine Asian touches with influences from the place in which it is situated – in this case juxtaposing an imposing stone façade and Boston-style blonde-wood panelling with rich fabrics and artwork inspired by the Orient. Enter through the revolving doors and you'll find yourself in an elegant marble lobby with reception ahead, a cosy seating area to the left, and bold prints by David Hockney and Massachusetts artist Frank Stella adorning the walls.

**WHERE IS IT?** On Boylston Street, in the Back Bay. The road runs parallel to Newbury Street, Boston's high-end shopping avenue, at the other end of which is Boston Common and, beyond that, the downtown business district. Logan International airport is 8km away, about 15 minutes' drive.

**ROOM FACILITIES** There are 136 rooms and 12 suites located on floors four to eight – above that are private residences. I stayed in an eighth-floor Deluxe room, which looked on to Boylston Street and was a spacious 38 sqm – the rooms are among the largest in Boston, I was told. It was tastefully decorated in neutral colours, with blonde-wood furniture and good-quality upholstery. The comfortable king-size bed was dressed with a goose-down duvet and Frette linens, and there was also a curved sofa, a workdesk with two chairs, US-only plug sockets, a 42-inch flatscreen TV, and a walk-in closet. The marble bathroom was large and gleaming, with a deep bath, a walk-in rainshower, and toiletries by Aromatherapy Associates. Other features included wireless internet access (priced at

US\$15 per day), a laptop safe, an iron and ironing board, robes and slippers, turn-down service, a minibar, and free bottles of mineral water.

**RESTAURANTS AND BARS** On the ground floor is Asana, a fine-dining restaurant offering US and Asian cuisine – an à la carte breakfast is served here, along with lunch and dinner. It's a stylish room with floor-to-ceiling windows, granite tabletops and bamboo flooring, and I had a delicious lobster salad (US\$24). Open 6.30am-10.30pm. Attached to Asana is the M bar and lounge, a chic space with a varied cocktail list and a light-bite menu – if you're a cheese fan, try the fondue (US\$17). It was very lively on the Saturday night I visited. Open 11am-1am (1.30am Fri-Sat, 12am Sun).

**BUSINESS AND MEETING FACILITIES** These are on the arcade level, above the lobby, and consist of the Oriental ballroom, which divides in two and can accommodate up to 600 people for a reception, and three smaller rooms. There is a 24-hour business centre with three computers on the ground floor.

**LEISURE FACILITIES** The spa is on the fourth floor and has nine treatment rooms, crystal steam rooms, vitality pools, "experience" showers and ice fountains. Open 9am-9pm. Next to this is a 24-hour fitness centre, which has Technogym equipment, a yoga room and a weights area.

**ROOM HIGHLIGHTS** The amount of space, the comfortable bed and the stylish bathroom.

**PRICE** Internet rates for a midweek stay in July started from US\$500 for a Deluxe room.

**CONTACT** Mandarin Oriental, Boston; 776 Boylston Street; tel +1 617 535 8888; mandarinoriental.com

**VERDICT**

**A worthy addition to Boston's hotel scene, which has relatively few top-end properties, this is an excellent property with great facilities in an ideal location.**

"new Boston", the area around the Seaport District is already home to the Boston Convention and Exhibition Centre, which opened in 2004; to cultural attractions such as the Institute of Contemporary Art, which upped sticks from the Back Bay in 2006; and to hotels including the Intercontinental Boston, which opened in the same year.

"The waterfront has become the new visitor mecca of Boston," says Tim Kirwan, the Intercontinental's general manager. "We have three or four museums and probably 50 restaurants. Coming next are marinas, retail and further office development." He adds that there are 17 buildings at various stages of financing and construction that should be in place in the next two to three years.

Such large-scale work is subject to the financial climate, of course, and some projects have had to be put on hold, such as the planned extension of the 793-room Westin Boston Waterfront, attached to the convention centre, which would add a second tower containing 400-500 rooms. "It's been approved but because of the economy, construction hasn't started yet – hopefully that's something we'll see in two or three years' time," Moscaritolo says.

When the work is finished, he adds, the area "will be like a city within a city, just as the Back Bay is – it'll be almost a mirror image except you'll have the sea". This will no doubt



make the city even more appealing to visitors. "One of Boston's strengths is that it's a city where people live – it's not just a place where people come to work from 8am to 6pm and then leave," Moscaritolo says. "There are so many young people living here who are out there shopping and walking around, that it gives a sense of a 24-hour city." One to visit, then – just go easy on the doughnuts. ■