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Boston for families

Boston's harbour was a tipping point in US history, then a no-go zone; Now it's a playground for children and adults alike



Julia Brookes

Everyone knows what Boston harbour is famous for - it is where those uppity colonials tipped 342 crates of PG Tips into the sea in a protest against unfair taxation and helped to ignite the American Revolution.

For centuries afterwards, however, tea wasn't all you would find floating in the water. The harbour was the end of the pipeline for the city's sewage - nobody dared to swim there - and by the late 1980s George Bush Sr was accusing his presidential rival and the Massachusetts Governor, Michael Dukakis, of polluting the dirtiest harbour in America.

Boston harbour was also cut off from the rest of the city by the mother of all flyovers, a six-lane highway called the Central Artery, which kept locals away.

A clean-up costing more than £3 billion, and the Big Dig, the most expensive public works project in US history, which rerouted the Central Artery into a tunnel, have changed all that. Now the harbour teems with plants and animals, Carson Beach in South Boston is clean enough again for clam digging, and the once-seedy waterfront is being transformed.

It is a fantastic base for a family holiday. We found ourselves strolling along decked walkways and visiting parks, trails and new museums, including the Institute of Contemporary Art, the first arts museum to be built in the city in more than a century.

We stayed at the Seaport, which cunningly disguises itself as a convention hotel, but was ideal for children, with a large indoor pool, Nintendo Wii on tap next to the bar, smiling staff and an adventurous menu. (It also has a no-tipping rule. And the staff really wouldn't accept tips - we tried.)

There was no need for a car since many of Boston's attractions, such as the Freedom Trail around revolutionary landmarks and Faneuil Hall (the US version of Covent Garden in London), were within walking distance. We were also close to a new subway line that carried us quickly to other child-friendly places, and back to the airport.

Most gratifying of all, we had Boston's best-kept secret, its 34 harbour islands, on our doorstep. Like the harbour, the islands were for years used as dumping grounds for rubbish - and unwanted New Englanders.

Asylums, poorhouses and prisons were all pushed out there. But now this is a national park area and the city's summer playground as well as a fashionable film set: Scorsese's thriller *Ashecliffe*, which opens this autumn, was shot on Peddocks Island in June.

On Bumpkin and Grape you can camp overnight. On Little Brewster, there is the first lighthouse built in the US and the last in the country to be staffed by a US Coast Guard lighthouse keeper - it's now manned by Sally Snowman, who cheerily greets visitors in 18th-century costume. On other islands there are ruins and old forts to clamber over and all manner of cruises and ferries to get you there.

We took a 30-minute ferry ride to the Hallowe'en party on Georges Island. It is dominated by Fort Warren, a prison for Confederate soldiers during the civil war that now hosts summer concerts and children's theatre. The dimly lit passageways, dungeons and spooky tunnels seemed custom-built for a fright night and were full of Boy Scouts dressed as ghouls and armed with torches - young children were scared witless and my five-year-old ran for cover within minutes. My nine-year-old thought it was fabulous.

It is the greening of Spectacle Island, however, of which Bostonians are most proud. Used for landfill and leaching toxins for years, the dump was closed in 1959 when piles of rubbish were 85ft high - a bulldozer sank into the mountain of waste and was never seen again.

Now the island has been resculpted using excavated material from the Big Dig, topsoil added and thousands of trees planted. There is a small beach with a lifeguard, five miles of hiking trails around the shore, a marina and a solar-powered visitors' centre with rocking chairs on the porch where you can sit and gaze at the city skyline.

Back on the waterfront, the best fun, as far as Holly and Rory were concerned, was to be had at the spiffily revamped Boston Children's Museum along the Fort Point Channel. This vast indoor playground had a New Balance Climb - a three-storey, web-like climbing frame - and Kids Power, with bikes, basketball, wall climbing and an interactive dancefloor.

They also loved the New England Aquarium, where we helped museum staff with one of the daily seal-training sessions, cleaning their teeth and in reward getting a wet whiskery kiss on the cheek (from the seals, not the staff).

We also took a Boston by Little Feet children's walking tour of the Freedom Trail, which turned out to be ideal for adults with only a shaky grasp of colonial history - the children's favourite bit was climbing on the big bronze Democrat Donkey outside the old City Hall and learning how to pronounce Barack Obama. I would have liked to have taken them on a trip to the Boston Tea Party

Ship Museum, but it was closed - a new and improved version will reopen on the harbour next year with replicas of all three of the tall ships that sailed in with their controversial cargo and changed the world.

NEED TO KNOW

Getting there

The Seaport Hotel (001 617 385 4000, www.seaportboston.com) has a children's adventure package that includes tickets for a family of four to the Boston Children's Museum and costs £130 a night for a deluxe double room (sleeps up to four).

For more information on the harbour islands open from May to October, go to www.islandalliance.org

Take part in a seal-training session at the New England Aquarium for £109pp in its Be a Trainer for the Morning programme (001 617 973 5206, www.neaq.org). Boston by Little Feet walking tours are £6pp and run from May to October

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