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## Book a room, get a guided tour

### Hostel highlights culture in Boston

By **Don Aucoin**  
GLOBE STAFF

Daynali Flores had arrived in Boston just a few hours earlier, but already she was nose to nose with one of the city's cultural treasures: the portrait of Paul Revere by John Singleton Copley.

"He looks like Jack Black!" exclaimed Flores, a 30-year-old graduate student from Puerto Rico, as she peered at Revere inside

the Museum of Fine Arts. "Look at him. Imagine him with a mustache and a beard. He's Jack Black!"

Not every Bostonian will buy the comparison between the Revolutionary War hero and the rotund star of "School of Rock." But her enthusiastic response to the MFA's collection — echoed by two dozen other young guests who strolled from a nearby hostel through the streets of Boston to the museum — was telling. It suggested that Hostelling International Boston may be on to

something in acting as a kind of gateway to Boston culture for the 32,000 guests it hosts each year.

With travelers looking to pinch pennies amid the economic downturn, HI-Boston is positioning itself as an alternative to pricey hotels while formulating plans to build a new facility that would nearly double the number of beds. There has been a 14 percent increase in occupancy at the hostel over the past five years, with around 65 percent of those who stay coming from abroad.

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YOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

Hostel guests Xiaqing Wu (left) of China and Julian Schenkel of Switzerland toured the Museum of Fine Arts recently.

# Hostel offers gateway to city's culture

## ► HOSTEL

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The average age of guests is in the mid- to late 20s.

Increasingly, part of the hostel's pitch is that its staff and volunteers will act as tour guides through the city's culture and recreation. These are two continuing strengths of Boston, even — or maybe especially — at a time when the stalled economy has left the city's confidence a bit shaky and in need of every tourist dollar it can get.

So when guests arrived recently at the hostel on Hemenway Street, they found a list of upcoming events tacked to a wall in the lobby: a visit to a jazz club, a tour of Fenway Park, a visit to Harvard University, an evening at a comedy club, a tour of Harpoon Brewery. Occasionally the hostel gets its hands on free tickets to the opera, movie screenings, or Red Sox games, and distributes them to guests. That evening, a hostel volunteer gave a free guided tour of the MFA.

"Every day, there's something for the guests, to bring them together," said Deborah Ruhe, executive director of Hostelling International's hostels and programs in New England, as she watched guests cluster in the lobby.

There was a time when hostels (formerly known as youth hostels) were not much more than a way station for college students traveling on the cheap, a place to lay their heads and their backpacks. But Hostelling International USA, a nonprofit organization that runs 4,000 hostels around the world, increasingly makes the arts a central part of the travel experience for its guests.

"We focus on engaging people into local communities, to really experience that local community's arts and culture, be it music, the visual arts, or the spoken word," said Mark Vidalin, national marketing director for Hostelling International USA. "It's a way of tapping into meaningful local programs, which fits our mission to bring young and young-at-heart people together to explore the communities they're visiting."

Added Ruhe: "Hostels are different animals than they were in my youth. Then, you had chores and curfews and all kinds of limi-



YOON'S BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

Ralph Pratt (left) and Olivia Folkins prepared a spaghetti dinner at Boston's Hostelling International USA. Part of hostels' mission is to encourage socializing among guests.

tations. Now you book your room online, and there's more service provided. But our mission is really designed to bring people together. So we put together these outings so they can see the attractions, and get to know one another."

And get to know Boston. On the short stroll from the hostel to the MFA, the guests admired the architecture of the surrounding buildings. "It's historically beautiful," remarked Xiaoqing Wu, 24, of China. "I went to Houston before I came here. Houston, nothing. But the structure of these buildings is more European." Bruno Diaz, a 21-year-old law student from Argentina, was struck by how clean Boston is. "Why doesn't my city do this?" he asked. "All the buildings are really clean and have nice architecture."

Once they arrived in the MFA, the visitors made their way through the collection with wide-eyed appreciation. Gazing at a painting, 25-year-old Mareike Orschinski of Germany said approvingly: "It reflects the life of this city. You can see artists who lived here who painted people who lived here."

Julian Schenkel of Switzerland admitted sheepishly that before his visit to America he had told a friend that "American cities don't have culture." The

## Hostel highlights

Hostels offers dormitory-style accommodations to travelers who generally range in age from 16 to 30. Most guests tend to be in their mid-20s. They usually stay for two to four days.

The price of a hostel bed in the United States ranges from \$25 to \$45 a night. The price of a bed at Hostelling International Boston ranges from \$32 to \$45 a night. Accommodations typically include bedding and lockers in the rooms. Hostels often provide a complimentary breakfast. Hostels were created to "foster socializing and dialogue among guests," who often connect in the common spaces such as kitchens, dining areas, and TV rooms.

Source: Hostelling International USA

friend told the 20-year-old Schenkel: "You have to go to Boston."

Before they set off for another part of the museum, Xiaoqing, Schenkel, and Orschinski exchanged personal information and agreed to stay in touch via Facebook. Then Orschinski asked Nicolette Spear, an art student and hostel volunteer who

was conducting the tour: "Is there modern art in this museum?"

Spear assured her that there was plenty of modern art, but first she wanted the group to take a gander at Pierre-Auguste Renoir's "Dance at Bougival." She looked wistfully at the painting "Dancing in France," she said softly. "I wish I was there."

Throughout the tour, Spear was peppered with questions about other cultural attractions in Boston, suggesting a possible multiplier effect from this evening of art. "They were like 'Wow, why are there so many museums?'" said Spear. "I told them that Bostonians value culture in general. That is the aura of Boston. They were asking me about other museums, so I told them about the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum."

She was not surprised to hear that Flores was riveted by Copley's portrait of Revere, pointing out an immediate connection between art and life, or, more precisely, Boston art and Boston life. "Seeing a painting by someone like Copley will give you a feel for Boston," Spear said. "I mean, you can walk through Copley Square."

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