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Nova Scotia annually donates the tree that lights up the Boston Common.

# Lights of Longfellow

Experience Boston's sights and sounds on a cold, captivating winter's eve

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BOSTON – Boston is best seen at night, standing on Longfellow Bridge, just before the holidays.

With stars across the winter sky and twinkling lights on the trees lining the Charles River, I can feel the hush and glow of what's to come. The central towers of the "salt and pepper shaker" bridge are decorated with gaping fish gargoyles, lion heads and sculptured Viking ships. They loom like hunkering ghosts of the Christmas past. Wind off the river is crisp, clean and filled with the promise of snow.

Built in 1793, the Longfellow Bridge, connecting Cambridge to Beacon Hill, was once named the West Boston Bridge. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem called "The Bridge" in 1845, and the bridge became his namesake. He wrote:

*I stood on the bridge at midnight,  
 As the clocks were striking the hour,  
 And the moon rose o'er the city,  
 Behind the dark church-tower.*

The Red Line rattles across the Longfellow Bridge, and I watch the faces staring outward at dark and light. Fathers with daughters, college students with backpacks and men wearing fedoras stare outward and upward. Most get off the Red Line with purpose. Some take their time, wandering. I follow one such ambling man as he heads toward the Charles River toward the Hatch Shell.

Longfellow wrote of Boston at night:

*Half-way up the hill, I see the Past  
 Lying beneath me with its sounds and sights,  
 A city in the twilight dim and vast,  
 With smoking roofs, soft bells, and gleaming lights*

After spending time in Europe, Longfellow came to Cambridge as a professor at Harvard. One of the most popular poets of his day, I'm sure he was inspired by the weather, finding beauty in the bareness and cold light of winter.

That night, along Charles Street, the windows of shops and restaurants are fogged. Laughter spills out from celebratory crowds in from the cold and out with friends and family.

I spy that same man again as he walks slowly down Exeter Street. He looks skyward to the dimming stars. It's quiet up above even as the crowds pass by to parties, homes or travel. I pull my muffler tight to my nose and wonder if he's thinking of Longfellow's poem, "Light of Stars":

*The night is come, but not too soon;  
 And sinking silently,*



Skating on the Frog Pond is a favorite wintertime activity in Boston.

*All silently, the little moon  
 Drops down behind the sky.*

The Hatch Shell stage is empty, the Boston Symphony Orchestra gone to the confines of Symphony Hall. The trees, lit up in white strands, stand in sentinel to long gone summer crowds, lawn chairs and picnics spread out. Now, lone couples hunker down in mufflers, and random joggers wearing headphones pass the silent stage. Most look up to the emptiness with a sort of expectation that comes with knowing the city has seasons. This season is insular, calm and bright full of moon.

*When winter winds are piercing chill,  
 And through the hawthorn blows the gale,  
 With solemn feet I tread the hill,  
 That overbrows the lonely vale.*

Just beyond the golden dome of the Statehouse, the Boston Common stretches open. The Frog Pond is filled with ice skaters. Entertained by piped-in carols and songs of the season, families skate together, holding hands. College kids glide by, laughing, while the "Make Way for Ducklings" statues gleam in spotlight. Those strolling along the sidewalks hold cups of hot cocoa and sip them for warmth. I blow into my mittens and head back toward Cambridge.

The Harvard Bridge is measured in "smoots" rather than yards or feet. Why? Because an MIT student, Oliver Reed Smoot, decided to mark the distance of this bridge with

his body. End to end, head to toe, the bridge is 364.4 Smoots, give or take an ear. There are commemorative plaques and painted sayings the entire length of the bridge. I read them with my head hung low. The wind is strong and getting stronger across the Charles. It smells like snow, so I quote from Longfellow's poem, "Snowflakes."

*Out of the bosom of the Air,  
 Out of the cloud-folds of her garments shaken,  
 Over the woodlands brown and bare,  
 Over the harvest-fields forsaken,  
 Silent and soft and slow  
 Descends the snow.*

The Art Bar in the Royal Sonesta has couches with pillows and candlelight. I sit closest to the window and watch the shimmering lights blow as the wind blusters. A random snowflake smacks against the glass and soon another. I can finally feel my fingertips, and my nose is thawing out.

Boston in the winter is an adventure and finding a warm nook after exploring a just reward. Longfellow knew what cold could do to a person. From "The Battle of Lovell's Pond," he wrote:

*Cold, cold is the north wind and rude is  
 the blast  
 That sweeps like a hurricane loudly  
 and fast.*

As I wait for a Hot Toddy, I realize why

it is called the Art Bar. Amazing pieces line the walls. Pop art, minimalist, conceptual; none are prints, all are original. It's a cocktail lounge inside a museum.

I find out that more than 600 original pieces of contemporary art are placed throughout the hotel, including Alan Saret, Jim Dine, Tom Wesselman, Eve Sonneman and Stephen Mueller. If you like to sleep surrounded by art, the New England Suite has watercolors by Katherine Porter and charcoals by Chuck Holtzman. Andy Warhol's famous "Campbell's Soup Paper Dress" and Jasper Johns' "Feet" are housed in the Artist Suite. Joan Sonnabend is the Sonesta's art dealer and collector, and she has curated the Sonesta collection.

"You can even get a guidebook from the concierge," the bartender tells me.

I decide that the next morning, after a swim in the heated atrium-style pool, I will tour the hallways. Perhaps I'll even slip into one of the suites.

There are secrets known and undiscovered all through Boston – some coming at you as you cross a bridge to lit-up trees and holiday laughter, others hung on the walls, a silent tribute to inspiration. With the city soon covered in snow and the streets icy, it's a welcome relief to sip something warm, thinking of Longfellow's poems.

*Chill airs and wintry winds! my ear  
 Has grown familiar with your song;  
 I hear it in the opening year,  
 I listen, and it cheers me long.*