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Harvard Square 101: A Cultural Sampler (Cambridge, MA)

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The Charles Hotel

If you're craving a weekend escape that's as cultured as it is cozy, Cambridge, Massachusetts just might be the New England getaway for you. Home to Harvard University and known as Boston's Left Bank (sitting on the Charles River), the city holds a premium on all things intellectual, cobblestoned, and quaint. And, more likely than not, any visit to this part of town will get you in Harvard Square, the hub of the neighborhood. Here's your cultural sampler to this little but very rich slice of Cambridge.

There's an uncanny concentration of well-endowed museums and award winning restaurants to choose from here, so you really can't go wrong. Start with the Harvard Art Museums ($15), which re-opened in 2014 after a monumental six-year renovation. Three formerly separate museums are now under one stunning, glass-ceilinged roof, and the newly expanded building is airy and light-filled. Inside is a solid afternoon's worth of Impressionist paintings, Chinese jades, and Grecian urns — amongst other treasures.

When you've had your fill of *objets d'art*, head across the street to Harvard Yard for a grassy respite on the University's campus. Traverse the college lawn, admiring centuries old lecture halls and libraries, and exit the gates at Harvard Square. In the Square, skip the chain establishments for the independent businesses. Snag a patio seat in the afternoons at Bar Noir to people watch and sip a cocktail. Don't miss the $1 oysters, served Tuesday though Sunday starting at 5 p.m., until they run out.

For dinner, you can find rustic Italian fare at the Rialto, in the same building as Bar Noir, run by James Beard Award-winning chef Jody Adams. Entrees are thoughtfully plated, modern yet homey. Think: squid ink tortolli ($16/$32) and gnocchi with nettle-basil pesto ($28). The prosciutto antipasti gets rave reviews, too ($15). For something more casual, but equally tasty, head to OTTO Pizza for $3.50 slices (or $10-$15 pies). The apple, bacon, and red onion pizza is a favorite, just like the mushroom and cauliflower combo. And if you're in the mood for something wholesome and affordable, Le's has some of the best bowls of pho in the city ($6.95).

If you're staying the night in the Cambridge, the Charles Hotel — located in the same complex as Bar Noir and Rialto — is an upscale option with a location that can't be beat. A favorite of visiting politicos, the vibe is understated modern while still managing to capture New England coziness. The TV behind the bathroom mirror in each suite is an unexpected bonus — and makes for a great tub soak after a long day of wandering on cobblestone streets.

The next morning, take a few minutes to pick up a breakfast sandwich from Crema Cafe ($4.25) before you leave. Its drip coffee ($1.85) will keep you fueled on the road — as will the almond earl grey ($2.90) and Thai iced tea ($2.75).