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CITYWIDE

The Boston Globe

Need a break? Take a hike New books give readers tours of the city by foot

By Michael Kenney, Globe Correspondent | December 17, 2006

The holiday season, with its office parties, family gatherings, and cookie swaps, can make anyone feel as heavy as stale fruit cake.

Now, three new Boston guidebooks offer help to those who want to walk off those extra pounds -- and perhaps pick up a holiday gift at one of the city's shops while they're at it.

Each of the latest in the crowded field of self-guided walking tours of the city takes a new approach. One accommodates the tourist who can't be bothered lugging a guidebook around; another offers respite to those visiting hospital sickrooms; and one caters to history buffs.

From "50 Adventures on Foot," in the Boston entry in the "City Walks" series published this fall, visitors -- encumbered, perhaps, by shopping bags -- can slip a couple of the handy 5 1/2- by 3 3/4-inch cards into their pockets as they tour the city.

Card No. 7, pulled at random from the deck, offers "a fitting literary ramble" with eight stops along, or just off of, School Street -- from King's Chapel past the Last Hurrah Bar at the Omni Parker House (citing Boston cream pie and Ho Chi Minh, but not author Edwin O'Connor), the mosaic marking the first site of the Boston Latin School outside Old City Hall, the Old Corner Bookstore and Pi Alley (but not mentioning that it opened off the stretch of Washington Street once known as "Newspaper Row"), to the site of Benjamin Franklin's birthplace.

In addition, WalkBoston has recently added to its collection of neighborhood-focused guides with walks setting off from Massachusetts General Hospital and from the Boston Medical Center/Boston University Medical Center. A third from Children's Hospital is forthcoming.

These guides, explained WalkBoston's Robert Sloane, are "designed for people who have to be here," typically while a family member is hospitalized. "They want to take a break" from a bedside watch, said Sloane, "but can't go out for too long."

Most of the walks in the two guides are less than two miles and take about 30 minutes.

The Tremont Street Loop, one of six in the medical center guide, is just a mile and clocked at 20 minutes. Walkers are advised to look for trees arching over the side streets, the brick row houses, and cast iron fences and railings. Stops include Worcester Square and Rutland Green, a "very quaint frame house" on Haven Street, and the 1820 cemetery at East Concord and Rutland streets.

Nancy S. Seasholes's "Walking Tours of Boston's Made Land" is a richly detailed guide to 12 walks through land "made" as Boston's original shoreline was filled in and expanded outward .

Seasholes is author of "Gaining Ground," a history of the city's three centuries of "land making." The walking tours grew out of a course she teaches on the subject at the Harvard Extension School.

In mapping the walks, Seasholes said, she would "try out different routes to get the most interesting sites and the best views."

She fine-tuned the walks by leading tours along their routes. "What everybody loves about them," she said, "is that this is a different way of looking at Boston."

The South Cove walk, for example, is illustrated with no fewer than eight 18th- and 19th-century maps, plus a current street map with the route marked.

None of the walks is a casual undertaking , and most require two hours.

But as Seasholes writes in the guide, "understanding where land was made can help us understand many aspects of present Boston." If, for example, "you've ever wondered why street grids in adjacent areas don't mesh, it's because those areas were filled at different times." ■

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