

News, Apps, Deals, and Gear from New England and Beyond



TAKE THE TRAIN TO MID-COAST MAINE

You can take Amtrak from downtown Boston to mid-coast Maine, thanks to new service that launched this week. The Amtrak Downeaster travels between Boston and Portland five times a day, stopping at eight communities en route; two of these trips now extend to Freeport and Brunswick, marking the first time these towns have been accessible by train since 1959. Leave North Station at 9:05 a.m. or 5 p.m. on weekdays and arrive in Freeport at 12:15 p.m. and 8:05 p.m. and Brunswick 15 minutes later. Southbound service departs Brunswick at 7:05 a.m. and 5:50 p.m., arriving in Boston at 10:30 a.m. and 9:15 p.m. Weekend and holiday schedules vary. Fares \$24 to \$29 each way. 800-872-7245, www.amtrakdowneaster.com

ATTEND A BLIZZARD TO WELCOME SKI SEASON

Head to Club Royale on Tremont Street Wednesday for the Boston Ski & Sports Club's (BSSC) annual Blizzard, an event that celebrates the start of ski season. Find out what's new at New England ski areas, win lift-ticket giveaways from Wachusett Mountain Ski Resort, Sugarbush Resort, and Crotched Mountain Resort, toss your name into a raffle for a five-night ski vacation to Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia, and then dance the night away. Don't miss the après-ski appetizers and snow bar. The first 500 attendees receive goody bags with free lift tickets and swag. Tickets \$10 for BSSC members, \$15 for nonmembers, \$20 at the door. 617-789-4070, www.bssc.com



THERE

NYC TAXI SERVICE FOR WHEELCHAIR TRAVELERS

Only 233 of New York's 13,000 taxis can accommodate wheelchair travelers. That's why the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission has launched Accessible Dispatch, a service that provides wheelchair-accessible taxis to passengers. The service is operated by Connecticut-based Metro Taxi, which tracks those 233 taxis by GPS and then dispatches the one closest to your location. Request a lift anytime day or night, 365 days a year, by phone, text, Internet, or by using a new iTunes app, WOW Taxi. No extra charge for the lift or service, and no need to make advance reservations. Trips must originate in Manhattan and end anywhere in the city's five boroughs, Westchester and Nassau counties, or the three regional airports. All taxis are rear- or side-entry minivans. 646-599-9999, www.accessibledispatch.com

VIEW TUT'S TREASURES STATESIDE ONE LAST TIME

Visit Seattle's Pacific Science Center by Jan. 6 and see "Tutankhamun: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs," a National Geographic exhibit with art and artifacts that will not be on display in North America again. The captivating exhibit features more than 100 objects from King Tut's tomb — discovered 90 years ago today — and other ancient Egyptian sites. See the largest image of Tut ever found, a 10-foot-tall statue of the pharaoh, and the young king's golden sandals. Tickets are for timed entry; advance purchase is advised. Prices range from \$15.50 for children ages 3-5 on weekdays to \$32.50 for over 16 on weekends. 800-664-8775, www.pacificsciencecenter.org

DINE AND SKI IN ITALY'S DOLOMITE MOUNTAINS

Burn off rich dishes in the Dolomite Mountains of northern Italy on new culinary ski and snowboard adventures from Italiaoutdoors. The trips, March 10-16 and 17-23, are led by the company's owners: Vernon McClure, a ski and snowboard instructor and mountain guide, and Kathy Bechtel, a cooking instructor, chef, and ski instructor. The small-group tour, with 12 people max, gives winter enthusiasts of all ability levels a chance to ski and snowboard in the Dolomites, experience the culture of the autonomous province of Sudtiro, and savor regional cuisine and wines. Price: \$3,995 per person, based on double occupancy, includes accommodations, ground transportation, guided ski tours, meals, daily wine tastings, and museum visits; flights and rental equipment are additional. 978-270-5774, www.italiaoutdoorsfoodandwine.com



EVERYWHERE

30 LANGUAGES AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Lingo's 30 Language Text to Text Translator doesn't just provide a few pat phrases to help you find your hotel, order a meal, and ask directions to the train station. It lets you input a question and then it translates it into one of 30 languages and speaks the translation so you can hear the correct pronunciation. The device has more than 1.8 million words and 210,000 common travel phrases stored in its memory that it can articulate in languages from Arabic, Czech, French, Swedish, and Ukrainian to Hindi. It also offers translations for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The smartphone-size device converts eight currencies, provides local and world time, and has a backlit LCD screen, a calculator, a calendar, Sudoku, and an address-phone book. It sells for \$249.99 at Hammacher Schlemmer. 800-321-1484, www.hammacher.com

A PRECISE AND EASY-TO-ADJUST TRAVEL TRIPOD

If you have ever missed a shot because you couldn't get your camera leveled on your tripod in time, you will appreciate Vanguard's new BBH-200 ballhead. Its clever Rapid Level System lets you quickly adjust and level your camera without having to fiddle with knobs and dials, or consult bubble levels. Just loosen the ballhead with the twist of a dial, slide a glove-friendly switch to the right, and then swing the ballhead into its upright position until it clicks into place. The BBH-200, which weighs 18.7 ounces and supports up to 44 pounds, also comes with a 360-degree dial for shooting panoramas, two bubble levels, and an Arca-style quick-release plate. The BBH-200 sells for \$199 (get a \$25 rebate through Dec. 31). 800-875-3322, www.vanguardworld.com

KARI BODNARCHUK

Where blues feel down-home in Chicago

By Steve Morse
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CHICAGO — As the natives like to say, this city is associated with deep-dish pizza, Al Capone, Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey — and, of course, the blues. Chicago has often been called the home of the blues. Such locals as Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, and Willie Dixon stand out as important influences on the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and so many other rock luminaries.

While blues clubs are declining nationally, they are still going strong in Chicago, which I confirmed on a recent pilgrimage. The classic blues hit "Sweet Home Chicago" is still heard throughout the city.

"The blues is on the upswing here," says Toronzo Cannon, a guitarist who backed a galvanizing singer named Ms. Peachez at Buddy Guy's Legends club when I checked in. It was the first of four club stops in a weekend stay capped by a visit to Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation, which is now a museum but was home to Chess Records when Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and others recorded there. It was also where Chuck Berry cut "Johnny B. Goode." Aretha Franklin made her first gospel album, and the Rolling Stones did one of their early albums.

But first, Buddy's Legends. Located on the South Side, it's a surprisingly modern, 500-capacity spot (his former site was much smaller) and also serves Cajun soul food, which is appropriate since Buddy grew up in Louisiana before moving to Chicago as a young man. The club is a veritable shrine to him. It houses his Grammy awards, guitars, and a host of other instruments donated by the likes of Keith Richards, B.B. King, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. And all over the room are photos of Buddy and other greats, along with lesser-known but beloved figures like Koko Taylor, David "Honeyboy" Edwards, and Bob-bly "Blue" Bland.

Front and center on this night, though, is Ms. Peachez, a South Side powerhouse whose old-school voice transfixes the many international fans who have come for a taste of the



PAUL NATKIN/WIREIMAGE

Buddy Guy, a long-ago native of Louisiana (pictured here, at 75, in January) performs at his Buddy Guy's Legends blues club on Chicago's South Side.

blues. Ms. Peachez hits on some vintage blues themes — not wanting to be treated mean by her man, not wanting to be cheated on — before climaxing with an emotional treatment of Tracy Chapman's "Give Me One Reason." Fans jump up from tables and crowd around her for photos at the end. There's a warm atmosphere in the room, no doubt thanks to Guy, who often pops up unannounced to play. Just a few months ago, he showed up with B.B. King and George Benson to jam — all for the basic cover price of \$10. You don't go broke in the clubs here.

Next up is Blue Chicago on Clark Street, a more traditional, roadhouse-style club with scuffed floors, chipped walls, and a serious blues shouter in Shirley Johnson, who has played here for 20 years. She originally came from Norfolk, Va., and her grandfather ran a liquor still. She is stirring up a multi-aged crowd of dancers and a special buzz starts when she sings "Sweet Home Chicago." It feels different to hear the song in its natural setting.

Johnson tours internationally — she just returned from Belgium — but she is a Chicago resource. "I'm still working as much as ever," she says.

After dusting myself off the next morning (the clubs run late here), I head to Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation at 2120 South Michigan Ave. It's a famous address — the Stones even recorded a song by this title. So, not surprisingly, I run into three British fellows who have come over for their own pilgrimage. "We love the history of the blues more than most Americans," says one of them. And it's hard to deny that. When we meet the tour guide, Kevin Mabry, they seem to know nearly as much as he does. The Brits are also renting a convertible to drive the entire length of the fabled blues highway Route 66. It's a trip of a lifetime for them.

A 45-minute documentary movie highlights the Blues Heaven visit. It recounts the magic of Chess Studios, and how millions of African-Americans migrated from the South

seeking work after World War II. Rural, acoustic blues evolved into urban, electric blues, which was shot into overdrive at Chess. Mick Jagger is interviewed in the film, while Stone bandmate Ron Wood has some of his paintings mounted on the wall.

It's a small, unassuming building and the former studio is on the second floor, no longer functional and its equipment removed. The museum is run by Marie Dixon, whose late husband, Willie, wrote more than 500 songs including "Hoochie Coochie Man" and "Red Rooster." There's also some memorabilia such as Waters's tour jacket and Bo Diddley's stage shoes. It could be better organized — some displays are in disarray and poorly lighted — but the historic vibe is unmistakable.

There's a gift shop, too, which I hit hard.

That night, I take a cab to the North Side to sample the succinctly named B.L.U.E.S. and, just down the street, the funky Kingston Mines (open until 4 a.m. on Saturday night).

If you go . . .

Where to stay
W Chicago Lakeshore
644 North Lake Shore Drive
312-943-9200
www.chicago-lakeshore.com
Superbly located with a view of Lake Michigan. A cutting-edge hotel with a 33d-floor lounge called Whiskey Sky. \$199-\$295 a night. There's also a W Chicago City Center Hotel.

Where to eat
Bistrot Margot
1437 North Wells
312-587-3660
www.bistrotmargot.com
Traditional French dining in Chicago's Old Town. Entrees \$15.95-\$28.95, from steak frites to grilled salmon filet.

Buddy Guy's Legends
700 South Wabash
312-427-1190
www.buddyguy.com
Great blues and Cajun soul food; nightly \$10-\$20 cover.

What to do
Blue Chicago on Clark
536 North Clark
312-661-0100
www.bluechicago.com
Funky, roadhouse-style blues; nightly \$8-\$10 cover.

Kingston Mines
2448 North Halstead
773-477-4646
www.kingstonmines.com
Two stages, two bands, for six hours; nightly \$12-\$15 cover.

B.L.U.E.S.
2519 North Halstead
312-661-0100
www.chicagobluesbar.com
Another beloved roadhouse; nightly \$10-\$15.

Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation
2120 South Michigan Ave.
312-808-1286
www.bluesheaven.com
The site of Chess Records, now a museum. Tours \$10, Mon-Fri 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Sat noon-2.

I start with B.L.U.E.S. and immediately get swept in. It's another roadhouse gem: small with a narrow, bowling-alley feel with a teeming bar on the right and a riser with tables and chairs on the left. The band is the rocking Big Time Sarah & the BTS Express. She's a veteran singer who used to be Sunnyland Slim's wife (you've got to love those blues nicknames). She's getting up there in age and sits out part of the set, but all of a sudden rips into Little Richard's "Good Golly Miss Molly" and nearly brings the house down. A band member asks for a show of hands to see who had come to the club for the first time — and about 25 percent put them up.

"There's a lot of tourist traffic that still comes to Chicago for the blues," says Greg Kot, Chicago Tribune music critic. "It has kept the clubs very active. We call it 'tourist blues,' but it's thriving."

My final stop is Kingston Mines, an earthy mainstay that is really two clubs in one. Bands alternate in each room and

much of the mixed-age crowd follows them from room to room. It's like a mini-festival. Tonight's acts are Joanna Connor and Big James & the Chicago Playboys. Both are excellent. Connor has a more rocking feel (she adds songs by the Stones and Beatles) and Big James exudes a Marvin Gaye-like soul-blues.

Kingston Mines is as unpretentious as it gets. Drinks are cheap (there are nightly "Buck-et Specials" where you can get four or five beers in an iced bucket) and food is served in back at a casual takeout counter called Doc's Rib Joint. It offers a "half slab" of ribs for \$15.25 and a "full slab" for \$20.75.

"There's a vibrant blues scene in Chicago," says Connor between sets. "It's one reason I'm not traveling as much anymore. The world now comes to us rather than us having to go to them."

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