Compared to that vast metropolitan zone to the southwest where concrete environs pack in the summer heat like a giant beehive oven, Greater Boston is an airy, pleasant place to spend the summer. The student population ebbs and easy access to open space, parks, esplanades, and water—the Charles and Neponset Rivers, Boston Harbor, or multiple public sprinklers and fountains—allows those out and about to find a spot of shade and a breeze, often carrying a salty edge.

What follows is a selection of picnic spots accessible by foot, bike, and subway for anyone adventurously inclined to embrace summing in the city.

In South Boston, the 22-acre Castle Island/Pleasure Bay park lands offer pedestrian and bike paths, a sandy beach, and the pentagonal Fort Independence. The last, a granite behemoth built between 1834 and 1851 (although the site has included some form of defense structure since 1634), is a National Historic Landmark open for weekend tours. The surrounding grassy slopes offer clear views of a few fishing piers and of the Boston Harbor islands, some prime picnic spots themselves. (For details, visit www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/massparks/region-boston/castle-island-pleasure-bay-m-street-and-carson-beach.html.)

Castle Island is one in a series of trails and destinations (not contiguous, and still very much a “work in progress”) called the Boston HarborWalk. Worth exploring in its entirety, the park district runs through Boston’s waterfront lands, historic sites, and neighborhoods, from East Boston and Charlestown to South Boston, Dorchester, and along the Neponset River Greenway (www.bostonnatural.org/gwynep.htm).

The HarborWalk’s 2.4-mile Lower Neponset River Trail (www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/massparks/region-boston/low-er-neponset-river-trail.html) offers numerous places for picnics, soccer and Frisbee games, or kite-flying. A mixed-use route for bikes and walkers, it extends from the Port Norfolk section of Dorchester, through marshlands, into the town of Milton. Spend some time in the 65-acre Pope John Paul II Reservation. Thanks to continuing restoration efforts, the site, which once held a dump and drive-in movie theater, is now slowly growing back into a semi-native habitat, and birds are rediscovering its flora. (Take the MBTA Red Line to Fields Corner and bike three miles from there, or board buses 201/202.)

At a different end of the city, the bustling community of East Boston is known for an array of Latin American restaurants, bakeries, and cafés (see “Food Fiesta,” July-Au-
It's also home to several green corridors along the terrific and underutilized East Boston Greenway, a bike trail, and the stunning Piers Park. The park, owned and maintained by Massport (which also operates the adjacent Logan Airport), offers a pedestrian promenade with two pavilions, a community sailing center, an outdoor gym, and a playground with a fanciful sprinkler that even adults will want to skip through on a scorcher. Don't miss the wondrous views of the Boston skyline—especially just before dusk. (Take the Blue Line to Maverick Station and walk, or bike, the half-mile to the park.) Also appealing is the nearby Boston Harbor Shipyard and Marina, a funky commercial and artistic enclave: do try the Australian-style “pie floater” at KO Catering and Pies (www.kocateringandpies.com).

Thanks to farsighted environmental activism, the Charles River is now a joy to explore, particularly during the summer. Take out any manner of boat, or walk or bike along the enveloping green (and quite peaceful) “Upper Charles River” paths that hug the embankments in Watertown, Newton, and Waltham. Dotted throughout are wooden benches and viewing decks; consider lingering to eat near the beautiful Blue Heron Bridge, by Albemarle Road in Newton (www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/massparks/region-boston/upper-charles-river-reservation.html).

ALL IN A DAY: Dedicated to Craft

Visitors to Lowell’s Boat Shop in Amesbury, Massachusetts, often find Graham McKay ’01 hunched over a wooden sailing dory, perhaps hand-planing a gently bowed plank. The task, he says, like the tool and the craftsmanship, has not changed that much since the shop was founded by Simeon Lowell in 1793. Lowell’s is, in fact, the oldest continuously operating wooden-boat shop in the country. The National Historic Landmark still produces between eight and 12 boats, on commission, each year—and thus also serves as a working museum.

“We demonstrate different stages of construction and the boats’ components,” notes McKay, the master builder and executive director of the nonprofit Lowell’s Maritime Foundation. A formal exhibit depicts the region’s once robust boatbuilding industry and the shop’s history using video and maritime artifacts; the vintage boats on display include an 1880 Swampscott dory. Year-round boatbuilding classes are offered, along with kids’ programs. This summer McKay is teaching children to row on the Merrimack River—which flows by at the end of the shop’s dock—echoing his own childhood pastime. Growing up in Amesbury, he lived two miles downriver from his best friend’s house: “Before I could drive, I would row up to see him. The freedom was appealing.” Behind the shop’s three red barn-like structures are grassy banks (a perfect spot for picnics). From there, “You look out across this beautiful river at the wooded lands,” he says. “These are the sort of structures and places that, if not preserved, would have long ago been turned into condos.” McKay truly cares. He apprenticed at Lowell’s during high school, then studied economics at Harvard. Stints as a commercial fisherman, a marine-science researcher, and a captain of tall ships followed; then McKay earned a master’s in maritime history and archaeology at the University of Bristol, in England, in 2007, and returned to Lowell’s as a builder. He took over the helm last year.

Dories and skiffs are iconic emblems of early American industriousness; New England manufactured more than a quarter-million dories within 200 years, according to McKay. Lowell’s was often the leading innovator and producer; in 1911, at its peak, the shop sold more than 2,000 boats, all built by hand. “In its heyday, every region in the U.S. and even, I would say, in the world, had a particular boat type that was characteristic of that region and the environmental conditions that existed there,” he says. “It’s now difficult to even find any store or business that is not a chain.”