The ExploreBoston Brand Guide

How Boston's independent city guide looks, sounds, and behaves — on the site, in the inbox, and on the feed.

VERSION 1.3 · JULY 2026 · EXPLOREBOSTON.COM

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ExploreBoston at a glance

Everything a contractor needs before touching anything. The other thirteen sections are the argument; this is the law.

Type: Playfair Display (display, never below 18px) + Montserrat (everything else). A third typeface is a bug.

Links on cream/paper: Link Gold `#8A6A1F` — bright Brass is for backgrounds and borders, not small text.

Ads: labeled every time; the price shown is the price charged; unsold slots don't render.

Missing photo: render the navy skyline tile, never a broken image. Free things get the cream Free chip.

Logo: black & white only; on dark it rides a white/cream card. Never recolored, stretched, or below 90px.

Standards, in order: Consistent · Engaging · Boston-rooted · State of the art.

Copy: plain and concrete; numbers round down; no hours/prices in evergreen; subject lines are news, not bait.

Floors: 44px tap targets · visible focus · Hairline `#E7DCC6` is the only border color · every newsletter link resolves to exploreboston.com.

01 · THE BRAND IN ONE BREATH

Explore Boston like a local

ExploreBoston.com is the city guide a well-connected friend would write: plain-spoken, genuinely useful, unmistakably New England. It competes with Boston's biggest media brands on polish — and beats them on honesty.

Four standards govern every piece of work, in this order:

- **Consistent** — one palette, two typefaces, the same card language everywhere. A reader should recognize an ExploreBoston page, email, or Story with the logo covered.
- **Engaging** — concrete, confident, warm. Every page earns the next scroll.
- **Boston-rooted** — navy and brass, harbor and brownstone. New England restraint, not startup gradient.
- **State of the art** — the benchmark is Boston.com, Boston Magazine, and the Globe, not "good for a small site."

02 · LOGO

The stamp

The ExploreBoston stamp is black and white. Always. That single rule keeps it credible next to century-old mastheads.

On Paper or Cream: use as-is.

On navy or photography: the white card treatment — never a recolored logo.

DON'T — STRAIGHT ON DARK

Black art on navy disappears. Dark surfaces always get the white-card treatment.

DON'T — STRETCH OR SQUEEZE

The proportions are the mark. Scale it; never distort it.

DON'T — RECOLOR

No brass, navy, or any tinted version. Black and white is the whole identity.

- **Never** recolor, outline, shadow, stretch, or set the stamp in brass or navy. Black on light, or black-on-white-card on dark. That's the whole system.
- **Clear space:** keep a margin of at least the height of the ".COM" line on all sides.
- **Minimum size:** 90px wide on screen; if it must go smaller, use no logo at all rather than an illegible one.
- **Source of truth:** `wp-content/uploads/2026/01/logo.png` (187×106).

03 · COLOR

Navy, brass, cream

A harbor-at-dusk palette: deep navy doing the talking, brass doing the pointing, cream doing the breathing. Roughly 60% cream/paper, 30% navy, 10% brass on any given surface.

Harbor Navy
`#15324F · --nv`
Headlines on light, mastheads, primary surfaces

Midnight Navy
`#0E2338 · --nvd`
Deep bands, gradients with Harbor, button text on brass

Brass
`#C2A14D · --br`
Kickers, accents, buttons, card top-borders

Old Brass
`#A8863A · --brd`
Card taglines, hover states, small brass text on white

Cream
`#F6F1E8 · --cr`
Alternating section bands, callout backgrounds

Paper
`#FBF8F2 · --ow`
Page background, cards on cream

Hairline
`#E7DCC6 · --ln`
Every border, divider, and table rule

Ink
`#1C2A38 · --ink`
Body text

Muted
`#5E5E5E · --mut`
Captions, metadata, fine print

- **Accessibility floor:** brass text on cream fails contrast — use **Link Gold** `#8A6A1F` for text links on cream/paper (ratified in the July 2026 contrast pass). Bright Brass is for backgrounds, borders, and large display accents, not small text on light. Every pairing is computed in the **§12 contrast matrix**.
- Light text on navy: `#C9D4DF` for body, `#9FB0C0` for fine print, white for headlines.
- Reserved red `#8C3B2E` exists only for destructive/warning moments (veto buttons, hard warnings). It never decorates.

- **Transit exception (owner, Oct 2026):** the T's official line colors may break the palette rules wherever they mark a line — on transit maps, line keys and line labels: Red Line `#DA291C`, Orange Line `#ED8B00`, Green Line `#00843D`, Blue Line `#003DA5`, Silver Line `#7C878E`, Commuter Rail purple `#80276C`. They match the signage riders follow. Use them only to identify those lines, never as decoration.

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04 · TYPOGRAPHY

Two typefaces. No exceptions.

The type constitution, owner-ratified July 2026: Playfair Display for display, Montserrat for everything else. A third family on any surface is a bug.

PLAYFAIR DISPLAY · HEADLINES, STANDFIRSTS, CARD NAMES · NEVER BELOW 18PX

Know Boston before Boston wakes up.

MONTSERRAT · BODY, UI, LABELS, BUTTONS, NAVIGATION

Boston is compact enough that most tours start within a block of a T stop — and half the best ones are walks you can start whenever you like.

THE KICKER · MONTSERRAT 11PX / 700 / 2.5PX TRACKING / UPPERCASE / BRASS

EXPLORE BOSTON · CITY GUIDE

DO — THE HOUSE CTA	DON'T — SYSTEM-FONT CTA	DON'T — TINY PLAYFAIR
SUBSCRIBE FREE	Sign Up Now	Fine print set in a display face is a legibility smell.
Montserrat 700, uppercase, tracked, Midnight on Brass.	Arial + client blue = a bug, not a button. (The lone exception: Outlook's VML email buttons.)	Playfair below ~18px switches to Montserrat.

- **Stacks:** `'Playfair Display',Georgia,serif` and `'Montserrat',-apple-system,Segoe UI,Helvetica,Arial,sans-serif`. Georgia and Arial live only inside the fallback chain — never as a chosen face. (One deliberate exception: Outlook's VML email buttons keep Arial.)
- **Scale on pages:** H1 clamp(30–46px) · section H2 26–27px · card names 22px · body 14–15.5px at 1.55 · fine print 11.5–12.5px. Long-form text sits in a ~680px measure at 1.6.
- **Playfair below ~18px is a legibility smell** — switch to Montserrat.

05 · COMPONENTS

The house parts

Every hub page is built from the same six parts. Reuse them; don't reinvent them.

THE CARD — BRASS TOP BORDER, PLAYFAIR NAME, OLD BRASS TAGLINE

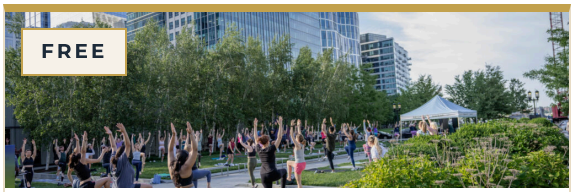
Newbury Street

BACK BAY · THE CLASSIC

Eight blocks of Victorian brownstones from the Public Garden to Mass Ave.

Back Bay guide →

THE LISTING CARD — IMAGE-LED (EVENTS & VENUES): REAL PHOTO WHEN IT EXISTS, THE NAVY SKYLINE TILE WHEN IT DOESN'T. CATEGORY CHIP, PLAYFAIR NAME, ONE META LINE WITH LINK GOLD SEPARATORS



FITNESS

Seaport Sweat

5:30–6:30 pm · Seaport Common · Seaport

FREE

FAMILY

Coffee with the Mayor

10:00–11:00 am · Garvey Playground · Dorchester

THE DAY HEADER — PLAYFAIR DAY NAME, BRASS RULE, MUTED COUNT; DATES NEVER REPEAT ON THE CARDS BENEATH IT

Today Monday, July 20 · 25 events

THE GEOMETRY — RADIUS, SHADOW, AND MEASURE TOKENS (THE UNWRITTEN HALF OF CONSISTENCY)

- **Corner radius:** chips, pills, and CTAs are full-round `999px`; editorial hub cards are square with the brass top edge; dense listing grids (the events redesign) may soften to `10–12px`. Never mix square and rounded cards in one grid.
- **Shadows, exactly two:** the page frame `0 10px 40px rgba(14,35,56,.18)` and the logo chip on navy `0 10px 26px rgba(0,0,0,.35)`. Anything else is flat — depth comes from bands and hairlines, not drop shadows.
- **Measures:** page shell ≤1160px · long-form text ~680px · email 600px · social 1080px. Mobile breakpoint: `769px`.
- **Spacing rhythm:** multiples of 4 — 8/12/16/24/36 do almost all the work. Section padding runs 44–64px on desktop.

THE FACT BOX — BRASS LEFT BORDER, ONE IDEA PER BOX

> **The clothing tax break:** Massachusetts charges 6.25% sales tax, but ordinary clothing is exempt up to $175 per item.

THE BUTTON — BRASS FILL, MIDNIGHT TEXT, UPPERCASE · AND THE SALE PRICE TREATMENT

SUBSCRIBE FREE **$49.50** ~~$99~~

THE CHIPS — SPONSOR TRANSPARENCY (THE RIBBON AND THE CHIP) AND THE FREE MARKER

Presented by Sample Advertiser · **Learn more →** SPONSORED FREE

- Sections alternate **white and Cream bands** separated by Hairline rules; nothing floats on gray.
- Interactive targets are at least 44px tall on mobile. Hairline `#E7DCC6` is the only border color; the brass top edge on cards is an accent, not a border.
- **A missing photo never ships broken.** Image slots without art render the navy skyline tile — the fallback is a design element, not an error state.

- **Lists that span days group under day headers** — Playfair day name, brass rule, count — and the date never repeats on every card beneath one.
- Every hub page ends with the subscribe CTA on navy, then an **honesty footer** in the source style: ***"shops move and close — check before you make a special trip."***

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06 · VOICE & TONE

Plain, warm, local

We write like a Bostonian showing a friend around: confident, concrete, a little wry, never breathless. The reader's trust is the product.

PRINCIPLE	YES	NO
Say the plain thing	**"This isn't a mall city."**	"Discover a world-class retail destination!"
Be concrete	**"Cash, elbows, and the best prices in town."**	"A vibrant market experience."
Tell the truth even when it costs	**"Honestly — for most trips downtown, don't bring the car."**	Hiding the hard part to keep the page upbeat
Subjects are readers, not brands	**"You'll smell the ocean before you see it."**	"ExploreBoston is proud to present…"
Subjects lines: news, not bait	**"Half the Red Line is shuttle buses today"**	"You WON'T believe what the T did"

- **Numbers round down.** The list says 8,268? We say "Join 7,500+ Bostonians." Never inflate; understatement is a flex.
- **Era-safe facts only:** founding years, permanent icons, geography. No hours, no prices, no exhibition names in evergreen copy — they rot.
- **Hedge what changes:** "in the warmer months," "most Augusts," "the date moves — check first."
- **Punctuation:** real typography via entities (— ’ ·) in site copy. In advertiser-facing product and sale copy, no em dashes — commas and periods.
- **Second person, present tense,** contractions welcome. "Wicked" is earned about once a year.

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07 · THE EDITORIAL CONSTITUTION

Rules that don’t bend

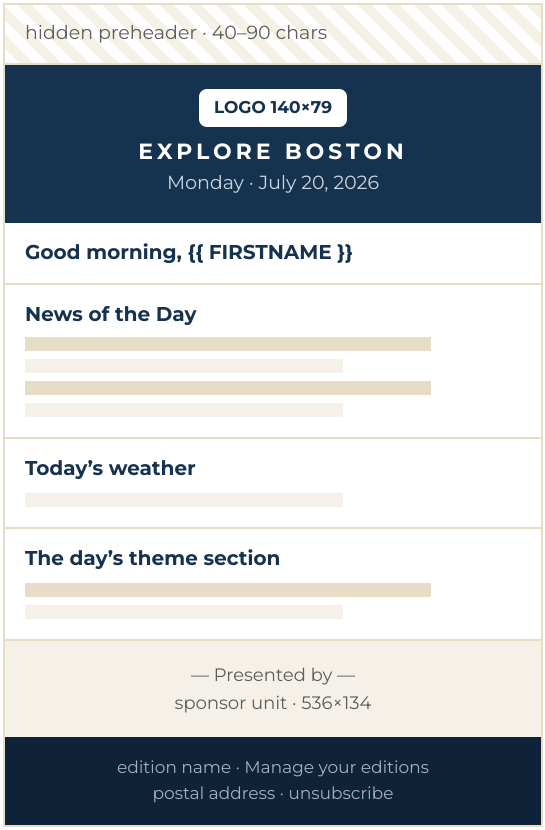
- **The Link Rule:** every link in a newsletter resolves to exploreboston.com (ads ride `/go/` redirects). On the site, news headlines always credit and link the original outlet.
- **Link liveness:** every URL is verified live at publish, and newsletter links are re-checked before send. A link that only works via a redirect net counts as broken.
- **The closed ledger:** when a venue closes it goes on the do-not-name list with a date. Nothing gets re-added from memory.
- **Institutions need tenure:** a business gets named in evergreen copy only after decades of history (the bar is roughly 40 years). Districts carry the page; names are seasoning.
- **Sponsored says so.** Community listings are free, always. Paid placement is labeled — the chip, the ribbon, or the word “Sponsored,” every time, and the sale price shown always equals the price charged.
- **The honesty footer:** every guide ends by telling readers what could have changed since we checked, and when we checked it.

08 · THE NEWSLETTER

The Daily, 6:30 AM

Seven mornings a week, 600px wide, navy masthead on cream, from Explore Boston <noreply@exploreboston.com>. It reads in three minutes and never wastes one. Templates live at `newsletter/*.html`; each file's in-head token manifest is the spec-of-record for that edition.

THE EDITION ANATOMY — EVERY DAILY, TOP TO BOTTOM



- **Masthead logo is the only image** in the entire email; everything else is live text and emoji. Total weight stays under 100KB.
- **Construction:** 600px nested tables, all critical styles inline, MSO/VML button twins for Outlook (Word engine), tested against Gmail web/app, Apple Mail, iOS Mail.
- **Greeting** uses {{ contact.FIRSTNAME | default : "there" }} — the only Brevo merge tags anywhere are FIRSTNAME and unsubscribe.
- **Tokens:** content fills use `%%TOKEN%%`; `{{ }}` is reserved for Brevo merge. All token values are plain text — never HTML.
- **Footer, every edition:** edition name · "Manage your editions" → /my-editions/ · postal address · Brevo unsubscribe.

- **The week:** Business Monday · Transit Tuesday · News + Events Wednesday · Weekend + Restaurants Thursday (from 7/23) · Weekend + Real Estate Friday (incl. curated open houses) · Culture Saturday · Week Ahead + Sunday Scoreboard Sunday (from 7/26).

- **THE LINK RULE (hard):** every href in every email resolves to exploreboston.com — never directly to outlets, venues, ticket sites, or mbta.com. Emails are teasers; the site gets the click. Sole exception: the Brevo unsubscribe tag.
- **Email links** use Link Gold `#8A6A1F` (set as the global `a` rule so staging-inserted links never fall to client blue); the sponsor slot is a fixed 536×134 unit, text or artwork, labeled "Presented by."
- **Type in email:** the constitution holds — Playfair display, Montserrat body, Google Fonts linked for clients that load them. The single ratified exception: **Arial inside the Outlook VML button conditional** (Outlook can't load webfonts; leave it).
- **Email-safe encoding:** the built HTML is pure ASCII — degree signs, dashes, and emoji ship as numeric entities. (Never "fix" this with literal emoji; it guards against transport mangling.)
- **The transactional pair** (same masthead, palette, and link rule): the **welcome** sends once per address, ever — a re-submitted existing address is a silent no-op; the **unsubscribe confirmation** is the last email an address receives and carries transactional content only — no sponsor slots, no promos, no "before you go" marketing.
- **The archive** (/newsletter/archive/): sent editions republish with merge tokens cleaned, unsubscribe links → /my-editions/, and `utm_medium=email` rewritten to `archive` — archive readers never inherit the subscriber pass or pollute email attribution.
- The house default sponsor line: ***"This spot reaches 7,500+ Boston locals before 7am."***

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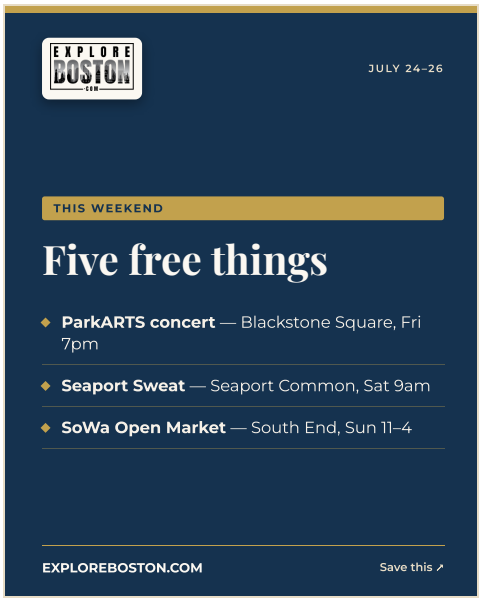
09 · SOCIAL

@explorebostondotcom, everywhere

One handle across Instagram, Facebook, and Threads: @explorebostondotcom (Facebook page name ExploreBostondotcom). Templates live at `instagram/card-template.html` and `instagram/story-template.html`; the runbook is the operating spec.

THE CARD (1080×1350, SHOWN AT 22%) AND THE STORY SAFE ZONE (1080×1920, SHOWN AT 15%)



The CTA pill is burned into the art — the link survives even when no sticker is added.

- Navy field, **14px brass rule across the top**; the logo top-left **on its cream chip**, uppercase Montserrat dateline top-right.
- Brass **kicker chip** → **Playfair 92px headline, 2–6 words** → Montserrat 37px rows with brass diamond bullets and hairline dividers (delete unused rows — never leave empties).
- Footer: brass top rule, site wordmark left, CTA right. Colors are the site brand set — do not restyle per post.

- **The Story** is the same shell at 1080×1920 (9:16): all content inside the safe zone (y 250–1560), logo chip present, **burned-in CTA** (pill + exploreboston.com) so the link survives even without a sticker. Every daily feed post also ships as a Story.
- **Photo posts still carry the logo:** full-bleed 1080×1350 photo with the cream logo chip inset 48px top-left. A raw photo alone is not a valid deliverable — the logo appears on everything

created.

- **The link mandate:** every Facebook/Threads/X post carries exactly one on-site link with campaign UTMs; the Instagram caption says “link in bio.” X copy fits 280 counting any URL as 23.
- **Cadence:** Instagram daily (+ Story), Facebook/Threads/X twice daily (AM + PM, PM never repeats the noon lead), Morning Magazine Stories 6:00–7:45am.
- Photography: real Boston, verified rights (Commons/CC with credit chips, own shots, or licensed) — never unattributed scraping, never AI-generated cityscapes passed off as real.
- Captions are our own words (never lifted copy), and paid social follows the same transparency rule as the site: an ad looks like an ad.

Real Boston, owned weight

Photography is the brand's proof that we're actually here. Every image is really Boston, really cleared, and really optimized.

Do: a real place, a real crowd, rights verified, credit carried on the image or in the caption.

Do: no photo? The navy skyline tile — decorative, honest, never pretending to be photography.

Don't: watermarked, unlicensed, or AI-generated "Boston" — one fake image costs the trust every real one earned.

- **Rights, always:** Commons/CC with the attribution carried in the caption or a credit chip, our own shots, or licensed art. Never unattributed scraping; never AI-generated cityscapes passed off as real.
- **Never hotlink.** Every image is localized into our media library — outside servers don't hold our pages hostage.
- **Weight budget:** masters recompress to ≤1400px JPEG (~q78) before upload; a multi-hundred-KB PNG in a content slot is a bug, not a style. Card/thumb slots get width/height attributes and sized variants wherever the renderer allows.
- **Range beyond the postcard:** the downtown skyline is one neighborhood out of 23 — photography should walk the rest of them.
- **The skyline silhouette** (navy-on-navy) is the house decorative motif: hero bases, the missing-photo fallback tile, og art. Decorative only — it never pretends to be photography.

An ad looks like an ad

Sponsorship pays for the journalism, and the reader can always tell which is which. Every paid surface is labeled, every price is honest, and community listings stay free.

- **The label, every time:** the “Presented by” ribbon, the Sponsored chip, or the word itself — on site placements, in the newsletter, and on paid social. No exceptions, no gray areas.
- **The price shown is the price charged.** Sale treatments show both figures (**$49.50** ~~$99~~); nothing anchors against a price that never existed.
- **The product family:** the Daily Spotlight (site banner with an automatic text-card twin on phones — small screens get a clean text unit, never a squashed banner), the newsletter’s 536×134 “Presented by” unit, Sponsored Events ($15 / 7 days, capped at 10, compact rows on a cream band), Open House slots, and page sponsorship ribbons.
- **Sold means shown:** unsold inventory never renders as a visible placeholder — a sponsor band collapses to what’s actually sold and hides when empty. (One quiet “Sponsor this page →” line may carry the funnel.)
- **Advertiser-facing copy** is plain product prose: no em dashes (commas and periods), concrete promises only, launch-honest tense — never present-tense claims for things that haven’t shipped.
- **Community listings are free, always.** Events cost nothing to add; paid placement buys position, never inclusion. And real-estate money is flat-fee only — never per-lead (MA §87PP).
- Newsletter ad links ride `/go/` redirects so the link rule holds even for sponsors.

DO — ADVERTISER COPY	DON’T
“Your event in front of 7,500 Boston locals by Friday. $15, live for a week.” Concrete number, concrete promise, plain punctuation.	“Unlock unparalleled visibility — supercharge your reach with our premium platform!” Vague superlatives, em dashes, nothing checkable.

Checkable, not aspirational

Every color pairing below is computed, not eyeballed. WCAG AA needs 4.5:1 for body text and 3:1 for large display text; pairs that fail are decorative-only, and that's a rule, not a suggestion.

PAIR	WHERE IT'S USED	RATIO	VERDICT
Ink on Paper	Body text	13.8:1	**AAA**
White on Navy	Hero headlines	13.1:1	**AAA**
Navy on Cream	Headlines on bands	11.7:1	**AAA**
Parchment on Navy	Social datelines	9.6:1	**AAA**
Light body on Navy	Hero body text	8.7:1	**AAA**
Midnight on Brass	The house CTA	6.5:1	**AA**
Muted on Paper	Captions, fine print	6.1:1	**AA**
Brass on Navy	Kickers, accents	5.3:1	**AA**
Link Gold on Paper	Text links	4.8:1	**AA**
Link Gold on Cream	Text links on bands	4.5:1	**AA — at the line**
Link Gold on Hairline	—	3.7:1	**Fails — never**
Brass on Cream	Rules & borders only	2.2:1	**Decorative only**

- **Cream is the darkest background text-gold may sit on.** On Hairline or any parchment tint, links go Navy.
- **Retired in this pass:** the green Free badge (`#1D9E75` , white text, 3.4:1 — fail). Free things now carry the cream Free chip everywhere: ink on cream, 12:1, and on-palette.
- **Tap targets:** 44px minimum on mobile — chips, buttons, and card links included.
- **Focus is visible:** 2px brass outline, 2px offset, on every interactive element. Never `outline:none` without a replacement.

- **Alt text:** every content image describes what's pictured; the skyline fallback tile is `aria-hidden` with the event name carried in text.
- **Motion:** hover lifts and transitions respect `prefers-reduced-motion`. Nothing auto-plays.
- **Structure:** real heading order (one H1, sections are H2s, day headers are headings), landmarks, and lists marked up as lists — the day-grouped archive reads correctly in a screen reader.

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13 · SEARCH & SHARE

The brand off the site

Most first impressions happen in a Google result, a link preview, or a dark-mode inbox — surfaces we don't fully control. These rules keep them ours anyway.

- **SEO titles:** *"<Topic> in Boston (2026) | Explore Boston"* — the year only where freshness sells (events, guides that rot), aim ≤60 characters. The on-page H1 stays human and needn't match the title tag.
- **Meta descriptions:** one promise plus one proof, ≤155 characters, written in the site voice — news, not bait. Never auto-generated fragments.
- **Link previews:** every hub carries og tags (Yoast owns them; a no-op resave refreshes a stale card). The og:image standard is a 1200×630 navy card — skyline motif, Playfair title, logo on its cream chip — not a random content crop.
- **The small-size mark:** below ~100px (favicons, app icons, social avatars) the wordmark is illegible — use the square avatar mark (`instagram/eb-logo-512.png`). This is the single sanctioned exception to "the wordmark on everything."
- **Dark-mode inboxes:** Gmail may invert our navy and cream. The defenses are structural: all copy is live text (never baked into images), the logo rides its white card so inversion can't erase it, and the Gmail-app dark theme is a standing test target for every new template.
- **URLs are copy too:** lowercase, hyphenated, human-readable slugs (`/things-to-do-with-kids/`), stable once published — a changed slug needs its 301.

Copy-paste starting point

Every new surface starts from this block, a wrapper div with a unique marker id, and the two Google Fonts. If a design can't be built from these tokens, question the design first.

```
--nv:  #15324F;  /* Harbor Navy   */    --nvd: #0E2338;  /* Midnight Navy */
--br:  #C2A14D;  /* Brass         */    --brd: #A8863A;  /* Old Brass     */
--cr:  #F6F1E8;  /* Cream         */    --ow:  #FBF8F2;  /* Paper         */
--ln:  #E7DCC6;  /* Hairline      */    --ink: #1C2A38;  /* Ink           */
--mut: #5E5E5E;  /* Muted         */    /* links on cream: #8A6A1F        */

/* geometry */
--r-pill: 999px;                        /* chips, pills, CTAs            */
--r-card: 12px;                         /* dense listing grids only      */
--shadow-frame: 0 10px 40px rgba(14,35,56,.18);
--shadow-chip:  0 10px 26px rgba(0,0,0,.35);   /* logo chip on navy      */
/* breakpoint 769px · shell ≤1160px · prose ~680px · email 600px      */
```

Canonical living examples: `shopping-page/page-shopping.html` (the template every 2026 hub descends from), `newsletter/monday-news-of-the-day.html` (email shell), `instagram/story-template.html` (social shell).

ExploreBoston.com Brand Guide v1.4 · October 28, 2026 (v1.4: transit exception, official T line colors and Commuter Rail purple · v1.2: newsletter anatomy, social specs, Imagery + Advertising · v1.3: contents + one-pager, live component demos and do/don't pairs throughout, geometry tokens, Accessibility section with computed contrast matrix — green Free badge retired for the cream chip — Search & share section, print layout) · maintained in the site repo at `brand-guide/brand-guide.html` — edit there, re-print to PDF. Questions: the owner.