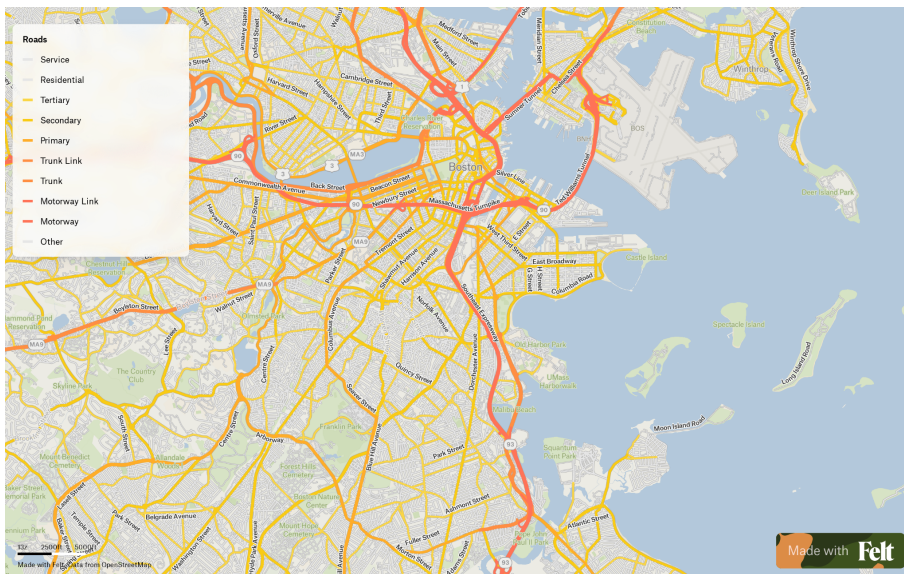


“Are We Going the Wrong Way?”

Atlas, City

Brenna Sheets

There’s a saying in Boston: “If you miss the exit, just go home.”



Let’s use Rock & Rye, my favorite dive bar in Boston, as an example. If you’re driving to Rock & Rye from the south of the city, such as Dorchester, you’ll take I-93. If you miss the exit toward Lincoln Street, you’ll miss your last chance to get off in downtown and will, in fact, have to do a whole life-questioning circle around the city. *Well, at least there’ll be a nice drive-by tour of the scenery*, an optimist would think. Boston laughs back at you. You’re underground the

majority of the time, lightly shielding your eyes from the tunnel's harsh lighting, wondering how the Big Dig was even possible, and hoping there's ventilation for all the backed-up car exhaust.

I know this because, now that I've lived in Boston for three years, it's happened to me on numerous occasions: in [an Uber](#), en route to Emerson, Moxy, [urgent care](#), Rock & Rye, [the Paramount](#), [the Wang](#), [the Q](#), [the Common](#) and the shops on Newbury. Who knew they built the subway for a reason? The Red Line is my best friend when it's reliable, but it tends to fall off the wagon a few times a year: we have a toxic, codependent relationship.

A 2024 study by WalletHub on the best and worst cities to drive in ranked Boston [No. 94](#) for traffic and infrastructure with an overall score of 86 (100 being the worst). Even if you're traveling on foot, you can take "[The Dark Side of Boston](#)" tours, which lead visitors through the North End's winding streets and alleyways for true tales of misery, misfortune, and murder.

One can learn all about the Great Influenza of 1918, the Molasses Flood, and the infamous Brink's Robbery, all of which were so heavily immortalized by the city's infrastructure.

It's not just my perception as a transplant. Boston really is built differently. Unlike most major U.S. cities, Boston's street system didn't emerge from a central plan but from centuries of layering.

In the 17th century, what is now downtown Boston was once the Shawmut Peninsula. Known as Mushawwomuk, or "[the boat landing place](#)", in the Algonquian language, [the area](#) was part of the

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Massachusetts nation, according to the West End Museum. William Blackstone, a lone English settler on the peninsula, invited John Winthrop to move Puritan settlers to the area in 1630; they renamed the settlement Boston. The Massachusetts were forced out of the area within a decade. The narrow cow paths and foot trails eventually hardened into roads. When the city expanded by filling in marshes and annexing nearby towns, the street system grew like a patchwork rather than a blueprint. By the time cars arrived, the damage — if you can call it that — was already done.

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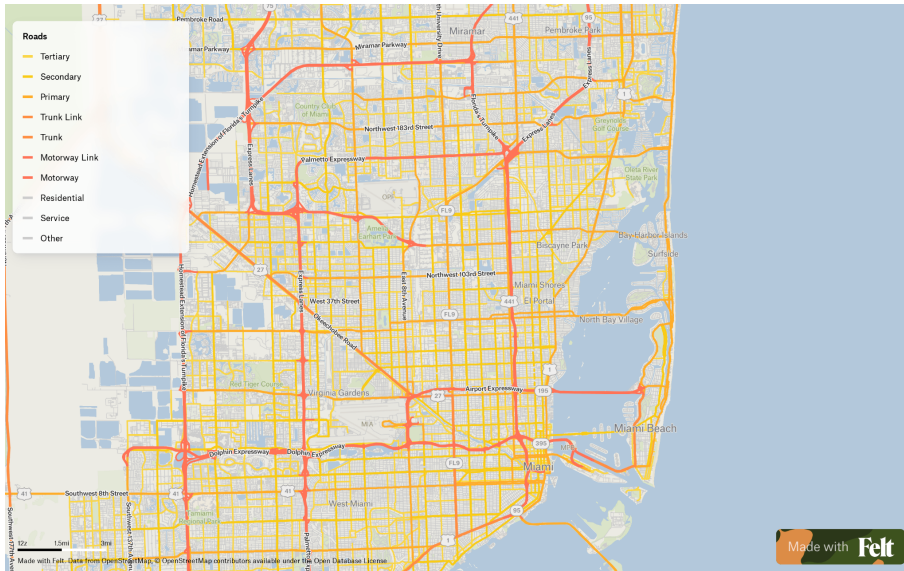
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The result is a city where one-way streets double back on themselves, where there are five-way intersections, where the tunnel rats never see the light of day, and where a single street will change names multiple times in the space of a mile. It's a place that has reinvented and expanded itself for centuries, and it expects you to do the same as soon as you sign your lease.

For reference, I grew up in Miami, Florida, which has a grid system and no trains.

In Miami, everything's laid out pretty straightforwardly. Streets and avenues are numbered and perpendicular, like graph paper stretching toward the horizon. It's hard to make more than one wrong turn unless you're trying to, and there's usually an easy solution, with traffic being the only headache.



I enjoyed growing up in Miami, but I always saw it as just that — a place I would grow up. I always dreamed of moving away and living a different life than the one I'd seen. I wanted more than just flip-flop tans and EDM music and drugs, and living at home. I didn't want to kick it with high school friends, pretend to care about Art Basel and avoid discussing politics as the city turned red. Yet it seemed like every time I tried to veer off the plan and leave Florida, the universe stood firm on its decision.

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That summer, after high school graduation, I found out that no matter how smart you are, how many clubs you join, or how hard you work, there are just some things you can't do without money. One of those things was going to college in New York City. I bet big and applied to the top schools only, desperate to leave my life in Miami and expand my horizons in pursuit of

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something greater. But when I found out my scholarship would still leave me \$150,000 in debt, and my mom's credit was too poor to co-sign any kind of loan, I gave up. I remember a financial aid personnel telling me over the phone, *Well, you know, maybe if you can't afford it and the loans are an issue, you should sit down and think, 'Is this really even the environment for me?'*

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The possibility that I was somehow destined to live a Floridian life was terrifying. When I finally managed to scheme a plan to leave the state after college, I figured that being in Boston would be the easy part: the reward after the grind.

I was just a *little* off track.

Boston is a maze, which is fitting because it's also a rat's race. It's full of twists and turns, side alleys with \$1 million brownstones, underground cafes, and train escalators that lead to more trains instead of above ground. It has more than 50 colleges, more than 100 company headquarters, around 700,000 residents, and more than 40 million airport passengers every year.

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The population and tourist destinations are not something I'm unfamiliar with, but I never thought I'd find myself embarrassed and confused at intersections so often.

My time in Boston has mirrored its streets. Life delivered more unexpected turns than I could have imagined, with moments that felt like the universe was expelling me back to the Florida marsh where I belonged. It wasn't like Miami at all, which always seemed to be begging me to settle, to follow familiarity and discontentment. Boston was quite literally turning me up on my head at every turn. Any time I've found myself settling in, it's thrown me right back onto the

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streets. I've taken probably all the wrong turns you can think of in the past three years: I stayed in the wrong career, picked the wrong apartments, settled for the wrong friends, talked to the wrong guys, chose the worst possible temporary this and momentary that, and somehow ended up in the suburbs, of all places. I've had to double back, reroute, and start all over, repeatedly.

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I still need Google Maps to get around. I still have to check where the Green Line splits and whether the Red Line is delayed. But the panic and frustration of not knowing where I belong have softened. Maybe I've just gotten used to adapting to the unnatural. Somewhere along the way, the disorientation stopped feeling like a mistake and started feeling like a continuous journey. Or maybe I've simply grown crazy with the city.

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Missing an exit doesn't always mean you have to go home. Sometimes it just means you take the long way, and not even for the pretty sights, but because it's a part of the deal.

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