

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Chicago

In This Chapter

- ▶ Kicking back: Barbecue and the blues
- ▶ Seeing a show: Theater, opera and comedy
- ▶ Eating your way around town

*Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders*

—Carl Sandburg, “Chicago”

In this chapter, you get a sampling of the qualities that make Chicago the most American of American cities. Today, you'd hardly recognize Chicago by Sandburg's description. No longer home to stockyards, the city is a cosmopolitan, vibrant place. But Chicago retains its unique identity: big and brawling, inventive, and wonderfully diverse. Chicago is the least pretentious and most livable metropolis in the United States — and maybe the best to visit, too.

Some activities just say, “Chicago.” They're the quintessential Chicago experiences, and no visit is complete without them. Read on for some of the activities that make Chicago a special place to visit. Throughout the book, the Best of the Best icon is attached to those places or activities mentioned in this chapter.

The Best Hotels

Most Family Friendly: With cribs, laundry service, free hot breakfast, and every room a suite, the **Embassy Suites Hotel Chicago–Downtown/Lakefront** is ideal for families looking for more space than the typical

hotel room provides. The in-room Nintendo, indoor pool, and location near Navy Pier — plus hamburger joint P. J. Clarke's in the same building complex — should keep Junior happy, too.

Best Room with a View: This isn't an easy call. Peering over the elevated tracks, **The Silversmith** in the Loop offers a distinctly urban vista. But consider several other hotels for their mix of lake and city views: the **Four Seasons Hotel Chicago**, **The Drake**, the **Ritz-Carlton Chicago**, and **Park Hyatt Chicago**.

Best Bet for Romance: A hip hotel that's known for its sense of romance and whimsy is **Hotel Burnham**. During the holidays, you're right across the street from the world-famous windows at Macy's (formerly Marshall Field's) and within viewing distance of the massive Christmas tree at Daley Plaza. Inside, you get a feel for the handcrafted beauty of the former Reliance Insurance building, one of the city's first skyscrapers. Windows are huge — you won't feel left in the dark or cramped here. Rooms are clubby but glamorous, with plush beds, mahogany writing desks, and chaise longues.

Best Place to Splurge: You want luxury? You've *got* luxury at three of Chicago's hotels, which are among the best in the world. **The Peninsula Chicago** was named *Conde Nast Traveler's* "Number One Hotel in the World," in 2006, as well as *Travel + Leisure* magazine's 2006 "Number One Urban Hotel Spa." The attention to detail, regal pampering, and well-connected concierges you'll find at the ultra-luxe **Ritz-Carlton Chicago** and **Four Seasons Hotel Chicago** make them the hotels of choice for travelers who want to feel like royalty.

Best Place to Save a Buck: **Red Roof Inn Chicago Downtown** offers a fabulous location for a bargain price. But the **Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago-Downtown** gets bonus points for being a bargain stay and for having a pool.

Best Swimming Pool: With its dazzling, all-tile, junior Olympic-size pool constructed in 1929, the **InterContinental Chicago** takes this award easily.

For more information on the hotels listed in this section, see Chapter 9.

The Best Restaurants

Best New Restaurant: How can you give this title to any restaurant other than Grant Achatz's **Alinea**, named best restaurant in the nation by *Gourmet* magazine in 2006? Of course, if you don't have hundreds of dollars to drop on a meal, you may want to try something that's both well-recommended and affordable (but still hopping), such as **Avec**, which is garnering kudos from foodies nationwide for its Mediterranean small-plate dining. It's small, it's crowded (you share a table with other diners), but it's a truly unique experience.

Best View: A location right on the Magnificent Mile means **The Hancock Observatory** (Chapter 11) offers an up-close-and-personal view of the city from its observation deck. For lunch, visit the **Signature Room at the 95th**, a sleek restaurant that offers a delicious lunch buffet. On a clear day, you can see 50 miles and part of three surrounding states — Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin. (Ladies, make sure to visit the restroom — it's got the best views in the restaurant!)

Best Ice Cream: Since the 1920s, **Margie's Candies** has been serving mammoth sundaes in conch-shell-shaped dishes. Margie is gone now, but her husband, Peter, still mans the cash register. Don't miss the homemade hot fudge, real butterscotch, and caramel. The place is frozen in time — about 1940, to be exact — and is stuffed with kitschy dolls, boxes of homemade candy, stuffed animals, and news clippings from through the years.

Best Outdoor Dining: Long tables and family-style dining reign in **Greektown**, making it a comfortable, fun destination for families and large groups. At **Pegasus**, a rooftop garden affords diners a panoramic view of the Chicago skyline. The restaurant is so family- and large-group-oriented, that when I called to make a reservation for a group of ten, the host replied, "Ten is not a big group!" So there you have it.

Best Burger: The hamburger at **Mike Ditka's Restaurant** tastes more like chopped steak and can easily feed two. Sports fans will be entertained by football memorabilia, and Bears fans can relive the glory days of former coach Mike Ditka, who owns the place. Take your kids to the main dining room, though, because the bar vicinity tends to get a little foggy with cigar smoke.

Best Barbecue: At longtime city favorite **Carson's**, \$20 gets you a full slab (nearly 2 pounds' worth) of incredible baby-back ribs, accompanied by a bowl of Carson's almost-as-famous coleslaw and a choice of potatoes.

Best Vegetarian: Vegetarians and veggie lovers alike will delight in the twist on fine dining served up at **Green Zebra**. The restaurant features "small plates" of veggie specialties, such as fennel risotto cake with a syrah reduction, and Hawaiian heart of palm with Kaffir lime and Thai basil chile.

Best Beer Garden: Chicago's favorite hometown beer, **Goose Island**, has a wonderful brewery and restaurant with a fantastic beer garden that welcomes families, too. Sample some of the brews on tap (and Goose Island's own root beer, for those not imbibing).

Best Family-Style Dining: **Maggiano's** is a mecca for Italian family-style dining. Heaping plates of pasta meant to be shared make Maggiano's a good choice for a budget-conscious (and hungry!) family. Everything on the menu is super-sized. Most steaks are more than a pound, and the full pasta dishes weigh in at over 25 ounces. (You can also get half-portion:

You'd be amazed at how large even a 14-ounce portion of pasta can be! You're expected to share dishes, pass things around, and try a little bit of everything.

Best Hot Dog: Gold Coast Dogs, a River North fast-food stand, serves up the authentic item, meaning a Vienna All-Beef Frank slathered with mustard, green relish, chopped onion, sliced tomato, hot peppers, and celery salt. Your kids may be brave enough to ask for and receive ketchup, but as an adult, I wouldn't risk the disapproving, raised-eyebrow look you'll get from the counter staff. You can round out the meal with cheese fries, made from Idaho potatoes and topped with a generous glob of Wisconsin cheddar.

Best Pizza: In the town where deep-dish pies were born, Chicagoans take their out-of-town relatives to **Gino's East** or **Lou Malnati's** to taste the real thing: mouthwatering slabs of pizza loaded with fresh ingredients atop delectably sweet crusts. Lou's fan base is so enamored that the restaurant has instituted a popular overnight mail-order business to get expat Chicagoans with a deep-dish jones over the hump.

Best Fast Food: Even though you're in the hometown of McDonald's, my vote goes to **foodlife** in Water Tower Place, a food court exemplar with everything from Asian noodles to pizza to smoothies.

Best Brunch: Cajun and Southern cooking is in store for you at **Wishbone**. Outsider art, bright colors, and a bustling crowd make this a great place for kids. A diverse crowd, from Harpo Studios employees (Oprah is headquartered around the corner) to businesspeople in suits and ad-agency types, frequent the place. For brunch, try the salmon cakes.

Best Neighborhood Hangout: Stanley's is a classic Lincoln Park restaurant with a family-friendly bent. When you walk in, there's a bar, but the adjacent dining room feels as though you've entered someone's family room, decorated with photos, quilts, bowling trophies, and children's drawings. On Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., there's an all-you-can-eat brunch buffet, featuring make-your-own omelets, build-your-own-Belgian waffles, home-fried potatoes, fried chicken, and mashed potatoes. Daily specials are posted on the chalkboard out front.

For more information on the restaurants listed in this section, see Chapter 10.

The Best Museums

Best Museum for Older Children: Yes, the biggest *T. rex* fossil ever unearthed resides at Chicago's **Field Museum of Natural History**. As long as you're going to see "Sue" (if you're on a first-name basis with the famous *T. rex*), you can check out an entire "campus" of museums nearby, including the **Adler Planetarium & Astronomy Museum** and

the **John G. Shedd Aquarium**. Farther south in Hyde Park, the incomparable **Museum of Science and Industry** wows kids and adults with a real-life U-boat submarine that's been completely refurbished and placed in a new indoor exhibit, as well as an airplane, an ant colony, a dollhouse, and more.

Best Museum for Younger Children: The **Shedd**, the nation's largest (and oldest) indoor aquarium, is housed in a spectacular 1929 Beaux Arts structure. The aquarium revamped and improved facilities to celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2005.

Best Art Museum: Downtown, the **Art Institute of Chicago** is a great starting point for seeing masterpieces.

Best Museum for Exploring the Outdoors Indoors: Located in Lincoln Park, the **Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum** is an environmental museum for the 21st century and boasts kid-friendly hands-on exhibits.

For more information on the museums in this section, see Chapter 11.

The Best Nature

Best Park: The city's latest and greatest urban project welcomed flocks of visitors in its first month alone, and for good reason. The 25-acre **Millennium Park** sets a new standard for what an urban park can be. With sculptures you can touch and feel (and in one case, splash around in), it's also home to a spectacular Frank Gehry-designed band shell and pedestrian bridge. And of course, the sentimental favorite is **Lincoln Park**, worth at least a few hours' stroll.

Best Golf Course: Within Grant Park on Monroe Street between Columbus and Lake Shore drives, you may want to putt around at **The Green at Grant Park**, an 18-hole putting course (and with its beautifully landscaped greens, you'll recognize immediately that this is *not* your usual miniature-golf course).

Best Beach: In Lincoln Park, stroll the lakefront path, and whether you're coming from the north or south, eventually, you'll see the North Avenue pedestrian bridge that crosses Lake Shore Drive. Walk over the lanes of traffic, and you'll find Chicago's number-one summer-fun destination: **North Avenue Beach**. Join Chicagoans at the lake in a game of beach volleyball, or simply walk, run, or relax.

Best View: Lively, renovated **Navy Pier** has become the city's number-one tourist destination over the last decade. The view as you walk out on the pier, and then turn and watch the city glimmer in the twilight, is among the best in the world.

For more information on the listings in this section, see Chapters 11 and 14.

Second City, Third Coast

Although it may surprise residents of the first two coasts (East and West, that is), Chicagoans consider themselves residents of the Third Coast — Lake Michigan's shore. Thanks to the foresight of city founders who, in 1836, wrote that the lakefront was a public ground "to remain forever open, clear, and free" from construction, the shore has no warehouses or shipping docks. More than half of Chicago's 2,800 acres of lakefront were created by filling in the lake and building a string of splendid lakeshore parks. The result? Thirty miles of sand beaches, green lawns, beds of flowers, and bicycle paths.

The Best Culture

Best Opera: A perennial favorite is the **Lyric Opera**, one of the nation's best opera companies, which amazes with top-notch productions at the Civic Opera House on the banks of the Chicago River in the Loop. The opera sells out every performance, but don't worry: Subscription holders hand in unused tickets before the performance, so you can still get some great seats if you know where to look.

Best Symphony: Now under the direction of Dutch-born principal conductor Bernard Haitink (well-known conductor Daniel Barenboim's term ended in 2006), the **Chicago Symphony Orchestra** is world-class.

Best Ballet: Chicago has adopted the **Joffrey Ballet**, which does a sumptuous production of *The Nutcracker* each holiday season in the spectacular setting of the Auditorium Theatre, one of Chicago's architectural gems.

Best Theater: Excellent theater companies include the **Goodman**, **Steppenwolf**, and **Victory Gardens** theaters. Steppenwolf, in Lincoln Park, focuses on new American works, as well as adaptations and reconsidered revivals of older plays. The Goodman has a more traditional repertoire and includes some musicals each season. Victory Gardens stages world-premier plays, which the rest of the U.S. theater scene keeps an eye on, in a new home, the former **Biograph Theater** in Lincoln Park. Other theater highlights include the refurbished **Oriental** and **Palace** theaters and two top-notch facilities in their respective genres, the **Chicago Shakespeare Theater** on Navy Pier and the **Old Town School of Folk Music theater and education center**, which presents traditional and contemporary folk music from around the world.



If you skip Chicago's theater scene, you just may miss out on the next Broadway hit. Two of the most widely applauded Broadway productions of the past few years started at the Goodman Theater: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, starring Brian Dennehy, and Eugene O'Neill's *Moon*

for the *Misbegotten*, with Cherry Jones and Gabriel Byrne. *The Producers*, starring Matthew Broderick and Nathan Lane, debuted in Chicago before taking New York by storm.

Best Comedy: Nobody does comedy better than **The Second City**, a training ground for comedians such as John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, and Chris Farley. Other companies are on the rise: Improv fans should also check out **ImprovOlympics**, located near Wrigley Field, for cutting-edge comedy performed by teams.

For more information on the performing arts events listed in this section, refer to Chapters 15 and 16.

The Best Live Music

Best Blues: Chicago is the blues capital of the world. And if you get to know this style of music, you may gain a greater appreciation for other popular forms, such as jazz and rock 'n' roll. Nothing is quite as sweet as hanging out at **Buddy Guy's Legends** on a Thursday night and discovering that the man seated next to you is B. B. King's drummer, visiting Chicago on a rare night off. Even if you don't love the blues, do yourself a favor and check it out when you're here.

Best Rock: You can't do better than **Metro**, housed on North Clark Street in an old theater (they just removed all the seats). It's one of Chicago's best live-music venues, intimate but not too small, and the launching pad for great local bands gone international, like the Smashing Pumpkins and Ministry.

Best Small Venues: One of the city's most intimate rooms for live music is at **Schuba's Tavern and the Harmony Grill** on North Southport Avenue. The style here is eclectic, with sounds ranging from rock to funk to the occasional mariachi band. You'll find everything from local bands on their way up to national acts still loyal to Schuba's. It's general admission (mostly standing, with some seats) and has the added bonus of having the Harmony Grill connected to it — this atmospheric former Schlitz Brewery tap house built around 1900 still offers Schlitz beer in bottles.

Best Eclectic Music: **Elbo Room** is one of the top venues for music in the city, located on North Lincoln Avenue. Upstairs, there's a cocktail lounge with a full bar. Downstairs, you'll find the stage, with seating along the walls. It's sweaty, crowded, and filled with lovers of live music from ska to hip-hop.

For more information on music venues, head to Chapter 16.