

The Best of Chicago

Like any great city, Chicago's got something for everyone, whether your tastes run toward world-famous museums and blow-your-budget luxury hotels or family-friendly lodgings and low-key neighborhood restaurants. Narrowing down your choices may seem daunting, but never fear: Here's your cheat sheet to the very best of the city, the places where I send out-of-town friends and relatives when they want to experience the "real" Chicago. Some are well-known tourist attractions, others insider secrets, but all are places and experiences that truly sum up this town. Happy exploring!

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Studying the Skyline:** The birthplace of the modern skyscraper, Chicago is the perfect place to learn about—and appreciate—these dramatic buildings. If you're only in town for a short time, get a quick skyscraper fix by strolling through the heart of downtown, known as the Loop, where you'll be surrounded by canyons of stone, concrete, and glass. (To get the full urban experience, visit on a weekday, when the streets are bustling.) If you have more time, take an architectural tour by foot, bus, bike, or boat. See "Sightseeing Tours," p. 193.
- **Chilling Out on the Lakefront:** It really is cooler by the lake (both meteorologically and metaphorically), and we Chicagoans treat the Lake Michigan waterfront as our personal playground. Miles of parkland hug the shoreline; walk to Monroe Harbor for picture-perfect views of downtown or join active Lincoln Park singles for biking or jogging farther north. For an even better look at the city, get out on the water. At Navy Pier, you can board a vessel that's just your speed, from a powerboat to a tall-masted schooner. See "Staying Active," p. 199.
- **Riding the Rails:** Find out why the Loop is so named by hopping a Brown Line elevated train (or "the El," for short). Watch the city unfold as the train crosses the Chicago River and screeches past downtown high-rises. Half the fun is peeping into the windows of offices and homes as you speed by. (Don't feel guilty—we all do it!) See "Getting Around," p. 41, and "Sightseeing Tours," p. 193.
- **Escaping Downtown:** Local politicians like to refer to Chicago as "a city of neighborhoods"—and in this case, they're telling the truth. You won't really experience Chicago unless you leave downtown and explore some residential areas, whether it's the historic wood-framed homes in Old Town or the eclectic boutiques of Wicker Park. It's one of the best ways to get a feeling for how the people here actually live, from Latino families in Pilsen to gay couples on Halsted Street. See "Neighborhoods in Brief," p. 56.

2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **Four Seasons** (120 E. Delaware Place; ☎ 800/332-3442; www.fourseasons.com): Appropriately enough in this skyscraper-packed city, some of the best hotels perch far above the sidewalk. The Four Seasons (as well as the Ritz-Carlton; see below) is tucked above a high-rise shopping mall on Michigan Avenue. A favorite among camera-shy celebrities who want to keep a low profile, the hotel exudes understated luxury. Expect discretion, not a lively lobby scene. Where the Four Seasons really shines is its service—the concierges might be the best in town. The clubby full-service spa provides on-site pampering, for a price. See p. 76.
- **Park Hyatt** (800 N. Michigan Ave.; ☎ 800/233-1234; www.parkchicago.hyatt.com): If the thought of overstuffed couches and thick brocade curtains makes you wince, this is the hotel for you. With its focus on modern design and clean lines, the Park Hyatt feels like one of those cool urban spaces featured in *Architectural Digest*. Reproductions of Eames and Mies furniture fill the guest rooms, and the in-room electronics are similarly sleek. The coolest feature? Moveable bathroom walls that allow you to soak in the view while you lounge in the tub. See p. 76.
- **Peninsula** (108 E. Superior St.; ☎ 866/288-8889; www.chicago.peninsula.com): Inspired by the elegance of 1920s Shanghai and Hong Kong, the Chicago outpost of this Asian chain is a seamless blend of classic and modern. The grand public spaces may be a throwback to the past, but the hotel's amenities are ultramodern. Bedrooms and bathrooms feature “command stations” that allow you to adjust lights, temperature, and TVs without getting up. The top-notch gym, spa, and indoor swimming pool (filled with natural light) make the Peninsula a must for fitness fanatics. See p. 78.
- **The Ritz-Carlton Chicago** (160 E. Pearson St.; ☎ 800/621-6906; www.fourseasons.com/chicagorc): Located above the Water Tower Place shopping center, the Ritz has one of the most welcoming lobbies in town, with light streaming through the windows, masses of fresh flowers, and bird's-eye views of the city. The guest rooms, decorated in warm shades of yellow and blue, have European-style elegance, and the staff prides itself on granting every wish. See p. 78.
- **W Chicago Lakeshore** (644 N. Lake Shore Dr.; ☎ 877/W-HOTELS or 877/946-8357; www.whotels.com): The city's only hotel with a lakefront address may try a little too hard to be hip, but it offers a nightclubby vibe that sets it apart from the many cookie-cutter convention-friendly hotels in town. (The rates are substantially lower than those at the hotels listed above, but the W is still a splurge for thrifty travelers.) The color scheme in the rooms—shades of gray, black, and deep red—is a refreshing change from the chain hotel look (although they won't appeal to guests who like things light and airy). The top-floor Whiskey Sky bar is cramped, but good for people-watching, and the outpost of New York's trendy Bliss spa is a must-visit for beauty junkies. See p. 80.

3 THE BEST MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Hotel Allegro Chicago** (171 W. Randolph St.; ☎ 800/643-1500; www.allegrochicago.com): Its prime Loop location and stylish decor make the Allegro an appealing home base for visitors in search of an urban getaway. Rooms are compact but cheerful, and you can mingle with other guests at the complimentary evening wine reception in the lobby. See p. 74.
- **Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago Downtown** (33 W. Illinois St.; ☎ 800/HAMPTON or 800/426-7866; www.hamptoninn.com): Located in a busy neighborhood full of restaurants and nightlife, the Hampton Inn feels more expensive than it is. The rooms have an upscale urban look, and the indoor pool is a draw for families. The hotel's hot breakfast buffet, included in the room rates and served in an attractive second-floor lounge, puts the standard coffee-and-doughnut spread at other motels to shame. See p. 86.
- **Red Roof Inn** (162 E. Ontario St.; ☎ 800/733-7663; www.redroof-chicago-downtown.com): This high-rise version of the roadside motel is your best bet for the cheapest rates downtown. The rooms don't have much in the way of style (or natural light), and the bathrooms, though spotless, are a little cramped, but it fits the bill if you want a central location and plan on using your hotel as a place to sleep rather than hang out. See p. 83.
- **Majestic Hotel** (528 W. Brompton St.; ☎ 800/727-5108; www.cityinns.com): A bit off the beaten path, this neighborhood hotel is tucked away on a residential street just a short walk from Wrigley Field and the lakefront. You won't find lots of fancy amenities, but the atmosphere here has the personal touch of a B&B. Rates include continental breakfast and afternoon tea in the lobby. See p. 89.

4 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Charlie Trotter's** (816 W. Armitage Ave.; ☎ 773/248-6228): Charlie Trotter is the city's original celebrity chef, and his intimate restaurant, inside a town house, is a must for foodie visitors. The formula may be rigid (tasting menus only), but the food is anything but: Fresh-as-can-be ingredients in dazzling combinations. The service lives up to Trotter's legendary perfectionism; the chef himself has been known to come out of the kitchen and ask diners why they didn't finish a certain dish. See p. 136.

Impressions

We were on one of the most glamorous corners of Chicago. I dwelt on the setting. The lakeshore view was stupendous. I couldn't see it but I knew it well and felt its effect—the shining road beside the shining gold vacancy of Lake Michigan. Man had overcome the emptiness of this land. But the emptiness had given him a few good licks in return.

—Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift*, 1975

- **Alinea** (1723 N. Halsted St.; © 312/867-0110): Widely considered the town's top restaurant of the moment, Alinea has gotten national press for chef Grant Achatz's revolutionary twist on contemporary dining. Each course of the ever-changing prix-fixe menu showcases Achatz's creativity, whether it's duck served on a scented "pillow" of juniper or a complete reinvention of wine and cheese (frozen grape juice rolled in grated bleu cheese and served with red wine gelée). An added bonus: Service that's friendly, not snobby. See p. 136.
- **Gibsons Bar & Steakhouse** (1028 N. Rush St.; © 312/266-8999): Chicago has no shortage of great steakhouses, but Gibsons has a great scene, too—a mix of moneyed Gold Coast singles, expense-account-fueled business travelers, and the occasional celebrity. This is the kind of place to live large (literally). The portions are enormous, so you're

encouraged to share, which only adds to the party atmosphere. See p. 114.

- **foodlife** (Water Tower Place, 835 N. Michigan Ave.; © 312/335-3663): This is my top pick for a quick, affordable, family-friendly meal downtown. Leaps and bounds beyond the standard mall food court, foodlife offers a wide range of non-chain food stations at affordable prices. Get everything from Asian noodles and vegetarian fare to more standard options such as pizza and burgers. See p. 119.
- **The Italian Village** (71 W. Monroe St.; © 312/332-7005): The old-school fettuccine alfredo won't win any culinary awards, but eating at this Chicago landmark is like taking a trip back in time, from the so-tacky-they're-cool twinkling stars on the ceiling to the vintage waiters (some of whom look like they've been working here since the place opened in 1927). See p. 104.

5 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **Art Institute of Chicago** (111 S. Michigan Ave.; © 312/443-3600): A must-see for art lovers, the Art Institute manages to combine blockbuster exhibits with smaller, uncrowded spaces for private meditation. Internationally known for its French Impressionist collection, the Art Institute can also transport you to Renaissance Italy, ancient China, or the world of the Old Masters. The dazzling, light-filled Modern Wing, added in 2009, has also given the museum's 20th-century modern art collection the setting it deserves. See p. 152.
- **Field Museum of Natural History** (Roosevelt Rd. and Lake Shore Dr.; © 312/922-9410): The grand neoclassical entrance hall will make you feel as if you've entered somewhere important, a sense of drama only enhanced by the

towering figure of Sue, the largest *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton ever uncovered. The Field can easily entertain for an entire day. Exhibits include ancient Egyptian mummies, a full-size Maori Meeting House, and stuffed figures of the notorious man-eating lions of Tsavo. See p. 163.

- **John G. Shedd Aquarium** (1200 S. Lake Shore Dr.; © 312/939-2438): Sure, you'll find plenty of tanks filled with exotic fish, but the Shedd is also home to some wonderful large-scale recreations of natural habitats. Stroll through Wild Reef, and you'll see sharks swim overhead. The lovely Oceanarium (renovated in 2009 with a Polar Play Zone for the kids), where you can watch a dolphin show, features floor-to-ceiling windows; you'll feel as if

you're sitting outdoors, even on the chilliest Chicago day. See p. 164.

- **Museum of Science and Industry** (57th St. and Lake Shore Dr.; ☎ 800/468-6674): You can come here year after year and still not see it all. Although the exhibits promote scientific knowledge, most have an interactive element that makes them especially fun for families. But it's not all computers and technology. Some of the classic exhibits—the underground re-creation of the coal mine and the World War II German U-boat—have been attracting crowds for generations. See p. 175.

- **Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio** (951 Chicago Ave., Oak Park; ☎ 708/848-1976): The Midwest's greatest architect started out in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, and his house—now a museum with guided tours—gives a first-hand look at his genius and influence. The surrounding neighborhood, where Wright's Prairie-style homes sit side by side with rambling Victorian villas, is an eye-opening lesson in architectural history. See p. 184.

6 THE BEST NIGHTLIFE EXPERIENCES

- **Getting the Blues:** Here, in the world capital of the blues, you've got your pick of places to feel them, from the touristy but lively atmosphere of Kingston Mines in Lincoln Park, where musicians perform continuously on two stages, to the roadhouse feel of Buddy Guy's Legends, where musicians in town while on tour have been known to play impromptu sets. See "The Music Scene," p. 262.
- **Taking in a Show:** The stage lights rarely go dark on one of the country's busiest theater scenes. Chicago is home to a downtown Broadway-style district anchored by beautifully restored historic theaters, the nationally known Goodman Theatre, and the city's resident Shakespeare troupe. Beyond downtown, you'll find a number of innovative independent companies, where future stars get their big breaks

and the pure love of theater makes up for the low budgets. See "The Performing Arts," p. 246.

- **Taking in Some Cool Jazz at the Green Mill:** This atmospheric Uptown jazz club is the place to go to soak up smooth sounds from some of the hottest up-and-coming performers on the jazz scene, while the club itself is a living museum of 1930s Chicago. The Sunday night "Poetry Slam" is a big crowd-pleaser. See p. 262.
- **Watching Improv Come Alive:** Chicago is a comedy breeding ground, having launched the careers of John Belushi, Bill Murray, Mike Myers, and Tina Fey through improv hot spots such as Second City and iO. The shows may soar or crash, but you just might catch one of comedy's newest stars. See p. 259.

7 THE BEST PLACES TO HANG WITH THE LOCALS

- **Shopping the Town:** Michigan Avenue is often touted as a shopper's paradise,

and I'll admit it has a great lineup of big-name designer boutiques and

multilevel high-end shopping malls. But that's all stuff you can find in any other big city. For more distinctive items, head to Chicago's residential districts, where trendy independent clothing boutiques sit next to eclectic home design stores filled with one-of-a-kind treasures. The home decor shops along Armitage Avenue cater to stylish young families with plenty of spending money, while Wicker Park and Bucktown attract edgy fashionistas with a range of funky clothing shops. Southport Avenue (near Wrigley Field) and West Division Street (south of Wicker Park) are the newest up-and-coming shopping meccas—with no nametag-wearing conventioners in sight. See chapter 9.

- **Soaking Up Sun at Wrigley Field:** It's a Chicago tradition to play hooky for an afternoon, sit in the bleachers at this historic baseball park, and watch the Cubbies try to hit 'em onto Waveland Avenue. Despite being perennial losers, the Cubs sell out almost every game; your best bet is to buy tickets for a weekday afternoon (although you'll often find season ticket holders selling seats at face value in front of Wrigley right before a game). Even if you can't get in, you can still soak in the atmosphere at one of the neighborhood's many watering holes. See "In the Grandstand: Watching Chicago's Athletic Events," p. 202.
- **Playing in the Sand:** If you're staying at a downtown hotel, you can hit the sands of Chicago's urban beaches almost

as quickly as your elevator gets you to the lobby. Oak Street Beach (at Michigan Ave. and Lake Shore Dr.) is mostly for posing. North Avenue Beach, a little farther north along the lakefront path, is home to weekend volleyball games, family beach outings, and a whole lot of eye candy. You probably won't do any swimming (even in the middle of summer, the water's frigid), but either beach makes a great place to hang out with a picnic and a book on a warm afternoon. See "Beaches," p. 199.

- **Raising a Glass (or a Coffee Cup):** Chicago has its share of trendy lounges that serve overpriced specialty martinis, but the heart of the city's nightlife remains the neighborhood taverns. These are the places you can soak in a convivial atmosphere without attitude or self-consciously flashy decor, but also have a conversation without being drowned out by the hoots and hollers of drunken frat boys (although there are plenty of bars catering to that particular demographic). My favorites include **Celtic Crossings** (751 N. Clark St.; ☎ 312/337-1005) in River North, **Miller's Pub** (134 S. Wabash Ave.; ☎ 312/645-5377) in the Loop, and the **Map Room** (1949 N. Hoyne Ave.; ☎ 773/252-7636) in Bucktown. If you prefer to keep things nonalcoholic, grab coffee and dessert at either of my two favorite cafes: **Third Coast** (1260 N. Dearborn St.; ☎ 312/649-0730), on the Gold Coast, or **Uncommon Ground** (1214 W. Grace St.; ☎ 773/929-3680) in Wrigleyville. See chapter 10.

8 THE BEST FREE (OR ALMOST FREE) THINGS TO DO

- **Exploring Millennium Park:** This downtown park, carved out of the northwest corner of Grant Park, has become one of the city's best spots for

strolling, hanging out, and people-watching (**Bonus:** It's an easy walk from downtown hotels). While the Pritzker Music Pavilion, designed by Frank

Gehry, is the highest-profile attraction, the park's two main sculptures have quickly become local favorites. *Cloud Gate*, by British sculptor Anish Kapoor, looks like a giant silver kidney bean; watch your reflection bend and distort as you walk around and underneath. The *Crown Fountain*, designed by Spanish sculptor Jaume Plensa, is framed by two giant video screens that project faces of ordinary Chicagoans. It looks a little creepy at first, but watch the kids splashing in the shallow water and you'll soon realize that this is public art at its best. See p. 156.

- **Bonding with the Animals at Lincoln Park Zoo:** You have no excuse not to visit: Lincoln Park Zoo is open 365 days a year and—astonishingly—remains completely free, despite many recent upgrades. Occupying a prime spot of Lincoln Park close to the lake-front, the zoo is small enough to explore in an afternoon, and varied enough to make you feel as though you've traveled around the world. For families, this is a don't-miss stop. See p. 170.
- **Listening to Music Under the Stars:** Summer is prime time for live music—

and often you won't have to pay a dime. The Grant Park Music Festival presents free classical concerts from June through August in Millennium Park. A few blocks south, you'll find the outdoor dance floor that's home to Chicago SummerDance, where you can learn new dance moves and swing to a variety of live acts on Thursday through Sunday nights. The summer also brings a range of large-scale music festivals—from Blues Fest to a rock-'n'-roll-themed Fourth of July concert—but the Grant Park classical concerts are considerably less crowded (and far more civilized). See "Classical Music," p. 248.

- **Discovering Future Masterpieces:** Chicago's vibrant contemporary art scene is divided between two different neighborhoods. The original, River North, is still home to many of the city's best-known galleries and is within walking distance from downtown hotels. The West Loop houses newer galleries—with, overall, a younger perspective—in freshly renovated lofts. You don't need to be a serious collector to browse; just bring an open mind. See "Art Galleries" in chapter 9.

9 THE BEST ONE-OF-A-KIND SHOPS

- **ArchiCenter Shop** (224 S. Michigan Ave.; ☎ 312/922-3432): Looking for unique, well-designed souvenirs? This store, run by the Chicago Architecture Foundation, should be your first stop. You'll find Frank Lloyd Wright book-marks, puzzles of the Chicago skyline, picture frames with patterns designed by famed local architect Louis Sullivan, and a great selection of Chicago history books. See p. 242.
- **Uncle Fun** (1338 W. Belmont Ave.; ☎ 773/477-8223): No other place lives up to its name like Uncle Fun, one of the quirkiest shops in town. This

old-fashioned storefront is crammed with a random assortment of classic dime-store gadgets (hand buzzers, Pez dispensers, rubber chickens), along with an equally eclectic selection of retro bargain-bin items. (Where else can you pick up a Mr. T keychain?). See p. 235.

- **The T-Shirt Deli** (1739 N. Damen Ave.; ☎ 773/276-6266): Got a soft spot for those cheesy 1970s "Foxy Lady" T-shirts? Head to the T-Shirt Deli, where the staff will customize shirts while you wait. Come up with your own message, or browse the hundreds of

Impressions

He glances at the new Civic Center, a tower of russet steel and glass, fronted by a gracious plaza with a fountain and a genuine Picasso-designed metalwork sculpture almost fifty feet high. He put it all there, the Civic Center, the plaza, the Picasso. And the judges and county officials who work in the Civic Center, he put most of them there, too.

Wherever he looks as he marches, there are new skyscrapers up or going up. The city has become an architect's delight, except when the architects see the great Louis Sullivan's landmark buildings being ripped down for parking garages or allowed to degenerate into slums.

—Mike Royko, *Boss: Richard J. Daley of Chicago*, 1971

in-stock iron-on decals (everything from Gary Coleman to Hello Kitty). And just like at a real deli, your purchase is wrapped in white paper and served with a bag of potato chips. See p. 235.

- **Architectural Artifacts, Inc.** (4325 N. Ravenswood Ave.; ☎ 773/348-0622): This vast warehouse of material salvaged

from historic buildings is a home renovator's dream. Although it's far off the usual tourist route, design buffs will find it well worth the trip—the enormous inventory includes fireplace mantels, stained glass windows, and garden sculptures. The owners display pieces of particular historic value in an attached museum. See p. 228.

10 THE BEST CHICAGO WEBSITES

- **Metromix** (www.chicago.metromix.com): Operated by the *Chicago Tribune*, this site features expanded versions of the newspaper's entertainment and restaurant coverage. It's a good place to check reviews and get an early look at new bars and nightclubs.
- **The Chicago Reader** (www.chicagoreader.com): The site of the city's alternative weekly paper is the place to find extensive coverage of the local music scene and reviews of smaller theater productions.
- **Chicago Landmarks** (www.cityofchicago.org/Landmarks/index.html): This site, part of the city government's official website, includes definitions of Chicago architectural styles, tour information, and maps.
- **Chicago Office of Tourism** (www.explorechicago.org): This local government site gives a good overview of festivals, parades, and other upcoming events in town.
- **Chicagoist** (www.chicagoist.com): Want to see what issues have Chicagoans riled up? Check out this sounding board for local news (an offshoot of the New York-centric site *Gothamist.com*), which covers everything from government corruption scandals to the latest celebrity sightings. You'll find a similar roundup of news, local gossip, and opinion pieces at the online magazine *Gapers Block* (www.gapersblock.com).
- **LTH Forum** (www.lthforum.com/bb/index.php): Local foodies come to this

bulletin board to get the scoop on hot new restaurant openings. The site also keeps a running list of “Great Neighborhood Restaurants,” if you’re looking for places with character rather than buzz.

- **League of Chicago Theatres** (www.chicagoplays.com): If you’re planning to catch a show while in town, visit this comprehensive theater site, where you can search specific dates to see what’s playing.