



Some of the greatest Chicago experiences—like the “Cloud Gate” sculpture in Millennium Park (see p. 100)—will let you see a whole new side of yourself.

BEST OF FREE & DIRT CHEAP CHICAGO

Three things I already know about you: 1) You are the savviest of savvy travelers because you know that travel is not about how much money you spend, but about how many experiences you bank; 2) You are willing to go off the beaten track in search of a cheap or free adventure; and 3) You never, ever pay full price. It's practically a religion with you.

Okay, these are just guesses, albeit educated ones (you bought this book, didn't you?). Here's another educated guess: You're going to love Chicago. Many of the natives see eye-to-eye with you. We know a good bargain when we see one, and we flock to enjoy those attractions

and events en masse. In Chicago, you can experience what amounts to a real urban miracle: open-air concerts that are free and fabulous; the best architecture in the world, free for the gazing; a new interactive park that's become the city's "front lawn"; and a lakefront that was declared "forever open, clear, and free" by our city's founders.

Visiting Chicago on a dime and a prayer? Taking a family vacation on a shoestring budget? Moving here to get your life started, or to start over? Welcome aboard. You have found yourself in a city that not only embraces, but celebrates, the free and dirt cheap philosophy. What follows are the best of the best dirt cheap and free experiences in Chicago.

1 Best Free Only-in-Chicago Experiences

- **Best Way to Feel like a Real Chicagoan:** Strolling, biking, running, or simply sitting and gazing at the scene on the **lakefront**. Unless you have actually walked down the Magnificent Mile, one of the best shopping districts in the world, through the pedestrian tunnel, and onto Oak Street Beach—a veritable Club Med atmosphere in the summer—you haven't experienced one of the most unique aspects of living in Chicago. Kick off your shoes, step into flip-flops and shorts, and head to the beach for a game of pick-up volleyball. I guarantee you'll be enamored of summer in the city faster than you can say, "That's a lake? But you can't see across it!" See p. 100.
- **Best Open-Air Dancing:** Chicago natives learn to salsa, mambo, or swing dance under

the stars at **Chicago Summer-Dance**. Now in its 13th year, the hugely popular, annual 11-week dance festival runs from June to September and takes place in the **Spirit of Music Garden** (601 S. Michigan Ave.) in Grant Park. Free, 1-hour dance lessons from professional instructors are followed by 2 hours of live music and dancing on a 4,600-square-foot open-air dance floor. Top-notch bands play everything from swing, salsa, and afrobeat to reggae, funk, and klezmer. In an informal survey of friends, SummerDance ranked as the number-one free activity in the city. Why not join in the fun? SummerDance events occur every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evening, 6 to 9:30pm, and Sunday afternoon, 4 to 7pm, weather permitting.

Admission is free and open to the public. See p. 188.

- **Most Bang for Your Buck:**

Twice weekly, from late May to early September, there's a free **fireworks display** at Navy Pier, Wednesdays at 9:30pm and Saturdays at 10:15pm. Fireworks also take place for special events the rest of the year; for exact times and dates, check out www.navypier.com. When the weather is fine, grab a beverage at one of the Navy Pier outdoor beer gardens and enjoy the view. Even better, combine my previous recommendation with this one, and check out Chicago **SummerDance at Navy Pier** for live music, dancing, and the best view of the fireworks—hands-down one of the best free-and-cheap date nights in the city. In 2009, there were three different SummerDance evenings at the Navy Pier beer garden. Lessons are from 6 to 7pm, dancing from 7:30 to 10pm, and fireworks at 9:30pm. See p. 102.

- **Best Neighborhood Festival:**

Garden walks are a summer tradition in Chicago; what began as a chance to tour backyard gardens has grown to become a number of huge street festivals with food, drink, games, and more. The **Sheffield**

Garden Walk (www.sheffieldfestivals.org), which takes place in mid-July in Lincoln Park, is one of the largest and best organized. The **Dearborn Garden Walk** (www.dearborngardenwalk.com) allows rare glimpses into the good life on the Gold Coast, also on a weekend in mid-July. Pick up a map and take a self-guided, free tour of the gardens, and see how the other half lives. See p. 104.

- **Best Pageantry: Venetian Night**

During the last weekend in July, approximately 35 boats decked out in lights and props sail along the shoreline of Lake Michigan, between the Shedd Aquarium at Roosevelt Road and the Chicago Yacht Club at Monroe Street. It's a bit like a floating parade, and it gets a little crazy. People of all ages stake out spots along the lakefront as early as 9am to ensure a good view of the event. Venetian Night is the longest running event that the City of Chicago produces, and attracts about 675,000 spectators—so public transportation, walking, or biking to Venetian Night is suggested. See p. 105.

- **Best Stroll: Lincoln Park Zoo**

(2200 N. Cannon; ☎ **312/742-2000**) is a free, beautiful green oasis in the heart of the city, and it's open 365 days a year.

This is the ideal place to take the kids, or just take a stroll. Not to be missed during your stroll: The Kovler Lion House, an architecturally beautiful interior, with an up-close view of the big cats (don't worry, there are vertical wires separating you and that jaguar!). See p. 102.

- **Best Place to Escape Chicago's Winters: Garfield Conservatory** (300 N. Central Park; ☎ 312/746-5100) offers the only city-run indoor playground for kids. Add in the array of amazing blooms on display, and you have an unbeatable combination (the Spring Flower Show in April is especially inspiring after a long Chicago winter). The conservatory was designed by the great landscape architect Jens Jensen in 1907, and is one of the largest gardens under glass in the world. Admission is free, but make sure to play it safe when traveling here, as the conservatory is located in a blighted neighborhood. If you drive (the conservatory is located just 10 min. west of downtown Chicago), there's free parking adjacent to the conservatory, just to the south, and it's manned by security. Or, take the CTA Green Line to the Conservatory-Central Park Drive

station. The conservatory is open every day, and always free. Hours are 9am to 5pm, and on Wednesdays, it's open 9am to 8pm. See p. 106.

- **Best Totally Free Architectural Tour:** Sure, you can pay \$15 to tour Frank Lloyd Wright's Home and Studio in Oak Park, but you can walk the surrounding neighborhood for free. Oak Park is home to the world's largest collection of Wright-designed buildings, so set out and explore the Historic District surrounding the Home and Studio at your own pace, and marvel at the exteriors of a wide selection of Wright-designed, Prairie-style, and Victorian homes (you know, the ones that drove Frank Lloyd Wright crazy with their traditional styling). See p. 106.
- **Best Open-Air Concert Series:** Chicago is the last city in America to still present a free, open-air, professional series of orchestral concerts each summer. The **Grant Park Music Festival** takes place at the glorious Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. You won't believe how fantastic the sound system is until you hear it with your own ears. Started during the Depression to lift Chicagoans' spirits, the Festival features

the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus. The Festival is still lifting spirits today: Lawn and general seating is free—no tickets necessary. Get there an hour before the concert starts to claim a good spot on the lawn. See p. 103.

- **Best Free Ride:** Navy Pier offers daily **free trolley service** between Navy Pier and State Street along Grand Avenue and Illinois Street. Hop on and hop off along the way, and laugh along as the drivers regale riders with entertaining Chicago stories. Start at the Grand Avenue subway station (at State St.). Runs Memorial Day to Labor Day, Sunday through Thursday 10am to 11pm, Friday and Saturday 10am to 1am. See p. 285.

- **Best Historic Adventure:** If you spook easily, this place is best avoided (particularly at dusk on Oct. 31, for example), but at any other time of year, **Graceland Cemetery** is full of amazing Chicago history lessons—all free. I, for one, am a huge fan of visiting cemeteries when I travel, and I don't think I'm alone in this sort-of strange obsession. Make sure to stop by the administrative office for a map of notable graves and a brochure. Chicago notables Potter Palmer, Marshall Field, George Pullman, Cyrus McCormick, and more have graves here. Don't miss the final resting place of Daniel Burnham, who got an island all to himself, on the edge of a beautiful pond. See p. 111.

2 Best Dirt Cheap Only-in-Chicago Experiences

- **Best Cheap Cruise:** A bona fide cruise on the Chicago River and Lake Michigan will set you back nearly \$50. But, hitch a ride on the Chicago Water Taxi and you'll pay only \$2 to cruise the Chicago River from the Loop to Michigan Avenue. Better yet? On the weekend, the water taxi will transport you to Chinatown, where you can delve into a super inexpensive and delicious

meal, then hop back on the taxi for a scenic—and cheap—ride home. Board between 2 North Riverside Plaza (Madison St. stop), 325 North LaSalle St. (LaSalle/Clark), and 400 N. Michigan Ave. (6:30am–6:30pm weekdays; 9:45am–6:00pm Sat, 10:45am–4:45pm Sun). ☎ **312/337-1446**; www.chicagowater-taxi.com. See p. 132.

- **Best Food Fest:** Admission is free to the **Taste of Chicago**, and so is the music at the Petrillo Music Shell. If you want to actually taste something at the Taste, tickets are sold in strips of 12 for \$8—not cheap, but not insanely expensive, either. You can eat a fair amount for your \$8, as “taste portions” (smaller portions of restaurant menu items) are two to four tickets each. Large portions (giant turkey leg, rib sandwich) go for 9 to 12 tickets, side portions for 6 to 8 tickets, and soft drinks, 4 tickets. I have to admit that this is not my favorite Chicago event (the heat and the crowds combined with a million food smells tend to be more overwhelming than appetizing), but I’m clearly in the minority. Some 3.7 million people can’t be wrong, can they? See p. 23.
- **Best Food for Thought:** The **Uptown Poetry Slam with Marc Smith** is the granddaddy of all poetry slams—it’s been running for more than 2 decades at the historic Green Mill jazz club (4802 N. Broadway; ☎ 773/878-5552). The event takes place every Sunday and includes an open mic at 7pm, scheduled performers at 8pm, and a slam competition at 9pm. Admission is \$6. See p. 194.
- **Best Cheap Laughs:** Chicago is one of the hottest cities in the world for improv comedy, and the popular cage match series at **iO Chicago** (3541 N. Clark; ☎ 773/880-0199) pits up-and-coming improvisational groups against each other at midnight on Saturdays. Sketches range from racy to obnoxious to witty to sarcastic . . . and all are worth your \$5 ticket. See p. 189.
- **Best Theater for the Roll of a Die:** The longest-running show in Chicago is also one of the best dirt cheap deals. The **Neofuturists** (5153 N. Ashland; ☎ 773/878-4577) are currently celebrating the 20th anniversary of “Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind,” an attempt to perform 30 plays in 60 minutes. Tickets are \$9 plus the roll of a single six-sided die (meaning, you’ll pay between \$10–\$15), and it’s cash only. Each show is written by a performer, honed by the ensemble, and randomly mixed with 29 other plays with the help of you, the audience. The show is performed Friday and Saturday nights at 11:30pm (doors open at 11pm); Sunday nights at 7pm (doors open at 6:30pm), every weekend except the last 2

weeks in December. To make sure you get in (the theater seats 150), get there at 10:45pm

on Fridays, 10:30pm on Saturdays, and 6:30pm on Sundays. See p. 184.

3 Best Dirt Cheap Dining

- **Best Happy Hour Steal:** Savvy Loop workers know that the best place to head for an inexpensive, gourmet happy-hour buffet is **Trattoria No. 10** (10 N. Dearborn St.; ☎ 312/984-1718), a warm and cozy Italian spot that's also popular for pre-theater dining for North Loop Theater District patrons. But the real value here isn't on the dinner menu, it's the all-you-can-eat buffet spread out on the bar for \$12 (plus a \$6 drink minimum), where you can sample beef tenderloin, shrimp and various pasta specialties. Skip lunch and fill up here! Served weekdays from 5-8 p.m. See p. 58.
- **Best Dim Sum:** The spacious, fairly elegant **Phoenix** (2131 S. Archer Ave., btw. Wentworth Ave. and Cermak Rd.; ☎ 312/328-0848) has plenty of big tables for family and friends to enjoy the Cantonese and Szechuan cuisine, and it attracts lots of Chinatown locals, especially for Dim Sum brunch. Come early to avoid the wait. Late night, stop by the more casual **Saint's Alp Teahouse** downstairs (☎ 312/842-1886), an outpost of the Hong Kong chain, which is open until midnight daily. See p. 62.
- **Best Inexpensive Outdoor Dining: Pegasus** (130 S. Halsted St., btw. Monroe and Adams sts.; ☎ 312/226-3377), with its rooftop patio serving drinks, appetizers, and desserts, offers wonderful views of the Loop's skyline. The restaurant is a good bet for gyros, Greek salads, shish kabobs, and the classic moussaka. Good for large groups. See p. 63.
- **Best Burrito:** Burrito? Come on, we can do better than that! In a city that excels at Mexican cuisine, picking the best Mexican restaurant is a tough call. Pilsen is home to the city's highest concentration of Mexican restaurants, and two good choices include **Nuevo Leon** (1515 W. 18th St., at Laflin St.; ☎ 312/421-1557), a popular choice for the standard offerings. Across the street, **Plaza Azul** (1514 W. 18th St., at Laflin St.; ☎ 312/421-2552) serves authentic Mexican seafood

dishes, salads, and soups. See p. 63.

- **Best Lunch in the Loop:** Loud, crowded, and casual, **Heaven on Seven** (111 N. Wabash Ave.; ☎ 312/263-6443) is a no-frills spot that buzzes with energy. Chef/owner Jimmy Bannos's Cajun and Creole specialties come with a cup of soup and include such Louisiana staples as red beans and rice, a catfish po' boy sandwich, and jambalaya. If you don't have a taste for Tabasco, the extensive coffee-shop-style menu covers all the traditional essentials: grilled-cheese sandwiches, omelets, tuna—the works. Indulge in chocolate peanut butter pie or homemade rice pudding for dessert. See p. 57.
- **Best Pierogi:** Chicago is home to a huge Polish population. If you're hankering for some hearty, stick-to-your-ribs Polish food, the best-known restaurant is **Red Apple** (Czerwone Jabluszko) (3121 N. Milwaukee Ave.; ☎ 773/588-5781). Dining here is strictly buffet, and the lineup includes Polish specialties such as pierogi (meat- or cheese-stuffed dumplings) and blintzes, as well as a huge selection of roast meats, salads, and bread. Best of all is the price: \$8.50 on weekdays and \$9.50 on weekends for all you can eat. See p. 96.
- **Best Tavern Lunch:** Chicago is a town filled with neighborhood taverns. Chicago is a town filled with neighborhood taverns. **The Billy Goat Tavern** (430 N. Michigan Ave; ☎ 312/222-1525), while a little on the grungy side, is a famed hangout for media workers and writers, and the service style inspired a classic *Saturday Night Live* skit with John Belushi. Most famous for its "cheezeburgers" (\$3), all the prices are diner-cheap, with nothing on the menu over \$6, and many items under \$4. See p. 65.
- **Best Beef Sandwich: Mr. Beef** (666 N. Orleans St.; ☎ 312/337-8500) is basically a fast-food stand, without much atmosphere or room for seating. Despite these drawbacks, Mr. Beef is a much-loved Chicago institution. Its claim to fame is the classic Italian beef sandwich (\$5), the Chicago version of a Philly cheese steak. The Mr. Beef variety is made of sliced beef dipped in jus, piled high on a chewy bun, and topped with sweet or hot peppers. Heavy, filling, and very Chicago. See p. 69.

- **Best Creative Sandwich: Bourgeois Pig** (738 W. Fullerton Pkwy; ☎ 773/883-5282) is located near DePaul University in Lincoln Park, and caters to an intellectual crowd. “The Sun Also Rises,” “Hamlet,” and “The Old Man and the Sea” are among the menu’s 25 gourmet sandwiches. Baked goods, including ginger molasses cookies, are homemade. The Pig always ranks high in surveys for best cup of coffee in Chicago, so don’t miss one of the four varieties brewed daily, or one of a mind-bending array of espresso drinks. Juices, shakes, and root beer made here are also great bets. The huge sandwiches will only set you back about \$8. See p. 80.
- **Best Do-It-Yourself Meal:** Get creative at this build-your-own-stir-fry restaurant. If you’ve never been to **Flat Top Grill** (319 W. North Ave.; ☎ 312/787-7676; check www.flattopgrill.com for more locations)

before, you might want to follow the suggested recipes on the giant blackboards. But of course, if you decide to strike out on your own with a unique combo that turns out to be less than edible (horseradish tofu sauce over stir-fried pineapple, anyone?), you can always start over for free, since the price of \$9.99 for lunch and \$13 for dinner includes multiple visits to the food line. See p. 82.

- **Best Stand-Out Hot Dog Stand:** Chicago is home to many stand-out hot-dog stands and shops, but one, **Hot Doug’s** (3324 N. California Ave.; ☎ 773/279-9550), takes encased meats to a new level, featuring several gourmet sausages on a bun every day except Sunday (plan on standing in line no matter which day you show up—it’s always worth it). Hot Doug’s also serves a great classic Chicago dog just like many other stands in town. See p. 71.

4 Best Low-Cost Lodging

- **Best Cheap Lodging Deal, Hands Down: Hostelling International Chicago** wins this crown easily. Named the best hostel in the world in 2007, the J. Ira & Nikki Harris Family Hostel (Hostelling International),

located at 24 E. Congress Pkwy (☎ 312/360-0300), is a stand-out in a city with a dearth of dirt cheap, super clean, and safe lodging options. You can’t lose on the location in the South Loop, a great jumping-off

point for adventures in the Loop, Millennium Park, and beyond. You'll find volunteer staffers who provide everything from insider tips on the best shopping, bus routes, and museum fees to their own well-organized walking tours. Each room is large by hostel standards and includes a locker (make sure to bring your own lock). There's an 11pm quiet rule, but no curfew. There's a beautiful kitchen, so you can prepare your own meals, and free breakfast. Because the hostel is located within walking distance to the Blue Line (O'Hare), it's easy to get to and from the airport from here. See p. 38.

- **Best Dirt Cheap Loop Hotel:**

Clean, neat rooms for reasonable prices, and a location near the Loop and Museum Campus, draw you to the **Travelodge Chicago Downtown** (65 E. Harrison, at S. Wabash Ave.; ☎ **888/515-6375**). You'll only be half a block from Grant Park and the summer music festivals, and only 4 blocks from the Field Museum. The hotel was built in 1925 as the Harrison Hotel, and for many years was one of the premier hotels in the city. Okay, it's not so

premier anymore, but it's definitely dirt cheap. See p. 39.

- **Best Dirt Cheap Magnificent Mile Hotel:** The **Red Roof Inn Chicago Downtown** (162 E.

Ontario St., ½ block east of Michigan Ave.; ☎ **800/733-7663**) is your best bet for the lowest-priced lodgings in the heart of the Magnificent Mile, and it's located within blocks of high-priced hotels like the Ritz Carlton and Peninsula. For the same stellar location, you'll pay a quarter of the price here. Guest rooms are stark and small, so make sure to ask for a room facing Ontario Street, where you'll get western exposure and some natural light. See p. 47.

- **Best Cheap Neighborhood Hotel:**

Located on the North Side, a few doors down from the El stop on Belmont Avenue, the charming **City Suites Hotel** (933 W. Belmont Ave., at Sheffield Ave.; ☎ **800/248-9108**) has a 1930s Art Deco feel, and double rooms for under \$100 (you might even do better than that rate, particularly on weekdays and off-season). The amenities are super for a hotel at this price point. There are plush robes and complimentary continental breakfast, and refrigerators and microwaves are available upon

request. Be aware, though, that most rooms can be fairly noisy, due to the El tracks and the location on busy Belmont Avenue (bring earplugs!). See p. 49.

- **Best Cheap Hotel When Baseball Is on the Agenda:** Sister hotel to the City Suites, the **Majestic Hotel** (528 Brompton St., at Lake Shore Dr.; ☎ **800/727-5108**) offers an excellent location, particularly if Wrigley Field is a major attraction for you. Located on a charming tree-lined street, convenient to the many shops and restaurants of Lincoln Park, the hotel offers large suites with sun porches. Many of the rooms are dark due to apartment buildings on all sides. See p. 50.
- **Best Hotel with Free Parking:** This former motor lodge isn't going to win any design prizes, but the **Best Western River North Hotel** (125 W. Ohio St., at LaSalle St.; ☎ **800/528-1234**) has got some of the most affordable rates to be found in this busy neighborhood, within easy walking distance of Chicago's art-gallery district and numerous restaurants. Rooms are spacious if rather generic (with comfortable bedding and down pillows). A big selling point for families is the indoor pool, with an adjoining outdoor roof deck.

The almost unheard-of free parking in the hotel's parking lot can add up to significant savings for anyone who drives. See p. 46.

- **Best Cheap Family Hotel, River North:** The family-friendly **Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago Downtown** (33 W. Illinois St., at Dearborn St.; ☎ **800/HAMPTON** [426-7866]) manages to appeal to both adults and kids—the Prairie-style lobby and breakfast lounge give the place a tranquil feel, while the indoor pool and free hot breakfast are a plus for families. Built in 1998, the hotel still feels brand-new; the rooms have an urban look, with dark wood furniture and plush duvets. There's even a complimentary continental breakfast with two hot items per day; you won't need much lunch if you fill up here each morning. See p. 44.
- **Best Family Hotel off the Beaten Track:** If you're looking for a neighborhood inn away from the tourist hordes, **Best Western Hawthorne Terrace** (3434 N. Broadway Ave., at Hawthorne Place; ☎ **888/401-8781**) fits the bill. Located in Lakeview—within walking distance of Wrigley Field, Lake Michigan, and the Lincoln Park walking and

Chicago's Top Five Best-Kept Free Secrets

- 1 Sadly, free money is not on offer at **The Chicago Fed Money Museum** (230 S. LaSalle St., at Quincy St.; ☎ **312/322-2400**). Disappointing, I know, but this little museum provides more than just the standard history-of-banking displays: The center has a giant cube that holds a million dollars and an exhibit that lets you try to detect counterfeit bills. There's even a section where visitors can pretend to be Ben Bernanke (for a moment), with a display that shows how changes in interest rates affect the economy. See p. 110.
- 2 The annual **Christkindlmarket** takes place from Thanksgiving weekend until Christmas Eve. Daley Plaza (btw. Washington, Clark, and Dearborn sts.) is transformed into a German Christmas market. Admission is free; for \$7 you can splurge and buy a souvenir mug filled with Gluhwein, the hot German mulled wine, imported from Nuremberg; you can refill it for \$5. (If you're not a wine drinker, \$7 buys you a mug of German beer.) Check out the free musical entertainment, and browse the market's authentic German ornaments, nativity scenes, cuckoo clocks, as well as marzipan, schnitzel, and stollen. While you're there, check out the city's official Christmas tree (also at Daley Plaza), and stroll across State Street to check out Macy's holiday windows. See p. 27.
- 3 The **Chicago Architecture Foundation's** permanent exhibition, *Chicago: You Are Here*, in the ArcelorMittal CitySpace Gallery—with

bike paths—the hotel is set back from busy Broadway Avenue. The relatively large rooms are bright and cheery, with spotless bathrooms. The ground-level exercise room is especially welcoming, with large windows to let light in and a glass-enclosed

hot tub. The hotel's extremely varied clientele—from business travelers in search of a homey environment, to diehard baseball fans, to lesbian and gay travelers in town for the annual Gay Pride Parade—is part of its charm. See p. 50.

its bold, innovative approach to telling the story of the construction of Chicago—features a scale model of downtown Chicago. The ArcelorMittal CitySpace Gallery provides the perfect orientation to Chicago's built landscape and is open to the public every day from 9:30am to 5pm. The organization presents exhibitions, lectures, and youth and adult education programs, many of which are open to the public free of charge. See p. 158.

- 4 It's hard to fathom, but yes, I am recommending a visit to the **Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory** (otherwise known as Fermilab), located in the western suburb of Batavia. The government-run facility hosts free "Ask a Scientist" discussions on the first Sunday of most months, open to anyone ages 10 and up at their site (Wilson and Kirk roads, Batavia; ☎ 630/840-8258). Past topics have included future accelerators and magnets. Go and soak up the intellectual power at this national laboratory specializing in high-energy particle physics. See p. 208.

- 5 The **Chicago Public Library at the Harold Washington Library Center** itself is no secret, but this is: If you (or someone you know) have a Chicago Public Library card, you can check out museum passports good for free admission to a dozen area cultural venues. Nine branches of the public library will even loan you fishing poles! See p. 110.

FREE & DIRT CHEAP CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Chicago is a festival city, with ethnic parades, food, music, art and flower fairs, and street celebrations packing the calendar. Best of all, most of these events are free. Of course, if you want to buy a beer at a neighborhood festival, or a car at the Auto Show (joking, of

course), the events can become somewhat pricier. But viewing the parades, the autos, the flowers, and whatever else is on display is always free.

Particularly in the summer, it can be tough to choose among activities. In winter you'll have fewer choices,

but some of the perennial favorites take place then. Even though these are annual events, the dates move around a lot, so call or log on to make sure you're in the right free place at the right free time.

To discover the latest and greatest special events in the city, ask the Chicago Office of Tourism (☎ 877/CHICAGO [244-2246]; www.choosechicago.com) or the Illinois Bureau of Tourism (☎ 800/2CONNECT [226-6632]; www.enjoyillinois.com) to mail you a copy of the Chicago Visitor's Guide, an excellent quarterly publication that surveys special events, including parades and street festivals, concerts and theatrical productions, and museum exhibitions. You can also download the guide in PDF form from www.choosechicago.com (look under

"visitors" and then search for "city guides"). Also ask to be sent the latest materials produced by the Mayor's Office of Special Events (☎ 312/744-3315, or the Special Events Hot Line 312/744-3370, TTY 312/744-2964; www.cityofchicago.org/specialevents), which keeps current with citywide and neighborhood festivals. You'll find food, music and flower fairs, garden walks, and more.

Remember that new events might be added every year, and that occasionally special events are discontinued or rescheduled. So, to avoid disappointment, be sure to telephone in advance or check the website of the sponsoring organization, the Chicago Office of Tourism, or the Mayor's Office of Special Events to verify dates, times, and locations.

JANUARY

Winter Delights Throughout January and February, the city's Office of Tourism (☎ 877/CHICAGO [244-2246]; www.choosechicago.com) offers special travel deals to lure visitors during tourism's low season. Incentives include bargain-priced hotel packages, affordable prix-fixe dinners at downtown restaurants (a typical three-course meal will go for \$20), and special music and theater performances. Families with cabin fever should seek great deals on hotels with pools—it's a great weekend away from the snow and cold. Early January through February.

Chicago Boat, RV & Outdoor Show McCormick Place, 23rd Street and Lake Shore Drive (☎ 312/946-6200; www.chicagoboatshow.com). This extravaganza has been a Chicago tradition for nearly 70 years. All the latest boats and recreational vehicles are on display, plus there's trout fishing, a climbing wall, boating-safety seminars, and big-time entertainment. Late January.

FEBRUARY

FREE Chinese New Year Parade Wentworth and Cermak streets (☎ 312/326-5320; www.chicagochinatown.org). The twisting

dragon is sure to please as it winds down the street at this annual celebration. Call to verify the date, which varies from year to year, depending on the lunar calendar (usually btw. Jan 21 and Feb 19).

Chicago Auto Show McCormick Place, 23rd Street and Lake Shore Drive (☎ **630/495-2282**; www.chicagoautoshow.com). More than a thousand cars and trucks, domestic and foreign, are on display at this show, a tradition since 1901. Get behind the wheel of the latest models at this event, which draws nearly a million car owners or wannabe owners a year. Look for packages at hotels that include tickets. Mid-February.

International Cluster of Dog Shows McCormick Place South, 23rd Street and South Lake Shore Drive (☎ **773/237-5100**; www.ikcdogshow.com). See canines great and small strut their stuff. They're all adorable, but only one can win Best in Show. More than 10,000 AKC (American Kennel Club) purebred dogs of all breeds heat up the competition. It's quite a scene, particularly in the poodle area, where you can see dogs getting their hair blow-dried until they look like canine rock stars. Third week in February.

MARCH

FREE Spring Flower Shows Spring is sprung a little earlier in the conservatories than it is outside in the real world, and thank goodness. See the lilies, daffodils, tulips, pansies, and other flowering perennials at **Lincoln Park Conservatory** (☎ **312/742-7737**) and **Garfield Park Conservatory** (☎ **312/746-5100**). Throughout March and April.

FREE St. Patrick's Day Parade Even the Chicago River puts on the green for St. Patrick's Day—it's actually dyed Kelly green for the occasion. The parade runs along Dearborn Street from Wacker Drive to Van Buren; the best place to view it is around Wacker and Dearborn. Saturday closest to March 17.

APRIL

Major League Baseball Bundle up and join the die-hard fans at the ballpark (and die-hard fans know to wear long underwear, so follow their lead). Optimism reigns supreme in the early season and fans hope again that this will be their season. And even if it's not, hot dogs and peanuts will take some of the edge off. Check the

team websites for various discounts: you should be able to find outfield upper deck seats for about \$10. For the Cubs, call ☎ **773/404-CUBS** (2827) or visit www.cubs.mlb.com; for the White Sox, call ☎ **312/674-1000** or visit www.whitesox.mlb.com. Early April.

MAY

FREE Buckingham Fountain Color Light Show Held in Grant Park, at Congress Parkway and Lake Shore Drive, the water and the ever-changing colored lights put on their show in the landmark fountain nightly until 11pm. May 1 through October 1.

FREE Celtic Fest Chicago The city's newest music festival celebrates the music and dance of Celtic traditions from around the world. Early May, Millennium Park (☎ **312/744-3315**; www.explorechicago.org).

The Ferris Wheel & Carousel at Navy Pier For \$5, get a bird's-eye view of Chicago from the Ferris wheel (those who are slightly less fond of heights can stay closer to earth on the carousel), when it starts spinning again after a long winter's sleep. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, Navy Pier also hosts twice-weekly fireworks shows Wednesday nights at 9:30pm and Saturday nights at 10:15pm. May through October, 600 E. Grand Ave. (☎ **312/595-PIER** [7437]; www.navypier.com).

JUNE

Ravinia Festival Summer wouldn't be summer without Ravinia, a Chicago tradition. Basically, it's an outdoor concert venue with a covered pavilion and plenty of lawn seating. Offerings range from classical to pop. Enjoy a picnic on the lawn while reveling in the music of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Pack a picnic, jump on the Metra commuter railroad, and join the crowds sitting under the stars on the lawn. Lawn seats are the cheap way in at \$12. **FINE PRINT** Ravinia is so popular that many of the first-rate visiting orchestras, chamber ensembles, pop artists, and dance companies sell out in advance. June through September, at Ravinia Park, in suburban Highland Park, north of Chicago (☎ **847/266-5100** for ticket reservations; www.ravinia.com).

FREE Chicago Blues Festival The lineup looks better every year at this festival. Admission is free, but get there in the afternoon to

stake out a spot on the lawn for the evening shows. You'll discover young up-and-coming blues stars (including some who are the offspring of blues greats, such as Shamekia Copeland, daughter of Johnny Copeland). A shuttle bus will take you from the park to blues clubs. Call for information. First week in June, Petrillo Music Shell, at Jackson Drive and Columbus Drive in Grant Park (☎ **312/744-3315**).

FREE 57th Street Art Fair This is the oldest juried art fair in the Midwest—in 2007, it celebrated its 60th anniversary. Kids will especially enjoy the arts and crafts projects and the fun rides. First weekend in June, at 57th and Kimbark streets in Hyde Park (☎ **773/493-3247**; www.57thstreetartfair.org).

FREE Chicago Gospel Festival This is the largest outdoor, free-admission event of its kind. Blues may be the city's more famous musical export, but Chicago is also the birthplace of gospel music: Thomas Dorsey, the "father of gospel music," and the greatest gospel singer ever, Mahalia Jackson, were South siders. This 3-day festival offers music on three stages with more than 40 performances. Early June, Petrillo Music Shell, at Jackson Drive and Columbus Drive in Grant Park (☎ **312/744-3315**).

FREE Printers Row Book Fair One of the largest free outdoor book fairs in the country, this weekend-long event features readings by children's-book authors, book signings, and panel discussions on everything from writing your first novel to finding an agent. Also on offer are more than 150 booksellers displaying new, used, and antiquarian books for sale; a poetry tent; and special activities for children. Early June, on Dearborn Street from Congress to Polk (☎ **312/222-3986**).

FREE Old Town Art Fair More than 200 painters, sculptors, and jewelry designers exhibit here from the Midwest and around the country. The fair also features an art auction, a garden walk, and food and drink. Second weekend in June, historic Old Town neighborhood, at Lincoln Park West and Wisconsin Street (☎ **312/337-1938**; www.oldtowntriangle.com).

FREE Wells Street Art Festival Held on the same weekend as the Old Town Art Fair, this arts fest is lots of fun, with 200 arts and

crafts vendors, food, music, and carnival rides. Second weekend in June, Wells Street from North Avenue to Division Street (☎ 312/951-6106; www.oldtownchicago.org).

FREE Andersonville Midsommarfest You can relive the Scandinavian heritage of Andersonville, once Chicago's principal Swedish community. The treats at the Swedish Bakery, north of the Swedish-American Museum, are not to be missed. Second weekend in June, along Clark Street from Foster to Balmoral avenues (☎ 773/728-2995).

FREE Puerto Rican Fest One of Chicago's animated Latino street celebrations, this festival includes 5 days of live music, theater, games, food, and beverages. It peaks with a parade that wends its way from Wacker Drive and Dearborn Street to the West Side Puerto Rican enclave of Humboldt Park. Mid-June, at Humboldt Park, Division Street and Sacramento Boulevard (☎ 773/292-1414; www.prparadechicago.com).

Jammin' at the Zoo One featured musical act (which could be rock, zydeco, or reggae music), rocks the zoo on the lovely lawn south of the zoo's Park Place Café, certainly one of the more unusual outdoor venues in the city. The first of three summer concerts (ticket prices vary) is held in late June, Lincoln Park Zoo, 2200 N. Cannon Dr., at Fullerton Parkway (☎ 312/742-2000; www.lpzoo.com). Admission to the zoo itself is free.

FREE Grant Park Music Festival The free outdoor musical concerts in the park begin the last week in June and continue through August. Also worthwhile are the movies in the park, shown outdoors on a large screen. Pritzker Music Pavilion, in Millennium Park (☎ 312/742-7638; www.grantparkmusicfestival.com).

FREE Taste of Chicago The largest free outdoor food fest in the nation (according to the City of Chicago), "The Taste," as it's known to locals, can be hot, sweaty, and claustrophobic. If your kids are small or don't do well in crowds, avoid it. Going on a weekday morning will help you miss the heaviest crowds. Three-and-a-half million people eat their way through cheesecake, ribs, pizza, and more, all carted to food stands set up throughout the park by scores of Chicago restaurants. On the evening of July 3, things get pretty hairy when Chicago launches its Independence Day fireworks, and crowds are at their sweaty peak. Admission is free; you pay for the

sampling, of course. Late June and the first week of July, Grant Park (☎ 312/744-3315).

FREE Chicago Country Music Festival It's less claustrophobic than Taste of Chicago, and it's free. You'll see big-name entertainers of the country-and-western genre. Late June (during the first weekend of Taste of Chicago), Petrillo Music Shell, at Jackson Drive and Columbus Drive in Grant Park (☎ 312/744-3315).

FREE Chicago Pride Parade This parade is flamboyant and colorful, the culmination of a month of activities by Chicago's gay and lesbian community. The floats, marching units, and colorful characters will keep you entertained, so pick a spot on Broadway for the best view. Last Sunday in June, on Halsted Street, from Belmont Avenue to Broadway, south to Diversey Parkway, and east to Lincoln Park (☎ 773/348-8243; www.chicagopridecalendar.org).

FREE Farmers' Markets They open at two dozen sites all over the city at the end of the month and continue weekly through October. Downtown sites are Daley Plaza (every other Thurs) and Federal Plaza (every Tues). For other locations and times, call ☎ 312/744-3315.

JULY

FREE Independence Day Celebration Celebrated in Chicago on July 3 (this way, people can also attend their community's own celebrations on the 4th), concerts and fireworks are the highlights of the festivities in Grant Park. The sight of fireworks exploding over and reflecting off of Lake Michigan is well worth braving the crowd. Take public transportation, or walk; ☎ 312/744-3315.

Irish-American Heritage Festival If you're into Irish dancing, made famous by *Riverdance*, make sure to check out this festival, featuring Irish music, dance, food, readings, and children's entertainment. Second weekend in July, Irish-American Heritage Center, 4626 N. Knox Ave., at Montrose Avenue (☎ 773/282-7035).

Sheffield Garden Walk One of Chicago's largest street parties, the Sheffield Garden Walk sounds a bit more refined than it actually is—but here's your chance to snoop into the lush backyards of Lincoln Park homeowners. There are also live bands, children's activities, and food and drink vendors on tap. Suggested donation

is \$6, \$10 after 3 p.m. Mid-July, starting at Sheffield and Webster avenues (☎ 773/929-WALK [9255]; www.sheffieldfestivals.org).

FREE Chicago Yacht Club's Race to Mackinac Island If you love boating, you're sure to get a kick out of watching the start of this 3-day competition. At Monroe Street Harbor, boats set sail on Saturday for the grandest of the inland water races. Mid-July (☎ 312/861-7777; www.chicagoyachtclub.org).

FREE Chicago SummerDance From July to early September, the city's Department of Cultural Affairs transforms a patch of Grant Park into a lighted outdoor dance venue on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday from 6 to 9:30pm, and Sunday from 4 to 7pm. The 4,600-square-foot dance floor provides ample room for throwing down moves while live bands play music—from ballroom, jazz, klezmer, and country-and-western to samba, zydeco, blues, and soul. One-hour lessons are offered from 6 to 7pm. Free admission, east side of South Michigan Avenue between Balbo and Harrison streets (☎ 312/742-4007).

Taste of Lincoln Avenue This is one of the largest and most popular of Chicago's many neighborhood street fairs; it features 50 bands performing music on five stages. Neighborhood restaurants staff the food stands, and there's also a kids' carnival. Third weekend in July, Lincoln Park, between Fullerton Avenue and Wellington Street (☎ 773/868-3010; www.wrightwoodneighbors.org).

FREE Venetian Night Whimsical decorations on a carnival of illuminated boats make this a colorful event. Fireworks and synchronized music by the Grant Park Symphony Orchestra complete the scene. Watch from the shoreline, or, if you can swing it, get on board a friend's boat. Last Saturday in July, from Monroe Harbor to the Adler Planetarium (☎ 312/744-3315).

FREE Newberry Library Book Fair & Bughouse Square Debates If you have an interest in history or a love of books, this fair is for you. At the fair, held over 4 days, Newberry Library sells tens of thousands of used books, most for under \$2. The highlight is soapbox orators re-creating the Bughouse Square Debates in Washington Square Park, just across the street. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Studs Terkel emcees the spirited chaos among left-wing agitators.

Late July, 69 W. Walton St. and Washington Square Park (☎ 312/255-3501; www.newberry.org).

AUGUST

FREE Chicago Air & Water Show This hugely popular show is held on the lake at North Avenue Beach and overhead, where you'll see Stealth bombers, F-16s, and special appearances by the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds and Navy Seals. Because the crowds are intense at North Avenue Beach, try grabbing a portable radio and hanging at Oak Street Beach, along the Gold Coast. Admission is free. Mid-August, North Avenue Beach (☎ 312/744-3315).

FREE Viva! Chicago Latin Music Festival Salsa, mambo, and the latest Latin rock groups hit the stage for this free festival. Last weekend in August, Petrillo Music Shell, at Jackson Drive and Columbus Drive in Grant Park (☎ 312/744-3370).

SEPTEMBER

FREE Chicago Jazz Festival This festival features Chicago-style jazz, with several national headliners always on hand. The event is free; kids are welcome. First weekend in September, Petrillo Music Shell, Jackson Drive and Columbus Drive in Grant Park (☎ 312/744-3315).

FREE Mexican Independence Day Parade Chicago is home to the nation's second-largest Mexican-American population, and that makes for a great parade. Another parade is held on the next day on 26th Street in the Little Village neighborhood (☎ 773/521-5387). Mid-September, along Dearborn Street between Wacker Drive and Van Buren Street (☎ 312/744-3315).

World Music Festival Chicago This relatively new and enormously popular festival is a major undertaking by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs. Call ahead for tickets, because many events sell out. The festival is held at venues around town—notably, the Chicago Cultural Center, Museum of Contemporary Art, Old Town School of Folk Music, and Hot House. You'll see top performers from Zimbabwe to Hungary to Sri Lanka performing traditional, contemporary, and fusion music. Shows are a mix of free and ticketed (\$10 or less) events. Call for information and to receive updates on scheduled

performances. Late September, various locations around the city (☎ 312/742-1938; www.cityofchicago.org/worldmusic).

OCTOBER

FREE Chicago Marathon Whether or not you're a runner, cheering on the harriers is an uplifting experience. Sponsored by LaSalle Bank, Chicago's marathon is a major event on the international long-distance running circuit, with some of the world's top runners competing. It begins and ends in Grant Park, but can be viewed from any number of vantage points along the race route. The website offers a free downloadable "spectator guide." Second Sunday in October (☎ 888/243-3344 or 312/904-9800; www.chicagomarathon.com).

FREE Spooky Zoo Spectacular Dress your tots in their Halloween finest for the free treats that are dispensed at various animal habitats. Bozo the Clown—himself a Chicago native—kicks things off with a parade through the zoo grounds. Late October, Lincoln Park Zoo, 2200 N. Cannon Dr. at Fullerton Parkway (☎ 312/742-2000; www.lpzoo.com).

NOVEMBER

FREE Magnificent Mile Lights Festival Beginning at dusk, a colorful parade of Disney characters makes its way south along Michigan Avenue, from Oak Street to the Chicago River, with holiday lights being illuminated block by block as the procession passes. Carolers, elves, and minstrels appear with Santa along the avenue throughout the day and into the evening, and many of the retailers serve hot chocolate and other treats. Saturday before Thanksgiving (☎ 312/642-3570; www.gnmaa.com).

FREE State Street Thanksgiving Parade An annual event that takes place on Thanksgiving morning beginning at 8:30am. The parade marches up State Street, from Congress to Randolph (☎ 312/781-5681).

FREE Christmas Tree Lighting The switch is flipped on the day after Thanksgiving, around dusk. Daley Center Plaza, in the Loop (☎ 312/744-3315).

FREE Zoo Lights Festival Colorful illuminated displays brighten long nights during the holidays. Another special tradition is the annual Caroling to the Animals, a daylong songfest on a Saturday early in the month. Late November through the first week in January, Lincoln Park Zoo, 2200 N. Cannon Dr. (☎ **312/742-2000**).

DECEMBER

FREE Christkindlmarket This German-style Christmas market features free music, inexpensive food, and excellent holiday shopping (including a stellar selection of decorations and ornaments) in the shadow of the city's Christmas tree. German beer and mulled wine make sure everyone is full of good cheer. Daley Plaza, 55 W Randolph St, ☎ **312/494-2175**; www.christkindlmarket.com.