Second to None

Want to feel like a local when you're in Chicago? Embrace your inner urban explorer, soak up some culture, fit in some beach time and catch the vibe of this bustling city.

Text Dawn Reiss
Chicago is a city that surprises. Sure it’s got unmistakable Al Capone mobster mystique and deep-dish pizza – an oozing, cheesy feast best eaten with a knife and fork, but there is so much more to this metropolis popularly known as the Windy City. Set on the banks of Lake Michigan, it’s like being by the ocean, for it’s impossible to see to the other side of the water. The lake is one of the US’s five Great Lakes; together they make up the largest body of freshwater in the world. It’s little wonder then that the region’s vast shoreline has been called the Third Coast, situated between the east and west coasts of the US.

Chicago’s massive amount of skyscrapers makes this city feel much bigger and busier than many imagine. Although there are over a thousand high-rise buildings, the most famous is the Willis Tower, often still called by its former name, the Sears Tower. With 110 storeys, it stands at 442 metres, excluding aerials. No longer the tallest building in the world, it now ranks second in the Western Hemisphere, after New York City rebuilt the World Trade Center.

Chicago is also home to the busiest airport in the US, with more arrivals and departures at O’Hare International Airport in 2018 than at any other American city.

Even though Chicago is America’s third largest metropolis, after New York and Los Angeles, many people call it the Second City. Some say this moniker originated well over a century ago, when New York derided Chicago as being second rate during a competition to host the 1893 World Fair. Second or not, it was a tussle that Chicago eventually won. Others claim the nickname came into use even earlier, after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 burned a third of the city to the ground. Either way, the label appears to be forever ingrained. It is also the namesake of the city’s best-known comedy club, The Second City. This comedy institution has seen the likes of Bill Murray, Steve Carell, Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert and Amy Poehler perform on its stage.

Most first-timers quickly comment on how the city is a cleaner, nicer version of New York. This is a foodie town that loves its art, culture and sports. During a long weekend visit you can get a taste of it that will likely leave you asking for more. With 77 neighbourhoods, each with its own distinct flavour, there is something here for everyone. While there’s no way to explore all of it in three days, there are plenty of things to make you feel like a true Chicagoan.

Day 1: Culture quest
This is a city that I’ve known since childhood and moved back to more than a decade ago. On this particular day I’m across the street from the Art Institute of Chicago, where a friendly homeless man named Ed Cephus is directing people with the fever of a traffic cop in the middle of rush hour. “Look up, look up or you’ll miss it,” Cephus says to me. He is selling copies of StreetWise, a local magazine created to help homeless people with job training and employment.

Like so many historical signs in Chicago, a small easy-to-miss brown-and-white marker on a lamppost indicates the approximate start of Route 66, one the most famous highways in the US. The legendary road once began here to cross the western half of the country before reaching Santa Monica, California. A more modernised interstate highway has replaced portions of the original route, transforming the remaining segments into a quintessential part of American history.

I cross the street and stop to admire the Art Institute’s iconic bronze lions with their green patina. Nearby, some men sit on plastic crates, musically drumming white buckets with sticks. It’s a bright day, and the sun is already gaining a hint of the strength that can make summer days as hot and humid as Florida. The city comes to life during the warmer months. Like eager ants converging on a piece of fruit, everyone flocks outside to enjoy every ounce of sunshine. While this is technically a four-season city, most locals joke it’s either summer and construction season, or cold and snowing.
The interactive Crown Fountain installation in Millennium Park. Many times, I've grabbed a blanket and bottle of wine for a picnic here with friends or loved ones.

Near the Art Institute is Millennium Park, 10 hectares of public greenery that opened in 2004. Technically a massive rooftop garden built over a car park, the park has become one of the most visited spots in the city. Various landmarks are dotted around it. The most recognisable is ‘Cloud Gate’ by Anish Kapoor, which has become an iconic sculpture for the city, in much the same way as the Statue of Liberty has for New York. Called ‘The Bean’ in a Chicago Tribune headline when it was first unveiled in 2006, the nickname has stuck. Like a metal quilt, 168 stainless steel plates were pieced together and polished into what looks like a liquid drop of mercury. The city’s magnificent skyline is reflected in the exterior of the sculpture. Walking through and under it, the metal arches above your head and curves away to either side. It feels like you are in the belly of some great creature, while distorted reflections of yourself are reminiscent of an amusement park funhouse. It is a great place to take pictures, even if you aren’t a tourist.

The park also features a garden filled with native plants and flowers, and Jaume Plensa’s ‘Crown Fountain’ – twin 15-metre glass block towers with digital displays of people’s faces. Water spurts from their mouths in a modern take on old gargoyles. Another highlight is architect Frank Gehry’s Jay Pritzker Pavilion, a futuristic-looking bandshell featuring the architect’s trademark metallic curves and ripples. It is fronted by a massive lawn covered by a floating metal trellis that pipes in sound so that visitors can enjoy the music perfectly, wherever they are seated. There’s a host of free concerts and movies in the park in the summer.

In summer, people flock outside to enjoy every ounce of sunshine

Inside the imposing art museum, one of the oldest and largest in the country, I’m greeted by the glowing cobalt hues of Marc Chagall’s stained glass ‘America Windows’. They are a popular favourite, along with the wings wholly devoted to outstanding examples of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art, including an expansive collection of works by Claude Monet. His famed ‘Water Lilies’ feels like an old friend every time I visit.

Day 2: A taste of the action

I get off to a relaxing start to the day with some yoga at Bloom Yoga Studio. A calm sanctuary about 30 minutes north of downtown, it’s in one of my favourite neighbourhoods, Lincoln Square, which is known for its German heritage and easy-going vibe.

If you’re after a genuinely local experience that’s a little more exhilarating, it’s well worth catching the Chicago Cubs playing baseball. The team won the World Series in 2016 after a staggering 108-year drought. But the Cubs’ home stadium is an attraction in itself. Built in 1914, Wrigley Field maintains an old-school appeal over a century later. It still operates a manual scoreboard and it has the only ivy-covered outfield in Major League Baseball. A visit to this city simply isn’t complete unless you come here. The best way to watch a game is in the rowdier bleacher seats, or from one of the few remaining rooftop bars, such as Murphy’s Rooftop above sports bar Murphy’s.
Alternatively, opt for the Green Mill, a dimly lit former speakeasy Al Capone liked to frequent. With an atmospheric 1930s feel and live jazz, it has appeared in multiple films, including *Ocean’s 11*. If Jay Gatsby had a bar in Chicago, this would be it. Seating is on a first-come, first-serve basis, so be sure to get there early for a good table.

**Day 3: Beach time**

Sundays are fundays. The Lakefront Trail, covering just under 30 kilometres along Lake Michigan, is calling my name. A friend and I walk for almost five kilometres and head to the beach. Counting over 25 beaches, Chicago has one to suit every personality type. My favourite is Montrose Beach with its picturesque harbour and family-friendly tracks of sand. It is a quiet alternative to North Avenue Beach with its crowded parties, or Oak Street Beach that has more urban noise. The waves lap against the shore and it’s breezy, something Chicagoans accept as the norm. But the term Windy City isn’t inspired by the weather: it is a jab at the boastful nature of Chicago’s politicians who have been known for their blustery hot air at times. There’s a lot of debate about who started the moniker. Regardless, this is another nickname that stuck.

It’s brunch time and a toss-up between Lula Cafe, an institutional breakfast spot, or the Revolution Brewing in Logan Square. We pick the latter since my significant other has just joined us and is craving their beer. With biscuits and gravy, chicken and waffles, whipped cheese and strawberry jam pancakes, choosing from the menu is a challenge! On the savoury side there’s *chilaquiles* – a blend of roasted chicken, salsa verde, avocado, lime, coriander, red onion and egg to consider. It’s a tough decision what to pair with our coffee or dark, malty porter beer, but we manage.

Right page (clockwise from top left): the Chicago River; mural at the Flamingo Rum Club; the Tusk shop in Wicker Park.
Go Japanese
Chicago is home to acclaimed establishments such as Kumiko, a spot known for its cocktails and tasting menus; Momotaro for sushi and Wagyu steak; and Kitsune, where the chef uses local ingredients to update Japanese classics.

Roost Chicken & Biscuits
Originally a popular food truck offering classic Southern fare, Roost has grown into a small chain of casual restaurants. Don’t miss the fried chicken on a buttermilk biscuit, coleslaw, pickles or peach cobbler.

Alinea
For theatrical panache, visit this three-Michelin star restaurant by Grant Achatz. With 16-18 courses, the Gallery experience offers two ‘shows’ per night. Or opt for 10-14 courses in the Salon. And then there’s the glass-enclosed Kitchen Table, available to parties of six.

Virgin Hotels Chicago
Cool chic meets extravagant décor in the public areas, while the smart rooms all feature ergonomic beds. Located in the heart of downtown, this pet-friendly hotel offers affordability with lots of style, plus a rooftop nightclub and coffee-and-wine bar.

Palmer House
This swanky Art Deco hotel showcases oversized 24-carat gold Tiffany candelabras and breathtaking ornate ceiling murals. Bertha Palmer, who originally owned this hotel with her husband when it was built in 1875, was a personal friend of Claude Monet. Her collection is now housed in the nearby Art Institute of Chicago.

Things to see and do
Architectural river cruise
One of the best ways to get your bearings and see the city’s monumental skyline is this 90-minute cruise. Learn about more than 50 architecturally outstanding buildings along the Chicago River.

Outdoor concert
Want to impress your Instagram followers with stunning scenes and some new dance moves? The Millennium Park Summer Music Series (until 15 August this year) hosts free weekly concerts. Relax on the lawn at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, then walk over to Grant Park’s Spirit of Music Garden, with its open-air dance floor, for fun free dance lessons featuring music from a live band.

Festival experience
Chicagoans love a good party and the city has festivals for everyone and everything, from tacos and tequila, to ribs and craft beer. For music, check out Chicago Blues Festival; Pitchfork, with its hip-hop headliner; the punk-rock filled Riot Fest; and the infamous four-day Lollapalooza.

A beach for everyone
Chicago has over 25 beaches, one for every type of personality. My favourite is Montrose Beach, with its little harbour and family-friendly sand. Quieter than North Avenue Beach with its parties or Oak Street Beach that has more urban noise, it is a perfect respite from the city.

Places to stay
Hotel EMC2
This one-of-a-kind boutique hotel feels like a mad lab experiment. From a huge zoetrope machine to phonograph-style phone chargers, its ‘find the science in art and art in science’ approach makes for perfect selfie fodder.

Dawn’s favourites
Chicago-based Dawn Reiss writes for The Atlantic and The New York Times among others. She has eaten crickets in Cambodia, gone dog-sledging in Alaska and followed the Italian coffee trail in Turin for her work.