

INSIDER'S CHICAGO

If one place speaks of the true America, it is the 'Windy City'. Sitting on the shores of Lake Michigan, it has been home to President Barack Obama, infamous Prohibition gangsters and two of the world's tallest buildings

Words by Nick Ryan



FIRST EYES

As you step off the plane at O'Hare International Airport, you're entering one of the busiest cities in the country. In fact, if there is one word to describe Chicago, it is 'vibrant'. Want underground music? You've got it. World-class shopping? It's here. Culinary delights which offer a taste of the north, south or nearby Midwest? That too. What's more, Chicago is forging a reputation as one of the greenest cities in America.

A TASTE OF HISTORY

Chicago is where infamous American gangster Al Capone built his empire, during the Prohibition Era of the 1920s. Head to the famous Green Mill Cocktail Lounge (greenmilljazz.com) on North Broadway Avenue to sample a taste of those heady days: energetic jazz, from New Orleans to New York avant-garde, tinkles throughout the evening, and the mirrored bar – spanning the length of the room – evokes the era's opulent style. If you look carefully you might even get a glimpse of the tunnel running underneath the street from the bar, which the gangsters used to escape from the police raids.

STANDING TALL

After the Great Chicago Fire, the city got its first skyscraper in 1885. Today, Chicago's skyline is among the world's tallest and more buildings have been built recently, including a tower and international hotel by eccentric millionaire, Donald Trump (see below). That sense of new and old is everywhere around you in Chicago and it's what gives the city a unique feel. The iconic Willis Tower – until recently known as the Sears Tower (willistower.com) – was the



Clockwise from above: the flowers in Grant Park; a blues guitarist; Navy Pier's ferris wheel; the Chicago skyline with the Willis Tower in the foreground

world's tallest building from 1973 to 1998. Be sure to head upwards to the Skydeck: at 1,353 feet (412m) above ground it is one of the most famous tourist attractions in Chicago. It takes about 60 seconds to soar to the top in one of two special elevators. Experience the building swaying ever-so-slightly on a windy day (don't worry, it's designed to do this!) as you look out over Michigan, Wisconsin, the plains of Illinois and across the lake to Michigan.

TRUMPED

If it's super-cool luxury you're after, don't miss the Trump International Hotel & Tower (trumpchicagohotel.com). This gleaming addition to the Chicago skyline last year (and second only to the Willis Tower as the States' highest building) boasts 339 rooms and the extravagant



amenities expected by its corporate clientele. The hotel occupies floors 14-27 of the 92-story tower, luring power brokers with its white-glove service, luxurious linens, über-cool refrigerators and wood-grained marbled lobby. An attaché attends to all your needs and keeps a log of your favourite requests. Alternatively, a grand deluxe room at The Peninsula Hotel (peninsula.com) will give you a TV at the foot of your bathtub, plus a speakerphone to talk to all your friends while you soak. It's so splendidly decadent, that if there wasn't so much to see and do in the rest of the city, you could spend a week in the hotel alone.

TAKE A STROLL...

The city has 552 parks, 33 beaches, nine museums, two world-class conservatories, 16 historic lagoons and 10 bird and wildlife gardens – so there's no excuse to lie in that bathtub for too long. Many tourists flock to the upscale shopping on the Magnificent Mile (part of Michigan Avenue; themagnificentmile.com) to find some of the best food and fashion anywhere in the US. The 'L' subway system (transitchicago.com) is one of the oldest in America and offers a 24-hour service around town, making a tour easy. ▶



TOP REASONS TO VISIT THE WINDY CITY

1. Shopping – Chicago is a shopper's paradise with malls, designer boutiques and outlet stores to choose from. The Magnificent Mile on Michigan Avenue is the best place to go if you want to shop till you drop.

3. Restaurants – There is a huge variety of food to choose from in Chicago, with plenty of international cuisine to keep the most adventurous happy. If you travel in the 10 days prior to the fourth of July you will be lucky enough to experience the food festival Taste Of Chicago.

2. Entertainment – If you like the blues, Chicago is the place to find some excellent clubs. There are also free festivals throughout the summer where you can listen to jazz, blues and gospel music.

4. A Great Lake – After seeing all that the city has to offer, check out the multitude of activities available on Lake Michigan, such as canoeing, swimming or cruising. If you're looking for fun, go to Navy Pier for amusement rides and to enjoy the lively atmosphere.



WHILE ON YOUR STROLL...

Located in a traditionally Swedish neighbourhood that's undergone an arty transformation, the Andersonville Galleria (andersonvillegalleria.com) is quietly becoming the go-to spot for handmade jewellery, clothing and other wares, most made locally by an eclectic mix of artists and designers who rent space month-to-month. Developers Mark Falanga and Ray Pesavento opened the galleria in a 7,000-square-foot exposed-brick space that was once home to Wikstrom's Gourmet Foods, the neighbourhood's historic Swedish deli. In the three years since it opened, it has rapidly developed a reputation as a breeding ground for talented, homegrown artisans: there are now more than 100 tenants on four floors. A flea market this is not.

Clockwise from above: the 24-hour transit system; the Chicago River meets Lake Michigan in downtown Chicago; one of the city's famous hot dog stands

APPETITE

Chicago excels at both ends of the culinary spectrum – the city is home to some of the world's finest temples of haute gastronomy as well as its greatest collection of hot dog stands. Paul Kahan is one of Chicago's best chefs. When his first restaurant Blackbird (blackbirdrestaurant.com) opened 12 years ago, it heralded Chicago's rebirth as one of the country's most dynamic restaurant cities. Kahan recently opened his fourth restaurant, Big Star Taqueria and Bar, in West Town (1531 North Damen Ave) in what was once a mechanic's garage. There's country music on the jukebox and tequila behind the bar, but the real draw is the tacos, including spit-roasted al pastor (pork kebab), which go for \$2 apiece.

TAXI!

It's a standard tourist activity in a Chicago summer: descend from Michigan Avenue to the quay along the Chicago River, board a tour boat and glide along to a breezy introduction to the heart of the city. But for a more intimate waterborne view, there's a better alternative: create your own tour by water taxi (chicagowatertaxi.com). From late spring to autumn, water taxis ply the river and venture out into Lake Michigan. They operate like buses, following scheduled routes that take you to standard tourist stops such as the Willis Tower or Navy Pier, where you can take in a show or enjoy the 15-storey Ferris wheel. But you can also travel by water taxi to lesser-known spots such as Chinatown (with its hole-in-the-wall restaurants and stores selling barrels of ginseng or aquariums full of live frogs) and stop whenever you want for lunch. ●

