

NEIGHBORHOODS

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NEIGHBORHOODS

Chicago prides itself on being a 'city of neighborhoods,' each one marked by its own look, feel and foods. Ethnicity characterizes many areas: enticing fragrances waft from varied home grounds in the city's vibrant Mexican, Polish, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese and Indian communities.

Most draws for visitors cluster in Chicago's geographic center. The bull's eye is the Loop, the city's historic and business

core circled by train tracks (hence the name). Its hubbub spills over into the Near North. Together, these two sight-heavy, shop-and-hotel-laden areas – Millennium Park, the Art Institute, the Magnificent Mile, Navy Pier and much more – could occupy an entire week. But don't give in to temptation and spend your whole trip here. These outlying areas are where locals live, eat, drink and watch their beloved sports teams – they're the places to go for the 'real' Chicago.

Take the gilded Gold Coast, for instance, where you can gaze longingly at mansions inhabited by folks living the high life, same as they've been doing for 120 years. Further north historic Old Town brings up the curtain for Second City improv, and Lincoln Park lets college students and puppies commune through beautiful parklands and swanky restaurants.

Keep moving north and you'll find Lake View – a hub for bars and shops, both gay and straight, as well as the Cathedral of Baseball, Wrigley Field. Beyond lies Uptown's 'Little Saigon' and European-vibed Andersonville. Both are prime for delicious browsing. Uptown also holds a clutch of historic music venues, including Al Capone's favorite jazz club.

From there, Bucktown and Wicker Park beckon to the southwest with vintage shops and DJ-spinning sushi lounges, while Ukrainian Village gives hipsters an edgier playground next door. Logan Square and Humboldt Park carry on the trendiness, though in a more relaxed manner. Some of Chicago's most inventive eateries – Hot Doug's, Kuma's and Bonsoiree – have set up shop in these two arty, come-one-come-all districts.

A quick ride west of downtown, the Near West Side has hot restaurants, avant-garde galleries and Oprah's studio. Neighboring Pilsen, a focal point for the city's mighty Mexican community, offers taquerias and cinnamon-scented churro vendors alongside groovy galleries on its mural-splashed streets.

The South Loop and Near South Side glitter with new condo high-rises. In addition to its resident shiny young urbanites, the area swarms with visitors who come to gawk at the Shedd Aquarium, Adler Planetarium, the Field Museum and Soldier Field. Further down, on the South Side, Hyde Park is Obama's old stomping ground – a leafy, bookish retreat centered on the gothic University of Chicago.

The El trains clatter through it all and unify the areas. It's easy to find your way around once you understand the orderly city plan. Chicago's streets are laid out on a grid and numbered; Madison and State Sts in the Loop are the grid's center. As you go north, south, east or west from here, each increase of 800 in street numbers corresponds to one mile. At every increase of 400, there is a major arterial street. For instance, Division St (1200 N) is followed by North Ave (1600 N) and Armitage Ave (2000 N), at which point you're 2.5 miles north of downtown.

Got it? Good. Now let's get moving.

'A wealth of galleries, historical sights and architectural wonders pop up in the neighborhoods beyond downtown.'