

Welcome to Chicago

Steely skyscrapers, top chefs, rocking festivals – the Windy City will blow you away with its low-key cultured awesomeness.

Art & Architecture

It's hard to know what to gawp at first. High-flying architecture is everywhere, from the stratospheric, glass-floored Willis Tower to Frank Gehry's swooping silver Pritzker Pavilion to Frank Lloyd Wright's stained-glass Robie House. Whimsical public art studs the streets; you might be walking along and wham, there's an abstract Picasso statue that's not only cool to look at, you're allowed to go right up and climb on it. For art museums, take your pick: impressionist masterpieces at the massive Art Institute, psychedelic paintings at the mid-sized National Museum of Mexican Art or outsider drawings at the small Intuit gallery.

Chowhounds' Delight

Loosen your belt – you've got a lot of eating to do. On the menu: peanut-butter-and-banana-topped waffles for breakfast (at Stephanie Izard's Little Goat); a chicken, apple and cranberry hot dog for lunch (at Hot G Dog); and 20 courses of centrifuged, encapsulated molecular gastronomy for dinner (at Grant Achatz' Alinea).

You can also chow down on a superb range of ethnic eats from Vietnamese pho to Mexican *carnitas*, Polish pierogi and Swedish almond tarts. Still hungry? Order a late-night deep-dish pizza.

Sports Fanatics

Chicago is a maniacal sports town, with a pro team for every season (two teams, in baseball's case). Watching a game is a local rite of passage, whether you slather on the blue-and-orange body paint for a Bears football game, join the raucous baseball crowd in Wrigley Field's bleachers, or plop down on a bar stool at the neighborhood tavern for whatever match is on TV. Count on making lots of spirited new friends. Should the excitement rub off and inspire you to get active yourself, the city's 26 beaches and 580 parks offer a huge array of play options.

Rollicking Festivals

Chicago knows how to rock a festival. Between March and September it throws around 200 shindigs. The specialty is music. Blues Fest brings half a million people to Grant Park to hear guitar notes slide and bass lines roll, all for free. During the three-day Lollapalooza mega-party, rock bands thrash while the audience dances in an arm-flailing frenzy. Smaller, barbecued street fests take place in the neighborhoods each weekend – though some rival downtown for star power on their stages (oh, hey, Olivia Newton-John at Northalsted Market Days).



Why I Love Chicago

By Karla Zimmerman, Writer

I've lived in this city for 25 years, and I never get bored. There's something groovy going on any night of the week. Like tonight: should I see the Grant Park Orchestra playing Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in Millennium Park, or a guitar-drum duo called Earring at Empty Bottle? I love that Tibetan dumplings, Mexican *carnitas* and crême brûlée doughnuts are all equally, easily accessible from local eateries. I love how total strangers sitting next to each other in a bar watching a Blackhawks game become high-fiving pals by evening's end. Chicago really is my kind of town.

For more about our writers, see p320.