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THE GREAT AMERICAN HEARTLAND

Greetings from CHICAGO

48 hours, solo, at your own pace

POCKET EDITION · 2027

48-HOUR GUIDE · SAFETY GUIDE · PLANNING CALENDAR

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Welcome to Chicago

Chicago is the easiest big American city to enjoy alone. The Loop, the lakefront, and the river sit within a few miles of each other, the L carries you between them for a few dollars, and the city's best food is served at counters, bars, and walk-up windows that never ask whether you are waiting for someone.

Traveling solo here works because Chicago is a working city before it is a tourist one. Nobody is performing for visitors, which means nobody notices a lone diner at the bar of a deep-dish pizzeria or a single traveler on a bench along the Riverwalk. It is a place that lets you set your own pace.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read through once before you go. Day One stays downtown and on the water — Millennium Park, the Art Institute, and an architecture cruise on the river. Day Two heads north and west — Lincoln Park's free zoo, the 606 trail, and dinner in the West Loop. Section 03 is the new-for-2027 feature on the river itself. Rideshare covers any gap the L does not.

ESSENTIAL QUICK FACTS

CURRENCY
US dollar (cards accepted nearly everywhere)

TRANSIT
CTA "L" trains · about $2.75 a ride

TIME ZONE
Central (UTC–6; UTC–5 in summer)

EMERGENCY
911 · non-emergency 311

TIPPING
18–20% in restaurants, $1–2 a drink

SALES TAX
10.25% — added at the register

01 DAY ONE

The Loop · Millennium Park · The River · Streeterville

The first day stays downtown, where Chicago keeps its most famous things in walking distance of one another: public art, a world-class museum, and the river that built the skyline.

MORNING · 8:00 AM – 1:00 PM

8:00 AM

Millennium Park & Cloud Gate

Go early, before the crowds arrive. Cloud Gate — "the Bean" — looks different at every angle, and the Crown Fountain's faces are quietly hypnotic. The park is free and opens at 6am.

Walk under the Bean's arch and look up at the reflection warping overhead.

9:30 AM

The Art Institute of Chicago

One of the great American museums. Look for Seurat's A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, Hopper's Nighthawks, and Grant Wood's American Gothic. Enter on Monroe Street to skip the longest line.

Pick three galleries and give them time. Trying to see everything is the usual mistake.

12:30 PM

Lunch — Revival Food Hall

A food hall in a restored Loop bank building with a dozen counters, so a solo diner can choose without committing to a table.

Order at the counter, then take your tray to any open seat.

AFTERNOON · 1:30 PM – 6:00 PM

2:00 PM

Riverwalk & Architecture River Cruise

Walk down to the Chicago Riverwalk, then board a 90-minute architecture cruise. The guides explain how each tower along the river answers the one next to it.

Book the 2pm or 3pm boat online; the afternoon light is best on the Wrigley Building.

4:30 PM

Chicago Cultural Center

A free, marble-clad former library with the world's largest Tiffany glass dome. Quiet, warm in winter, and a good place to rest before dinner.

Take the grand staircase to the third floor and look straight up.

EVENING · 6:30 PM – 10:00 PM

6:30 PM

Dinner — Lou Malnati's

The deep-dish pizzeria locals defend. Pies take about 45 minutes to bake, so order at the bar and have a drink while you wait.

Personal-size pies are on the menu, so a solo diner can have deep dish without leftovers.

9:00 PM

Evening Walk on the Lakefront

Walk back toward Navy Pier or along the lake. The skyline lit up against the water is the picture most people remember.

Stay on the main Lakefront Trail and the busier paths after dark.

02 DAY TWO

Lincoln Park · Wicker Park · West Loop

The second day moves out from the center into the neighborhoods where Chicagoans actually live, with a free zoo, an elevated trail, and the city's best dining district.

MORNING · 8:30 AM – 1:00 PM

8:30 AM

Lincoln Park Zoo & Conservatory

Admission is free at one of the oldest zoos in the country. Walk the lakeside paths and finish inside the 1890s glass Conservatory, which is warm in any weather.

Arrive at opening, when the animals are most active.

10:30 AM

North Avenue Beach & the Lakefront Trail

Walk or rent a Divvy bike along the lake past the beach house and the chess pavilion, with the skyline always in view to the south.

The path is busiest on summer weekends; weekday mornings are calm.

12:30 PM

Lunch — Lula Cafe, Logan Square

A neighborhood restaurant since 1999 that helped start the city's farm-to-table movement. Counter seats and a short, seasonal menu.

Take the Blue Line to Logan Square; it is a 25-minute ride from the Loop.

AFTERNOON · 2:00 PM – 6:00 PM

2:30 PM

The 606 & Wicker Park

Walk the 2.7-mile elevated trail built on an old rail line, then drop down into Wicker Park for independent shops and record stores around the six-corner intersection.

Enter at Damen or Milwaukee Avenue; the Bucktown end is quieter.

5:00 PM

West Loop & Fulton Market

Chicago's former meatpacking district is now its busiest dining strip. Walk Randolph Street and Fulton Market before dinner.

Reserve tables a week ahead; bars and counters accept walk-ins.

EVENING · 7:00 PM – LATE

7:00 PM

Dinner — Au Cheval or Girl & the Goat

Au Cheval's burger is a city institution, with counter seats for singles; Girl & the Goat serves shareable plates. Both draw lines on weekends.

Show up at 5pm on a weekday and you will often walk straight in.

10:00 PM

Jazz — The Green Mill

A cocktail lounge in Uptown since 1907 with live jazz most nights. Sit at the bar and let the band carry the evening.

Cash helps at the door; stay for the late set if you have the energy.

03 THE RIVER

The River That Flows Backward

DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know Chicago reversed the flow of its river?

For decades, the Chicago River carried the city's sewage into Lake Michigan, the same lake that supplied drinking water. After typhoid and cholera outbreaks, engineers dug the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, which opened in January 1900, to turn the river around so that it flows away from the lake. It is still reversed today, and it is still counted among the great civil engineering projects of the 20th century.

A SHORT HISTORY

The city rebuilt from the Great Fire of 1871 with an ambition that gave the world the skyscraper. The Home Insurance Building, finished in 1885 and designed by William Le Baron Jenney, is often cited as the first. The river tour traces what followed, from the Wrigley Building to Marina City's corncob towers and Mies van der Rohe's steel-and-glass boxes.

DON’T MISS

On the Saturday before St. Patrick's Day, the river is dyed green, a tradition dating to 1962. Every October, Open House Chicago lets visitors into more than 150 buildings that are normally closed.

BEST TIME TO GO

Architecture cruises run from spring through fall, with the best weather from late May through September. Book the afternoon boat, and sit on the shaded side on hot days.

04 WHERE TO EAT

Counters, bars, and pizza

Chicago is an eat-at-the-counter city. Most places below seat singles quickly, and prices run lower than in New York or San Francisco.

BREAKFAST & LUNCH

Lou Mitchell's
NEAR UNION STATION · $10–18

A Route 66 diner since 1923. Eggs, thick toast, and house-made donut holes handed out while you wait.

Revival Food Hall
THE LOOP · $10–18

A dozen counters in one restored room, from fried chicken to dumplings. Easy for one.

Portillo's
RIVER NORTH · $8–15

The Chicago dog, Italian beef, and chocolate cake shake in a themed dining room. Skip the ketchup.

Al's #1 Italian Beef
LITTLE ITALY · $9–14

Since 1938. Order it dipped, with hot giardiniera, and eat standing at the counter.

DINNER & LATE NIGHT

Lou Malnati's
RIVER NORTH · $15–30

Butter-crust deep dish, baked to order. Sit at the bar and plan on a 45-minute wait.

Au Cheval
WEST LOOP · $18–30

The burger that made the restaurant famous. Counter seats are the solo move.

The Green Mill
UPTOWN · $8–16

A jazz lounge since 1907, with cocktails at the bar and live sets most nights.

Billy Goat Tavern
LOWER WACKER DRIVE · $8–14

A newspaper bar founded in 1934, famous for the cheezborger.

05 GETTING AROUND

Navigating Chicago

The L covers most of what a visitor needs, and the downtown core is flat and walkable. Buy a Ventra card or tap a contactless card or phone at the turnstile.

L trains	about $2.75	Eight color-coded lines. Red and Blue run 24 hours; the others run roughly 4am–1am.
1-Day Pass	about $6	Unlimited L and bus rides for a day. Worth it from three rides.
O'Hare Airport	Blue Line	About 45 minutes to the Loop, 24 hours a day. Boarding at O'Hare adds a fee unless you hold a pass.
Midway Airport	Orange Line	About 25 minutes to the Loop; trains every few minutes.
Divvy bikes	$ per ride	Sky-blue bikes docked across the city, including e-bikes. Unlock with the app.
Metra	from $3.75	Commuter rail to Oak Park and the suburbs. Check the timetable before you go.

Rideshare and taxis fill any gap, but traffic downtown is heavy at rush hour; the L is almost always faster.

06 BACKUP PLANS

Chicago on a rainy afternoon

Lake-effect weather turns quickly. These stay open and comfortable whatever the sky is doing.

THE LOOP · FREE
Chicago Cultural Center
The Tiffany dome, free exhibitions, and quiet reading rooms in a former library.

HYDE PARK
Museum of Science and Industry
A full-size U-505 submarine and a coal mine, in a vast Beaux-Arts palace.

MUSEUM CAMPUS
The Field Museum
Sue the T. rex and a century of natural history under one roof.

LOOP
Chicago Architecture Center
Interactive exhibits, including a giant scale model of downtown Chicago.

WEST SIDE · FREE
Garfield Park Conservatory
A warm, tropical glasshouse, free to enter and worth the trip in winter.

STREETERVILLE
Museum of Contemporary Art
A spare modern museum near the Magnificent Mile, good for a slow afternoon.

07 NEIGHBORHOODS

Know your neighborhoods

THE HEART OF THE CITY
The Loop
Millennium Park, the Art Institute, the L's elevated tracks, and the city's central business district.

SHOPPING & SKYLINE
Streeterville & the Magnificent Mile
The Mag Mile's shops, Navy Pier, and the lakefront, all close to the water.

RIVER & RESTAURANTS
River North
Galleries, steakhouses, and deep-dish pizza north of the river.

ZOO & LAKEFRONT
Lincoln Park
A free zoo, a conservatory, and the best stretch of the lakefront path.

INDIE CHICAGO
Wicker Park & Logan Square
Record stores, small bars, and neighborhood restaurants along Milwaukee Avenue.

DINING STRIP
West Loop
Fulton Market and Randolph Street, the city's busiest restaurant district.

08 GOOD TO KNOW

What nobody tells you

- Never put ketchup on a Chicago hot dog. Mustard, relish, onion, tomato, pickle, peppers, and celery salt are the standard dressing.
- Deep dish takes 45 minutes to bake. Order when you sit down, or call ahead and order for pickup.
- Dress in layers. The wind off the lake can drop the temperature by 10 degrees in an hour, even in summer.
- Beaches open for swimming from Memorial Day to Labor Day, with lifeguards on duty.
- Tip 18–20% at restaurants and $1–2 per drink at bars. Sales tax is 10.25% and is added at the register.
- Red and Blue Line trains run all night; other lines stop around 1am, so check the last train before dinner.

WHEN TO GO

Jun–Sep	Best overall	Lakefront festivals, long days, and the best weather of the year.
Jul–Aug	Peak season	Warm and busy. Book hotels and the architecture cruise well ahead.
Sep–Oct	Second best	Cooler, calmer, and full of events like the Chicago Marathon.
Nov–Mar	Off-season	Cold and windy, but cheaper rooms, empty museums, and Christkindlmarket in December.

09 SOLO TRAVELER SAFETY

Is Chicago safe?

Safe in the places visitors go, with big-city awareness. Chicago's violent crime is concentrated in specific South and West Side neighborhoods, well away from the downtown, lakefront, and north-side routes in this guide. Use a rideshare or taxi late at night rather than walking long distances.

NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY AT A GLANCE

Lincoln Park / Gold Coast	●●●●●
Streeterville / Mag Mile	●●●●●
The Loop (daytime)	●●●●●
River North / West Loop	●●●●○
Wicker Park / Logan Square	●●●●○
The Loop (late night)	●●●○○
South and West Sides	●●○○○

COMMON SCAMS

Street performers and charity clipboards on Michigan Avenue sometimes ask for money after a photo; decline politely. Unlicensed cabs at O'Hare quote high flat rates, so use the taxi line, rideshare, or the Blue Line.

HEALTH & MEDICAL

Northwestern Memorial and Rush University Medical Center are the major downtown hospitals. Pharmacies such as Walgreens and CVS are on nearly every block. Carry travel insurance.

SOLO TRAVELERS

Share your plan with someone back home, keep your phone charged, and use the L's front car at night, where the operator can see you. The Red and Blue lines run all night but are quieter after midnight.

EMERGENCY CONTACTS

Police, fire, medical	911
City services and non-emergency	311
Poison Control	1-800-222-1222
Nearest ER (Streeterville)	Northwestern Memorial · 251 E. Huron St.

10 PLANNING CALENDAR

Chicago, month by month

Exact dates shift each year, so confirm before booking.

JAN–FEB QUIET & COLD

- Chicago Restaurant Weeks offer fixed-price menus at restaurants across the city.
- Museums are empty and rooms are cheapest.

MARCH ST. PATRICK'S DAY

- The river is dyed green the Saturday before the holiday, followed by the parade.

JUNE FESTIVAL SEASON

- Chicago Blues Festival fills Millennium Park, and Pride Month closes with the parade on the last Sunday.

AUGUST LAKEFRONT

- Lollapalooza takes over Grant Park, and the Chicago Air and Water Show lights up the shoreline.

SEP–OCT FALL

- Chicago Jazz Festival on Labor Day weekend, Open House Chicago in October, and the Chicago Marathon on the second Sunday.

NOV–DEC HOLIDAYS

- Christkindlmarket opens in Daley Plaza, the Magnificent Mile Lights Festival lights the avenue, and ZooLights fills Lincoln Park.

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Every Stop, Mapped

Scan the code to open the free interactive Chicago map — every stop in this guide, filterable by day, food, and transport.



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