

BOONDOCKING IN

CHICAGO

A Whirlwind Tour of the Windy City



Downtown skyline looking north

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When we unfold the map and plot out an RV trip, we're often looking at wide-open spaces, national parks and great swaths of forest and wilderness. But the flexibility of travelling by RV is also perfectly suited for budget-friendly visits to some of North America's greatest cities. As long as there is a suitable and safe place to boondock or find a more formal campsite, our cozy home on wheels is perfect for both urban and rural settings. That was our thinking when we planned our travels to Chicago.

The "Windy City:" an architectural showplace

It's not necessarily the gusts off Lake Michigan that give Chicago the nickname of the "Windy City." By some accounts, it has as much to do with politics as the weather. Back in the late-1800s, the city's elite, bombastic politicians were described as "windy" – full of hot air. A headline for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* played on the double meaning when reporting on a tornado that swept through Chicago. The moniker stuck.



Left: Wrigley Building, Right: Chicago Tribune Tower

Chicago is known for its forward-thinking architectural history, in particular as the birthplace of the modern skyscraper. As legend goes, the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was set into motion when a cow kicked over a barn lantern in the southwest corner of the city, starting a blaze that burned for two days. When the flames were finally extinguished, the fire had wiped out the central business district, levelling more than 17,000 buildings and leaving close to 100,000 people homeless. The Great Chicago Fire stands as one of the most memorable in American history.

The fiery disaster gave architects a clean slate upon which to rebuild the entire heart of the city, introducing modern and innovative designs that shaped American architecture and cemented Chicago as a living museum of construction and style. After the fire, land prices in the downtown core skyrocketed and architects built upward, developing new, skeleton-frame skyscrapers – a thin outside skin applied to an iron and steel frame. Chicago became the birthplace of the modern building and is now home to some of the world’s tallest structures.

We explored the city’s architectural past and present through two tours: a free, guided InstaGreeter walk offered by the Chicago Greeter program (tour information in the Chicago Cultural Center on Randolph Street), and a two-hour walking tour with the Chicago Architecture Foundation, the non-profit organization dedicated to generating public interest in architecture and design.

We like to walk. Our RV usually takes us to remote hiking trails, but we found the sidewalks and green spaces of downtown Chicago were also perfect for adding kilometres to our pedometers. It’s possible to dry camp at McCormick Place, the city’s convention centre, where overnight RV boondocking is available at the outdoor parking surface lot for a flat fee of US\$35 per day, with in-and-out privileges. Because buses and convention/event parking take priority, it is best to make advance reservations. The city’s bus, “L” trains and Metra Electric commuter railroad all connect downtown to McCormick Place.

Many of the architectural tours are neck-craning exercises through the “Loop,” a large commercial neighbourhood in the heart of downtown. With or without a guide to lead you, a simple walk through the city centre is a journey across an arc of classic architectural styles.

The Railway Exchange Building has all the trademark design features of the famous Chicago School of Architecture – a steel frame poised on deeply set



Cloud Gate at Millennium Park

caissons. This innovative steel frame allowed large expanses of glass to catch the light, since it was no longer the walls that held up the building.

The Art Deco-style Metropolitan Tower was designed by Louis Sullivan, “The Father of the Skyscraper,” who played with abstract ornamentation and geometric forms. Sullivan was known for the “form follows function” principle of modern architecture – and the steel girder frame of the new skyscraper was the form that made it all happen.

Chicago is also famous for the post-war Modernist or International style – sometimes called the “skin and bones style” – pioneered by one of America’s most famous architects, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose stamp is everywhere across downtown. His post-war designs were based on the principle that the qualities of proportion, engineering and materials were what made a building beautiful. He was famous for the notion that “less is more” – building glass skyscrapers, open plazas and modernistic buildings.

Even the vast preserved green spaces contain architectural wonders. Like many other visitors, we were drawn to Millennium Park, with its iconic Cloud Gate (nicknamed the Bean), a shiny sculpture considered to be one of the world’s greatest pieces of public art. It attracts locals and visitors alike and is so photogenic that it’s almost impossible to snap a bad picture.



A city of museums and the arts

The Chicago CityPASS is an economical way to explore the top attractions, including museums, the art gallery, aquarium, planetarium and two of the city's towering skydecks. Over a four-day visit, we narrowed our choice of museums down to one each day, added in an ultimate Chicago food experience (Chicago is considered one of North America's great food cities), made sure to do lots of walking to burn off the calories, and in the evenings we slowed down for a little entertainment, whether jazz, blues or a comedy club.

To get a real bird's-eye view of one of the nation's largest cities, we took the ear-popping, 60-second elevator ride to the 103rd-floor Skydeck of the Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower). On a clear day, the vista takes in four states. At 443 metres in height, it's one of the tallest buildings in the Western Hemisphere. On a gusty day when it actually is windy in the Windy City, you may feel the building waver – it is designed to sway up to one metre from the centre. Movie buffs may recognize the Skydeck in Ferris Bueller's Day Off, where the main characters leaned their foreheads against the windows to gaze over the rooftops below. Across the river, the 360 Chicago Observation Deck serves spectacular views over Lake Michigan and the downtown from 94 floors up. We found while the views

from both buildings were jaw dropping, the lineups at the 360 deck were a little more manageable.

Close by, we stopped for lunch at a local institution, The Berghoff. The eatery is very Old Chicago and dates back to a time when the city was newly populated with German immigrants. At the end of Prohibition, The Berghoff was the first bar in the city to be issued a liquor licence. The decor is dark oak panelling, marble and ceramic tile, and the wait staff still wear white shirts and ties. The menu – leaning toward German and Continental – is filling and affordable (tip: especially wallet-friendly in the basement cafe, where there are few tourists but many local businesspeople on their lunch breaks). We made sure to try the signature drinks, both the delicious Adams Street house-brewed beer and root beer.

Chicago easily offers enough museum experiences to fill a two-week holiday, but in our four days we opted for one of the world's great galleries – the Art Institute of Chicago – the Field Museum of Natural History and the Shedd Aquarium. The Art Institute of Chicago holds one of the world's finest collections of classical and modern art, including *The Bedroom* by Vincent van Gogh, *American Gothic* by Grant Wood and hundreds of other pieces by masters including Claude Monet, Andy Warhol, Pablo Picasso, Georges Seurat, Marc Chagall and countless others.

After being marinated in the finest of the arts, we opted for meals at the more nitty-gritty end of the spectrum. Chicago is famous for street food, and during our stay we sampled Chicago-style hot dogs (always served with mustard, sweet green relish, sliced tomatoes and onions, never with ketchup), Italian beef sandwiches dripping with gravy from Portillo's, deep-dish pizza from Uno Pizzeria and cheeseburgers at the Billy Goat Tavern made famous by a John Belushi skit on Saturday Night Live: "Cheezborger! Cheezborger! You want doublecheez? Who's next?" No one really goes to the Billy Goat for the burgers; they go for the boisterous atmosphere and to soak up the legend of the infamous Billy Goat Curse that (allegedly) kept the city's beloved Cubs from the World Series. The walls of the tavern are covered with newspaper clippings about the event and scores of black and white photos of celebrities and politicians who have crossed the threshold.

There's no hiding the fact that we were heading to the Field Museum for the dinosaur exhibits. The Field is home to the world's most famous fossil, SUE, the second largest Tyrannosaurus rex specimen ever discovered – more than 12 metres long and four metres tall at the hip. Next door, the Shedd Aquarium is home to beluga whales, sea otters, penguins and every type of sea creature imaginable. Both facilities are large and can be overwhelming, but they also make great spots to find a bench, take a break and just drink in the wonders of the natural world.

The evenings were reserved for music and theatre. Chicago is known for both world-class jazz and blues, and clubs like Kingston Mines, B.L.U.E.S., Buddy Guy's Legends, Andy's Jazz Club, Blue Chicago and comedy improv at The Second City did not disappoint. (Warning: The drink prices at The Second City are calibrated for a captive audience, and with the current exchange rate, the price of a beer was almost twice what we paid in one of the smaller music clubs.)

There is much to experience and celebrate in a city like Chicago, and exploring it from an RV base can make the experience all that more affordable. What better than to take in all the sights, sounds and flavours the city has to offer and then retire for the evening to the familiar comfort of your own home on wheels. 🍁

Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travel with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Class B Roadtrek 210 Popular. Learn more at www.travelswithrigby.com.



For more information

www.choosechicago.com

Taste of Chicago (July 10-14) is one of the nation's premier outdoor food festivals, showcasing local eats, arts and music.

The free Chicago Jazz Festival (on Labour Day weekend) celebrates jazz artists from around the world.

Campgrounds within easy driving distance:

- Kankakee South KOA: one hour south
- Chicago Northwest KOA: one hour northwest
- Illinois Beach State Park: one hour north, along the shoreline of Lake Michigan

Chicago is also the starting point for a drive along Route 66.