

Chicago Tribune



BACK TO THE BEACH

Ariel Alexovich, RedEye
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Who needs Maui and Miami when Chicagoans have all they need for a scorchin' summer in their own back yard? The Chicago Park District boasts 29 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, all covered in a sea of beach towels and umbrellas.

You don't even have to pay to swim and sunbathe at any of Chicago's 31 beaches, although you'll have to shell out a few bucks to park at the most popular oases--and RedEye is here to tell you which are worth the money.

People-watching paradise

Oak Street Beach, 1000 N. Lake Shore Drive

Sand doesn't get any closer to the Mag Mile than this. Oak Street Beach adjoins Ohio Street Beach (400 N. Lake Shore Drive), combining for the largest beachgoing population in the city, so be sure to stake out your spot early.

Besides the wide sandy beach, there's also a concrete patio for those who don't want the sand to ruin their pedicures.

Gay hot spot

Kathy Osterman Beach, 5800 N. Lake Shore Drive

This North Side strip of sand, named for the late chief of the mayor's Office of Special Events, was once known for being one of the city's biggest beach volleyball hangouts. Now it might be better known for its role as a gay meeting spot.

"Osterman Beach is where the Belmont Rocks used to be, where gay people have always met," said Matthew Blancett, office manager at the Chicago Area Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. "The density of gay residents is increasing in Edgewater and Andersonville."

The beach also is popular with families because of its shallow water.

Best sand for your Shih Tzu

Montrose Beach, 4400 N. Lake Shore Drive

Concession stands, volleyball courts, a bait shop--Montrose Beach has all these things, but what puts this North Side destination on the map is its dog-friendliness. It's the only beach in the city where unleashed dogs can play in the sand and surf in a specially fenced area.

"Living in the city, it makes all the difference to have a beautiful place where dogs can run free and in full force," said Craig Wolf, 36, of Ukrainian Village, who takes her black lab Lobo and yellow lab Cooper to Montrose's fenced-off doggie beach at least twice a week year-round.

Canine owners also appreciate the chance to bond with other dog lovers and get advice.

"When my puppy was sick, I came here, and they told me how to take care of her," said Gerardo Benegas, 24, of Ravenswood. "The next day, the vet told me the exact same thing."

Best South Side beach

31st Street Beach, 3100 South

You don't need to head north to go swimming if you live south of the Loop. Lisa Arizzi, Chicago Park District spokeswoman, said the 31st Street Beach is one of the most popular on the South Side, mainly because of its skate park, nature area and boat launch/land site.

Fitness first

North Avenue Beach, 1600 N. Lake Shore Drive

Come to North Avenue Beach and you'll get to see a ship-shaped beach house.

Also, the rabid health fanatic can stop at the Crunch Fitness mini-gym before taking a dip into Lake Michigan or work out on the lakeshore bike and jogging trails extending all the way to Navy Pier.

The Chicago Sport and Social Club runs men's and coed beach volleyball leagues starting May 27 and coed teams at Montrose and Oak Street Beaches in June.

Most underused beach

Foster Avenue Beach, 5200 N. Lake Shore Drive

This North Side beach doesn't have the cache of Oak Street or all the fitness facilities of North Avenue. But if you're looking for a clean, peaceful beach far away from the crowd of hipsters and tourists, look no further. Foster Avenue Beach has beach volleyball courts, basketball hoops, a deli and a roomy beach house.

Still not convinced? Two words: free parking.

Sand box

All city beaches are officially open from Memorial Day through Labor Day, from 9 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., with the exception of the beach at the South Shore Cultural Center which closes at 8:30 p.m. Keep in mind that any beach can be closed for unhealthy levels of E. coli bacteria. Call the Park District at 312-742-PLAY before heading to the shore.

