

Chicago Tribune

Lakefront Anchors Our Own Sweet Home Chicago

Culture, sports, entertainment, fun are all here

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Time for most young travelers is limited, so don't waste it. Every month, Youth Movement brings you expert advice on affordable, imaginative travel to make the most of your days away from school or the office.

In Chicago, it's always cooler by the lake. In the summer, the lakefront is way cool with hot things to see and do along 29 miles of beaches, parks and playgrounds.

Lake Shore Drive divides the waterfront from parkland that frames views of Chicago's awesome skyline. It passes beaches, picturesque marinas and acres of trees, grass and gardens. Equally important to visitors is that it runs north and south along Lake Michigan, which is located on the east side of the city.

With three points of the compass referenced, it's difficult to get lost in Chicago.

To help decide which part of the lakefront to explore first, stop at the Chicago Cultural Center Visitor Information Center. Located at Randolph Street and Michigan Avenue, there's a coffee shop inside and plenty of places to sit and read the surplus of free information about daily events. Bring your laptop--the Cultural Center has free Wi-Fi.

If your Saturday morning is open, get there early to line up for a free ride on the "E!"--the trip takes passengers on an escorted architectural tour of the Loop on an elevated train; the downtown area--the Loop-- got its name from the route of the track you'll ride.

The Cultural Center is a haven for Chicagoans who work in the Loop. Many don't realize that it is the first free municipal cultural center in the country. The center hosts free "LunchBreak" or 12:15 p.m. concerts with a different music genre each weekday. If you want a taste of big-time art without a big-time price tag, check out the art exhibits. Special art shows rotate throughout the year. No surprise that this architectural jewel with the world's largest stained glass Tiffany dome is one of the top 10 attractions in the city.

From the Cultural Center there are four easy entries to the lakefront: the museum campus, Millennium Park, Navy Pier and Oak Street Beach. At the lake, you'll find Lakefront Trail; it caters to those on foot and on Segways and other wheels--bikes, roller blades, skates and boards. If you don't BYOB (bring your own bike/blades/ board), there are plenty of vendors that rent them.

Millennium Park is across the street from the Cultural Center and it is a rare treat, even for residents. Visitors can download a 40-minute audio tour to their iPods from the park's Web site (www.millenniumpark.org) or rent an MP3 player for \$5 at the Chicago Shop in the park.

The podcast walks you through the park with plenty of behind-the-scenes information and includes comments from people that made Millennium Park happen, like Mayor Richard M. Daley.

The 24.5-acre park is a blend of urban art and architecture within a natural landscape. Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate," a.k.a. "The Bean" sculpture, fascinates as its mirror-like surface distorts your reflection to the height of nearby skyscrapers. Don't resist the urge to take your own picture; look around and you'll see everyone is. Cool off with a walk in the water at Jaume Plensa's Crown Fountain. Check out the concert schedule for the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, designed by Frank Gehry.

At 6:30 p.m. for eight Thursdays starting June 22, free jazz concerts highlight Chicago musicians and guest artists from all over the world. Called "Made in Chicago: World Class Jazz," the last concert kicks off the Chicago Jazz Festival, Aug. 31-Sept. 3.

To get to the museum campus, look for "Free Trolley" signs on street corners. Catch a free ride on a trolley marked with a green triangle that is dedicated to the campus.

The museum campus is located at "1300 South," meaning 13 city blocks south of Madison, the starting point for the north/south street numbering system. (State Street divides streets east and west.) These location indications are painted on the trail; you may start at 1300 South but end up at 2400 North, which would be Lincoln Park Zoo at Fullerton Avenue. The museum campus is at the south end of the Chicago Harbor and serves as anchor for the Field Museum, Soldier Field, the John G. Shedd Aquarium and the Adler Planetarium.

From the campus, you can ride, walk or take the Shoreline water shuttle to Navy Pier. The shuttle operates between the Shedd and the Pier; service starts Memorial Day and continues through August. Weekday rates are \$6 one-way or \$12 for an all-day pass. With the mist of the lake in your face and the sun on your back, the ride on the water provides a welcome respite without interfering with sightseeing. Along the way you'll cruise through Monroe Harbor, and get picture-postcard views of the Chicago skyline including Sears Tower, Millennium Park, the Aon Building and the Prudential Building.

Navy Pier rocks into the wee hours each day of the week. There's live, free entertainment on the Bud Light Stage, touring venues at the Skyline Stage, world-class performances at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, plus the wonder of the 150-foot Ferris wheel that carries 40 gondolas holding six passengers each (\$5 per ticket). Head for a ride later in the day after families have started their treks home. Other attractions include a miniature golf course, an IMAX theater and lots of places to eat or to dine . . . in Chicago they know one from the other. On the Pier, you can get a cheeseburger at Billy Goat Tavern or you can cross the street to experience fine dining at Cite at the top of Lake Point Tower with its skyline lounge and a 360-degree view of the city and lakefront.

The views from Oak Street Beachstro and Castaways Bar and Grill are much closer to the ground. Open May through September, Beachstro is reconstructed each year at the curve on the south end of Oak Street Beach. Its menu is American and its deck provides an excellent vantage of the beach and sun bathers. It is accessible from the trail or by using the underpass from Oak Street under Michigan Avenue.

Castaways Bar and Grill is located in the North Avenue Boathouse at 1600 North. It offers ice cream and burgers on the first floor and rooftop dining with live, nightly entertainment (and more great views) upstairs.

North Avenue Beach is a haven for beach volleyball. It is one of three beaches where the Chicago Sports and Social Club leagues play. The CSSC is the world's largest beach volleyball league, with more than 20,000 players and 1,200 teams. If you get into a pick-up game, be prepared for competition. Get information at the boathouse, which also houses washrooms, concessions, an in-line hockey rink and an open-air gym.

Best buy: Hands down, that free Saturday ride on the "E" around the Loop. Great fun with a bit of history thrown in.

Big splurge: Dine at The Signature Room on top of the John Hancock Center. It's 95 floors up. American cuisine, live jazz on weekends and a cellar of 250 wines. Entrees range from \$25 to \$39.

More, more, more: Can you visit Chicago without taking in a baseball game? Not if you are a fan. The 2005 World Series Champion Chicago White Sox play at U.S. Cellular Field (www.whitesox.mlb.com).

The Chicago Cubs play at Wrigley Field (chicagocubs.mlb.com). Both locations are accessible by public transportation.

More information: For information on bike and inline skate rentals, and lakefront tours that take off from the North Avenue Boathouse, Navy Pier, and Millennium Park, visit www.bikeandroll.com.

Chicago Cultural Center: www.chicagoculturalcenter.org

Chicago tourism: www.877.chicago.com; www.cityofchicago.org/tourism