

Easy Access



A low-angle photograph of the Chicago skyline, featuring several prominent skyscrapers like the Willis Tower and the Aon Center. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall lighting suggests a bright, slightly overcast day. The text 'in Chicago' is overlaid on the upper half of the image in a blue, cursive font.

in Chicago

Whether you're into sports, the arts,
sampling ethnic cuisine, or simply
visiting one of America's great cities,
hie thee to Chi-town! By Laurel Van Horn



QUICK CLICKS

Easy Access Chicago

(800) 226-6632
www.easyaccesschicago.org

Illinois Bureau of Tourism

(800) 226-6632
www.enjoyillinois.com

Chicago Office of Tourism

(312) 744-2400
www.cityofchicago.org

Chicago Greeter

(312) 744-8000
www.chicagogreeter.com

Millennium Park

(312) 742-1168
www.millenniumpark.org

Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities

(312) 744-4496
www.cityofchicago.gov/disabilities

Chicago Transit Authority

(312) 836-7000
www.transitchicago.com

Walk Chicago Tours

(708) 557-5400
www.walkchicagotours.com

Sittercity

(888) 748-2489
www.sittercity.com

Accessible Taxis

(800) 281-4466

CHICAGO

is a city that's easy to love. Perhaps that's why it has so many nicknames—Windy City, Chi-town, Second City, City of Big Shoulders, City by the Lake, and even City on the Make. Immortalized by poets, songwriters, and filmmakers, this beautiful, modern city on the shore of Lake Michigan has a rough and tumble, colorful history that one can still feel and glimpse. Just ride the "L" or walk beneath its shadow in the Loop to see what I mean.

Whatever you want, you can find here. Chicago is known for its great food, unique architecture, amazing museums, world-renowned music festivals, exciting sports teams, famous comedy clubs, top-notch theatre, and world-class shopping, as well as its beautiful parks and lakefront. For families—on a budget or not—this city matches any in the world for kid-friendly activities. Whether you stay a week or a month, Chicago's seemingly endless attractions will keep every family member entertained.

It's no surprise, then, that the city currently welcomes more than 33 million leisure travelers a year, many of whom have disabilities. In a 2005 survey of adult travelers with disabilities conducted by Open Doors Organization, Chicago ranked third in popularity among U.S. cities. In 2007 the National Organization on Disability also recognized Chicago as one of America's most disability-friendly cities. As an older city, it's far from perfect, but what sets Chicago apart is its real commitment to inclusion, for both residents and visitors alike.

New Access Guide

Tangible proof of that commitment is the new *Easy Access Chicago* guide, released by Open Doors Organization in January 2008. Sponsored by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, the guide's aim is to make trip planning as easy for visitors with disabilities as for everyone else. More than 300 accessible properties are included—airports, train and bus stations, hotels, restaurants, and attractions of all types—along with useful services and resources. The online restaurant and hotel databases are searchable by access features, location, and price, so finding properties that meet your specific requirements is a snap. An abridged print version of *Easy Access Chicago* can be ordered free from the Illinois Bureau of Tourism. Be sure to request a Chicago Official Visitors Guide as well, since it contains the general information you'll also need.

Getting There

With two international airports, O'Hare and Midway, less than an hour from downtown, one can shop around for airfares. Both have accessible

Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) train stations, if you can manage the long walk. Continental Airport Express offers a mid-price alternative: their lift-equipped vans, which accommodate two wheelchairs, must be ordered at least a day ahead. Accessible taxis are also available by calling a centralized dispatch service (*the number is listed in “Quick Clicks”*). With advance planning, registered paratransit riders can extend their eligibility to Chicago and schedule an airport pickup on arrival. Rental cars with hand controls and accessible vans are also available.

If you prefer not to fly, the Amtrak and Greyhound terminals lie just west of the Loop. A new company, Megabus, also offers accessible service between major Midwest cities and Chicago. If you’re driving or renting a car, be sure to bring your parking placard. Accessible spaces downtown are scarce, but one can park for free at most metered spaces.

When to Go

Chicago’s weather tends to be extreme, so if you can’t handle the heat or cold come in the spring or fall. No matter when you visit there’s always a lot to do, although the major lakefront festivals all take place in summer. Check the Illinois Bureau of Tourism Web site for a full calendar of events. Access features at Chicago festivals—overseen by the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities—include integrated wheelchair seating, a reserved seating area near the main stage, adapted restrooms, brochures in Braille and large print and, with advance notice, sign language interpreters.

Where to Stay

Because downtown Chicago is quite compact, one can easily stay in any of the neighborhoods along the lake from the South Loop to Lincoln Park/Lakeview and still travel quickly to the city’s main attractions. All of the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) buses are lift equipped. During the summer the city also provides free accessible trolleys from the Loop to Museum Campus, Magnificent Mile, Navy Pier, and Lincoln Park.

For Museum Campus—home to Adler Planetarium, Field Museum, Shedd Aquarium, and Soldier Field—hotels in the South Loop and Loop are closest at hand. If the theatre, arts, or architecture are your focus, your best choice is the Loop, also convenient for the Grant Park festivals and Millennium Park. For Navy Pier and Michigan Avenue shopping the nearest hotels are in Magnificent Mile and River North, which have many other kid-friendly attractions such as the Rainforest Café, American Girl, and the ESPN Zone.

Chicago Cubs fans may prefer to stay near Wrigley Field in the Lincoln Park/Lakeview area, which also boasts the Lincoln Park Zoo, Notebaert Nature Museum, and Chicago History Museum. Compared to other major cities, Chicago hotels are relatively affordable, especially off season. For further savings one can stay near O’Hare or Midway Airports and either drive or use the accessible CTA trains to commute downtown.

Millennium Park

Currently Chicago’s top attraction, Millennium Park is also tops on access. Located just north of the Art Institute of Chicago, this new 24.5-acre park is a unique center for art, music, architecture, and landscape design. Free outdoor concerts are held in the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, Frank Geh-



The “Bean” in Millennium Park.

Clockwise from left: The Oriental Theater at the Ford Center; the original water tower on Michigan Avenue downtown; the Ferris Wheel at Navy Pier Park.



ry's masterpiece, and the Crown Fountain and Cloud Gate sculpture are also crowd pleasers. At the Millennium Park Welcome Center at 301 E. Randolph wheelchairs are available, as well as park maps, information, and event schedules. Free daily tours begin at 11:00 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., May 31-Oct. 31.

Fun for Families

One perennial favorite for families is Navy Pier, with its summer fireworks on Wednesday and Saturday evenings, Ferris wheel, IMAX Theatre, and the Children's Museum of Chicago. Boat tours also leave from here, and one can rent



HELPFUL HINTS

Chicago street numbers start at State and Madison downtown. State Street divides east from west, while Madison divides north from south.

CTA Visitor Passes allow unlimited rides on city buses and trains. Purchase them online and at airports and Visitor Information Centers (www.transitchicago.com).

If you plan to visit the top sites, Attractions Passes can save you money. Choose from CityPass (www.citypass.com/city/chicago) and GoChicagoCard (www.gochicagocard.com).

Many museums offer free admission one day or evening per week. The Art Institute of Chicago, for example, is free on Thursday night (www.artic.edu).

For a meal or drink with the best view in town, head for the Signature Room/Lounge on the 95th/96th floor of the John Hancock Building (www.signatureroom.com).

bicycles of every variety, including hand cycles for adults and children. With a number of restaurants to choose from, one can easily spend the whole day.

The same is true of Museum Campus, where exploring just one of its institutions can take many hours. The new exhibits at the Shedd Aquarium, like the Wild Reef and Oceanarium, are so realistic that it's hard to believe you're on Lake Michigan and not the Pacific Ocean. Like the Museum of Science and Industry farther south in Hyde Park, these buildings have undergone major renovations to improve accessibility.

Another attraction that merits a day's visit is the Lincoln Park Zoo, home to more than 1,000 mammals, reptiles, and

birds. Amazingly, admission here and at the historic Conservatory next door is free. Wheelchair access in general is good, especially in new exhibits like the Regenstein Center for African Apes. If possible, avoid the pathways at the north end that have steep grades. Popular with little kids are the Carousel and Farm in the Zoo, where they can pet the animals. There are also paddleboats for rent.

If you love theatre, many local companies offer productions for children, including Chicago Playworks, Goodman Theatre, Lifeline Theatre, and Raven Theatre. One unique Chicago institution is the Noble Horse Theatre, where the actors are horses and children can visit the stables and take wagon rides after the show.

For parents who'd like a night out on their own, Sittercity is an online babysitter resource headquartered in Chicago that serves other major cities as well. They have sitters who are experienced in caring for children with disabilities and seniors.

Parks and Recreation

In warm weather, the city's parks and beaches are a magnet for residents and visitors alike. The Chicago Park District, which includes 552 parks and 33 beaches, is continually improving access. At present 11 beaches have beach mats to provide an accessible path through the sand, and 61 city pools have pool lifts. The Judd Goldman Adaptive Sailing Program, run in conjunction with the Park District, serves both children and adults. Also accessible is the Diversey Driving Range in Lincoln Park. If you have the time and transport to venture outside the city, both the Chicago Botanic Garden—25 miles north of Chicago—and Morton Arboretum, which is 25 miles west, offer wonderful opportunities to enjoy nature. Both have accessible trams, trails, and visitor centers.

Tons of Tours

Like the city itself, tours of Chicago can be quite unique. The Loop Tour Train, for example, provides a history of the 130 year-old downtown area and the elevated "L" train system which encircles it. This free accessible tour—sponsored by the Chicago Office of Tourism and narrated by the Chicago Architecture Foundation—takes place Saturday mornings from May through September. Tickets are available on a first-come, first-served basis from the Visitor Information Center at 77 E. Randolph.

Chicago Greeter tours, also free, depart from the same location. These walking tours, guided by volunteers and using public transportation, can explore virtually any neighborhood or area of interest, and they can be adapted for accessibility as needed. Be sure to reserve well in advance. Sixty-minute tours of downtown are also available from the InstaGreeter booth at 77 E. Randolph on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays only.

Walking Chicago Tours, a private company, also offers small-group, accessible tours with customized itineraries. For no additional charge they can provide a manual





The city's majestic skyline, at top. The Chicago Art Institute, above, and Lou Mitchell's, below, a landmark restaurant since 1923.

Did You Know?

Chicago hosts America's largest annual Disability Pride Parade, which takes place this year on Saturday, July 26. Call (312) 640-2195 or go to www.disabilityprideparade.com.

What's to Eat?

Anyone who's been to Chicago knows that the locals love to eat well. While the city's infamous stockyards are long gone, Chicago's steakhouses still serve the finest cuts of meat. Surprisingly, the city's seafood is just as good. Chicago may be popularly known for its deep-dish pizzas, but in recent years the city has become recognized as a culinary capital, where cutting-edge cuisines like molecular gastronomy are being born at trendy restaurants such as Moto and Alinea. Meanwhile, the many ethnic groups who have settled in Chicago continue to add their own flavors, with Moroccan, Mexican, and Thai restaurants now joining their German, Czech, and Polish predecessors. And for many visitors, a trip to Chicago is incomplete without a meal at one of the excellent Greek restaurants in the West Loop. So much to eat, so little time...

Easy to Love

As a frequent visitor to Chicago myself, I have to note that one of the nicest things about the city is its people. This is still the Midwest, after all, where good manners are the norm and no one is in such a hurry that they can't be helpful. This makes for a relaxing atmosphere that, while intangible, is nonetheless a critical ingredient for a successful holiday. Come experience it for yourself—the lakefront setting, cultural riches, superior accessibility, and congenial atmosphere—and you, too, will see why Chicago is a city that's easy to love. ☺

Chicago Festivals 2008

Taste of Chicago, June 27-July 6
Air and Water Show, Aug. 16-17
Latin Music Festival, Aug. 23-24
Jazz Festival, Aug. 28-31



wheelchair and pickup/dropoff service at Loop hotels in a lift-equipped van. There is a variety of accessible transportation listed in the preceding sidebar.

For a daylong hop-on/hop-off city tour your best bet is the Chicago Trolley Company, which stops at 14 key sites around downtown Chicago that you're bound to enjoy. Their trolleys are lift-equipped with two wheelchair securements in each car. Boat tours are another popular way to enjoy the city's skyline, which provides one of the best ways for wheelchair travelers to enjoy the sights along the fabled Chicago River. Boats that currently accommodate passengers in wheelchairs include Mystic Blue Cruises, Odyssey Cruises, Shoreline Sightseeing, and Spirit of Chicago, all based at Navy Pier.

SPOKES ON THE WATER

Navy Pier
www.navypier.com

Mystic Blue Cruises
www.mysticbluecruises.com

Odyssey Cruises
www.odysseycruises.com/chicago

Shoreline Sightseeing
www.shorelinesightseeing.com

Spirit of Chicago
www.spiritofchicago.com