

Windows to Chicago's past

By Hal Weitzman

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"This is where the Indian trading post was," says Carol Hitchie as we reach the junction of Fullerton and Clark.

It looks an inauspicious spot for the purchase of covered wagons and beaver pelts. We are in Lincoln Park, about three miles north of downtown Chicago. There is commerce all around – a House of Hunan Chinese restaurant, a fitness centre and a purveyor of cosmetic dentistry – but no sign of any Native Americans.

In some places in Chicago it is hard to conjure up what the past looked like. In others, history is impeccably preserved – not in individual buildings, as in the city's downtown, but in entire neighbourhoods. Just a mile or so north of Chicago's centre, the Old Town district is a living museum, a residential area that, thanks to a municipal preservation order and the determination of its residents to retain its unique charm, looks just the way it did in the decades following the Great Fire of 1871.

Along with Lincoln Park and Lakeview, the two neighbourhoods directly north of Old Town, the area is fertile ground for aimless wandering, shopping and architecture-spotting, punctuated by café and pub visits.

If your thing is rambling rather than ambling, the three North Side districts also hug the shore of Lake Michigan and feature bike trails, running tracks, as well as beaches, tennis courts, marinas and a golf course.

Old Town is easily walkable from downtown but when I meet Hitchie at the Chicago Cultural Center – the rendezvous point for all "greeter tours", a free service offered by the city – we decide to take the bus to give ourselves more time to explore. It is glorious and sunny but the forecast warned of rain, so we are both equipped with umbrellas. In June, the Chicago weather is particularly bipolar, and fair skies can give way in minutes to thunderstorms.

Our trip begins at the Chicago History Museum, which sits at the southern end of Lincoln Park. Although we are in Lincoln Park the park, we are not yet in Lincoln Park the neighbourhood. North Avenue, a big east-west thoroughfare, is the border delineating the Gold Coast – one of the city's richest districts, where Hugh Hefner lived in the original Playboy mansion – from Old Town.

The museum is an ideal place to start any trip to Chicago. It's one of those institutions that doesn't believe in overwhelming you with information so much as providing a general sense of what happened, when and why. After all, the real joy of Chicago's history is seeing it in context.

A lot of history happened on this stretch of the North Side. The Great Fire burned itself out at Fullerton Avenue, on the border between Old Town and Lincoln Park. The 1929 St Valentine's Day Massacre was carried out in a garage in Lincoln Park. And Lincoln Park and Old Town were the scene of clashes between police and

EAT, DRINK, BOOGIE

An FT correspondent's guide SUMMER FESTIVALS

Chicago bursts into life in summer, its residents determined to play hard after a long Midwestern winter. From June to September, visitors are almost guaranteed to be in town during a festival of some variety.

Perhaps the best known is [Ravinia](#), the US's oldest outdoor music festival, in Highland Park, just outside the city. This year marks its 40th anniversary, with performances from Tom Jones, Yo-Yo Ma, Elvis Costello and the usual residency by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

The younger crowd flocks to [Lollapalooza](#) in Grant Park. This summer's line-up features seasoned rockers such as Lou Reed and Depeche Mode alongside newer bands such as Kings of Leon and the Killers.

The park, the beating heart of downtown, is also the venue for events such as [Taste of Chicago](#), the world's largest food festival, and [Summerdance](#), which offers free dance lessons and then features live bands so you can practise your fancy footwork.

RESTAURANTS AND

anti-Vietnam protesters during the 1968 Democratic convention.

As we leave the museum, Hitchie explains that the land that became Lincoln Park was originally a paupers' graveyard. As part of the "Plan of Chicago" presented in 1909 by Daniel Burnham, the urban planner and architect, the city's lakefront was turned into public parkland. To fulfil Burnham's vision, some 31,000 coffins were exhumed, with the families of the interred having to pay the city \$1.95 each for the privilege. "They still come across bodies occasionally nowadays," Hitchie says with a grimace.

Across the street is the entrance to the Old Town Triangle District, filled with homes built in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. As in the centre of town, the Great Fire destroyed everything in what was at the time a neighbourhood of working-class German immigrants.

Old Town was initially exempt from the ordinance that all new buildings had to be made of fireproof masonry, leaving dozens of small-frame wooden workers' cottages that still stand today. Many have been lovingly restored, painted in vibrant colours with beautiful hardwood doors and copper gutters.

The area manages to avoid being twee, however. The cottages rub shoulders with redbrick townhouses, large single-family New England-style homes and über-modern dwellings with tall, narrow windows and dark brickwork. Old Town was, and still is, an area much loved by artists, and much like the eclectic works they produce, the different architectural styles sit together, if not seamlessly, then at least comfortably.

The Triangle is the closest thing to a village within Chicago's city limits. Even though it is near the main road, once we enter the district the traffic noise drops right down and is overwhelmed by birdsong. We may be in the heart of the US's third-biggest city but people on the street smile and greet each other with polite hellos.

Then it is east towards Lake Michigan again, emerging at the entrance to Lincoln Park zoo. The zoo, which is free, is crowded and bustling, so we walk through it to the Alfred Caldwell Lily Pond. Like the Triangle, this is a serene oasis. Rabbits and chipmunks frolic by a pool built to resemble a prairie stream, surrounded by piled-up flat rocks evoking the cliffs overlooking the Illinois River downstate.

Caldwell, who landscaped the pond in the 1930s, intended to create a naturalistic landscaped representation of the Prairie School style of Jens Jensen and Frank Lloyd Wright. This is a little jewel, and the few people there look as if they are worried we might reveal the secret of how beautiful and restful it is to the hordes at the zoo just metres away.

We continue on to the Lincoln Park neighbourhood, where Hitchie is keen to show me the Burling Row House District, a brick terrace that was one of the first streets rebuilt after the Great Fire. The houses are Italianate, restrained and elegant.

Armitage Avenue, with its trendy restaurants, funky boutiques and street flower displays, is called by many "the most beautiful street in Chicago" but time is pressing, so we board a bus north to Lakeview.

In the 19th century, Lakeview was just a resort hotel in a farming area known as the celery capital of America. "Where they once grew celery, now they grow condominiums," says Hitchie. And so to Buena Vista Terrace, a hidden gem of a street built at the turn of the century. Two long terraces face each other, each an inverted mirror of the other. The end house of one terrace is an exact replica of the house at the other end of the opposite terrace, and so on. It is like a mathematical puzzle made into a street.

HOTELS

The **Park Grill** in Millennium Park (near Anish Kapoor's "**Cloud Gate**" sculpture, nicknamed The Bean) is a good spot for drinking and people-watching, or pop across the street to **The Gage**, which has an impressive beer selection.

Sixteen, the restaurant at the **Trump International Hotel**, boasts wonderful views of downtown and has a newly opened terrace that is sure to be one of the hottest spots of the summer.

For gorging on old-fashioned, cellulite-inducing Chicago deep-dish pizza, **Lou Malnati's** is one of the most traditional establishments.

Like the Trump Hotel, the **Peninsula** combines top-notch accommodation with fine dining: its **Shanghai Terrace** restaurant is one of the best Chinese eateries in the city. **The Drake** and the **Palmer House Hilton** offer traditional splendour, while **Hotel 71** is a hipper option, located at the nexus of Chicago's shopping and cultural centres. Film buffs note: it was from the penthouse that Christian Bale's Batman scoured the city in *The Dark Knight*.

www.millenniumpark.org
www.choosechicago.com

Lincoln Park and Old Town are undoubtedly beautiful but they are also exclusive. In a city that has huge ethnic diversity, the two neighbourhoods are very white and consequently do not fully reflect Chicago as a city. Lakeview, though, is somewhat more mixed: its white, African-American, Latino, gay and Jewish residents live together with few tensions, something unusual in such a segregated city. Old Town is a window into Chicago's past. Perhaps Lakeview represents its future.

Hal Weitzman is the FT's Chicago correspondent

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