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.
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.

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