

“Windy City” Offers Loop, Lakeside, Lots of Things to Enjoy This Is America Visits Chicago



A popular spot to enjoy the sun, Oak Street Beach along Chicago's Lake Michigan (Photo by Steve Ember)

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This Is America. I'm Steve Ember. Today, we visit Chicago, Illinois. It is America's third largest city. It has The Loop...the Lakefront...and lots of exciting things to enjoy. Come along with us, as we visit the "Windy City."

Chicago has many nicknames besides "The Windy City." A number of them came from the lines of American poet Carl Sandburg, including "Hog Butcher for the World," "Player with Railroads," and "City of the Big Shoulders."

But many simply – and proudly - call it:

My kind of Town, Chicago is

My kind of town, Chicago is

My kind of people, too

People who smile at you

We're aboard/on a Chicago Transit Authority elevated train, heading for Chicago's downtown center known as "The Loop."

[Train Announcement]

"This is Adams and Wabash. Transfer to Orange and Green Line trains at Adams and Wabash. This is a Brown Line train to Kimble."

The system, also known simply by the letter "L," carries trains from Chicago's northern, western, and southern areas, and then makes a complete circle – or loop – of the downtown district, on a large overhead structure, with many station stops, running high above the city streets.

"This is Madison and Wabash."

There are also two subway lines running under the Loop, which serve additional routes of the city's extensive rapid transit rail network.

The “L’s” elevated railway loop is bordered by Wabash Avenue on the east, Lake Street and the Chicago River on the north, Wells Street on the west, and Adams Street on the south.

Each station along the “L” provides easy connections to shopping, hotels, restaurants and food stands, entertainment, music and cultural centers, and city and state government offices. The Loop is also the location of the city’s financial district, centered around La Salle Street. The financial district is home to the Chicago Board of Trade, the Chicago Stock Exchange and many banks.

In the Loop, you’ll also find the Willis Tower. It’s the tallest building in Chicago, with its Skydeck observation level providing visitors with exciting views of the city.

‘Chicago Picasso’ - A Nice Gift, But What Does It Represent?

The Chicago Picasso sculpture is a popular destination in the Loop’s Daley Plaza. It was a gift from the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso to the people of Chicago. It’s an eye-catcher and children love to climb on it, but no one seems to know what the sculpture represents.

Chicago newspaper columnist Mike Royko, covered the unveiling of the sculpture in 1967. He wrote: “Interesting design, I’m sure. But the fact is, it has a long stupid face and looks like some giant insect that is about to eat a smaller, weaker insect.”

Well, as we say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The Loop district actually extends east to the wide boulevard of Michigan Avenue, with its large stretches of green parkland along the shore of Lake Michigan. It also extends southward, by several blocks, to Roosevelt Road, and westward to the Chicago River.

Chicago Means High Spirits and Civic Pride

The people of Chicago are known for high spirits and a sense of fun and civic pride.

[Chicago's St. Patrick's Day Parade]

For example, the Chicago River is usually colored bright green to celebrate Saint Patrick's Day. On that day, people say, "Everyone in the city is Irish."

[Mayor Daly wishing Happy St Patrick's Day]

Another fun event – if not for everyone! - happens during Chicago's often bitterly cold winters. It's the Polar Plunge "swim" in Lake Michigan. This year, Mayor Rahm Emanuel and 3,000 other people jumped into the icy waters on a day when the air temperature was minus 12 degrees Celsius. The event helped pay for Special Olympics Chicago, a program for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Lakefront Offers Relaxation

Of course, thousands of people enjoy Lake Michigan during warmer weather. Chicago has that, too! The city stretches along the southwestern side of the lake. The area is inviting to people who enjoy sailing, swimming and other water sports.

People exercise along lakefront bicycle paths. Or they may stretch out on blankets along the wide Oak Street Beach in the Gold Coast neighborhood on Chicago's Near North Side.

The View from 'Big John'

There are famous Chicago landmarks nearby, like the stately Drake Hotel. Towering above the beach is another one of Chicago's modern tall buildings, the John Hancock Center, which *also* has an observation floor. While not as tall as the Willis Tower, "Big John," as Chicagoans like to call the Hancock building, offers dramatic views of the shoreline of Lake Michigan, as well as the downtown panorama of Chicago's many tall buildings that make up its distinctive skyline. The view is especially breathtaking at night!

Lake Michigan is far more than a place to spend one's free time...or look out over from Big John's observation deck. Chicago is a major industrial and commercial port. It became a major port when the Saint Lawrence Seaway opened in 1959. The seaway links the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean, connecting many ports in both the U.S. and Canada.

In addition to its natural beauty, Lake Michigan can bring not only heavy snows and sub-freezing temperatures in winter, but a brutal wind as well.

When the Wind Blows and the Snow Flies...

Over the years, Chicago has built the Pedway, an extensive network of underground pedestrian tunnels in the Loop that provide a more comfortable way to move about when the weather is unfriendly. A portion of the Pedway also connects the Loop with the Lakefront commuter rail stations to the east. The Pedway connects many of the downtown stores, office buildings, hotels, and apartment buildings, and even provides shops and services. So, in many cases, Chicagoans can reach their destinations without too much discomfort from the city's difficult winters.

But back to Michigan Avenue, which is perhaps the best known street in Chicago. Of course, musically some might argue with that statement...

On State Street, that great street

I just want to say,

They do things they don't do on Broadway

More from that song later, but, as we were saying, Michigan Avenue...

It Survived the Great Fire of 1871

The Chicago Water Tower on North Michigan Avenue is in the center of what Chicagoans call the Magnificent Mile. Popular stores and large office buildings line the street. The old water tower and nearby pumping station were among the few structures to survive the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Heading downtown on Michigan Avenue, we'll stop and look up at the Tribune Tower and the Wrigley Building, watch the boats on the Chicago River, cross over the river on the Michigan Avenue Bridge, and spend some time relaxing in Millennium Park. The huge park covers 10 hectares, between Michigan and Columbus Drive to the east, and between East Randolph Street on the north and East Monroe on the south. The park took almost nine years to finish and cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Millennium Park has one of the largest outdoor sculptures in the world. British artist Anish Kapoor created this 10-ton work of public art. And the Catalan Spanish artist Jaume Plensa designed the Crown Fountain in the park. It may be one of the world's most unusual fountains. The artist set a pool of water between two tall glass towers. Video images appear on the towers. The images are a series of pictures of objects in nature and people's faces. The water appears to fall from their mouths. The faces represent the many different groups of people who live in Chicago.

About 45 percent of the population is white. The city also has many African Americans and people of Hispanic ancestry, and a small percentage of Asians. Over the years many immigrants have settled in Chicago. Many people have ethnic roots in Poland, Russia, and other Slavic countries, Germany, Ireland or Italy. But more recent immigrants have come from all over the world.

Millennium Park was a dream of former Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley. He was elected to the office six times and served just before current mayor Rahm Emanuel took office. Mr. Daley and other city leaders believed a big park would bring more people, more homes and more businesses to the area. Mr. Daley's father, Richard J. Daley, also served as Chicago's mayor for many years.

Chicago is often called "the city that works." And the Daleys were known for getting things done. At its best, the city's political machine has made things work smoothly, without major problems. But at its worst, the buildup of power in one group led to cases of corruption over the years.

Chicago Offers Culture, Music, Art

The Chicago Cultural Center, stands on East Randolph Street at Michigan Avenue. The building that now houses the center was completed in 1897.

Many people probably could spend all day there, and not get tired of it. People say the restored building looks like a home for kings and queens. Some call it “the People’s Palace.” There are white walls made of marble from Carrara, Italy. And there are two domes. The bigger dome is one of the largest Tiffany designs in the world. It rises almost 12 meters above the floor. Artists and musicians present free talks and perform at the cultural center.

Chicago is famous for its music, from rock, blues and jazz, to classical. The Chicago Symphony is considered one of the world’s finest. Lurlean Hunter bridge

And if you like jazz and blues, be sure to visit Rush Street.

Lurlean Hunter sings:

If you could see me now, you’d know how blue I’ve been

Many great musicians of the past played in clubs there, and the tradition continues today.

Perhaps then you’d realize, I’m still in love with you

There is even a famous musical named “Chicago.” The actor, dancer and film director Bob Fosse was born in Chicago. He created dance routines for the musical, written by John Kander and Fred Ebb. The show opened on New York’s Broadway in 1975.

It had to do with Chicago’s colorful lawless era of the 1920s.

It starred Broadway greats Gwen Verdon, Jerry Ohrbach...and Chita Rivera.

Come on Babe, why don't we paint the town

And all that jazz

I'm gonna rouge my knees and pull my stockings down

And all that jazz

Start the car, I know a whoopee spot

Where the gin is cold but the piano's hot

It's just a noisy hall where there's a nightly brawl

And all that jazz

Well, now, as you can probably imagine, a city with so much to offer as Chicago, cannot really be sampled in just one program. So we will definitely come back another time...and show you more!

The L as Movie Star

We started our visit today by riding the L into Chicago's Loop. The L is so much a part of Chicago that it's not surprising to see it in many movies set in the "Windy City."

Film director Andrew Davis grew up in Chicago. He used the L in films including "The Package," "Code of Silence," "Above the Law," and, of course, "The Fugitive."

[Andrew Davis talks about filming "The Fugitive"]

"This is done on a moving train at night, back and forth, in a loop around The Loop. I've had a lot of experience shooting on the L's in Chicago. Almost all of my films I've done there have the L as part of the fabric, and they were very cooperative with us."

[From "The Fugitive" (Movie, 1993)]

L Motorman: Next stop, Balbo Station, Balbo

Andreas Katsoulas (the one-armed man): "This is my stop."

Harrison Ford (Richard Kimble): "This is my stop, too."

Transit Policeman: "Kimble!" [Gunshots]

[L Train goes into emergency stop as Kimble pulls emergency handle]

Harrison Ford (Kimble): "You missed your stop!"

Andrew Davis: "I love you, Chicago!"

So do we! This program was written by Jerilyn Watson, who grew up in Chicago, and by yours truly Steve Ember, who likes to visit, ride the L, look at the exciting mix of architecture, and take pictures in the "Windy City" whenever he can. Join us again next week for another This is America from VOA Learning English.

Frank Sinatra sings "Chicago"

Chicago, Chicago, that toddlin' town

Chicago, Chicago, I'll show you around

I love it

Bet your bottom dollar, you'll lose the blues in Chicago, Chicago

The town that [evangelist] Billy Sunday couldn't shut down

On State Street, that great street, I just want to say,

They do things they don't do on Broadway

They have the time, the time of their life

I saw a man, he danced with his wife

In Chicago, Chicago, my home town.