

CHICAGOSTYLE

Channeling his inner tourist in the Windy City, [Guy Trebay](#) tastes the famously cutting-edge cuisine, explores the Obamas' neighborhood, and is wowed by Renzo Piano's new modern wing at the Art Institute—a symbol of the welcome transformation of this Midwestern metropolis. Photographed by [Jonny Valiant](#)



A view from the Art Institute of Chicago's new Modern Wing, designed by Renzo Piano, overlooking Millennium Park and the Frank Gehry amphitheater. Opposite: Alberto Giacometti's Tall Figure and Walking Man II and Pablo Picasso's Nude Under a Pine Tree, in the museum addition.

If you don't like the weather, wait three minutes,"

a friend told me soon after I landed in Chicago. This is one of the most frequently uttered clichés about the Windy City, and now I know why. I arrived to fine spring sunshine, and in no time was treated to cloud banks advancing in a gloomy armada, followed by a rain squall, a mini heat spell—and snow. The shadow falling over the window as I unpacked in my room at the Peninsula was caused by a flurry that abruptly turned the area into a snow globe. This micro-climatic event lasted roughly 10 minutes and then cleared. It was May again.

I had come to Chicago to check out the celebrated food scene and to see the stores where Michelle Obama buys the clothes that have transformed her into if not the most fashion-conscious First Lady ever (that would be a toss-up between Mary Todd Lincoln and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis), then certainly the only president's wife to have worn Commes des Garçons. And, of course, I planned to explore the spectacular new Renzo Piano–designed addition to the Art Institute of Chicago.

I already knew about Chicago's world-class architecture and world-class art collections, that it was the American birthplace of molecular physics and is ground zero for molecular gastronomy on this continent. I was aware that its fecund political scene somehow birthed both the Jerry Springer–style train-wreck governor Rod Blagojevich and ... that other guy, the leader of the free world.

Still, for me Chicago had too long been terra incognita, which is why I understood when Erin Hogan, public affairs director of the Art Institute, told me too many people "still have this misconception that Chicago is all crooked politicians, guns, and gangsters. You know, Al Capone. Bang, bang."

I will give you this. The odds are long that not 20 minutes after this exchange occurred I would stumble across a

shoot-out in the middle of Michigan Avenue, specifically the swanky retail stretch of it called the Magnificent Mile. A thing like that could happen anywhere in our gun-happy country. But until I hit Chicago I had never seen a cop draw a gun before. Now I have. The event served to illustrate how paradoxical Chicago can be, and not just in the imagination. The city is, as advertised, staccato, chic, dynamic, and like something out of a cartoon.

The Chicago I encountered turned out to be less the monolithic Second City than a congeries of neighborhoods, entirely unlike. It is a surprisingly mercurial place operating under the marine influence of Lake Michigan, a body of water so vast and oceanic you could sink Vermont and New Hampshire in it all but invisibly.

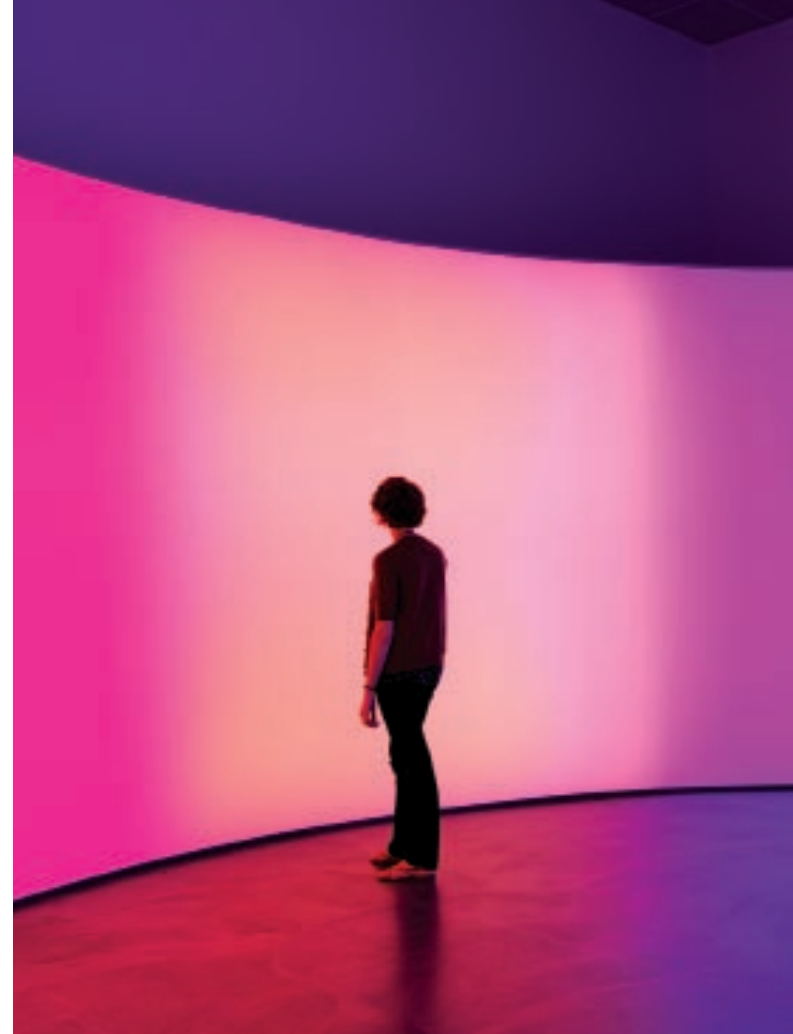
As Shane Gabier, who, with his partner and boyfriend, Christopher Peters, runs a design collective called Creatures of the Wind, told me, "Chicago is a really casual place these days." Over roast chicken one night at Lula Café, a bustling restaurant in Logan Square, Gabier remarked that Chicago has become "kind of like Portland or Seattle, but with some edgier moments, at this halfway mark between the Pacific and New York."

In style terms, that mash-up quality is embodied at the upper reaches by Blake, a minimalist retail temple where the Martin Margiela clothes are displayed with ecclesiastical reverence, and also by Ikram, a crammed Rush Street boutique owned by Ikram Goldman, the woman who acts as Michelle Obama's unofficial style consigliere, not that you would ever get Ms. Goldman to admit as much in print.

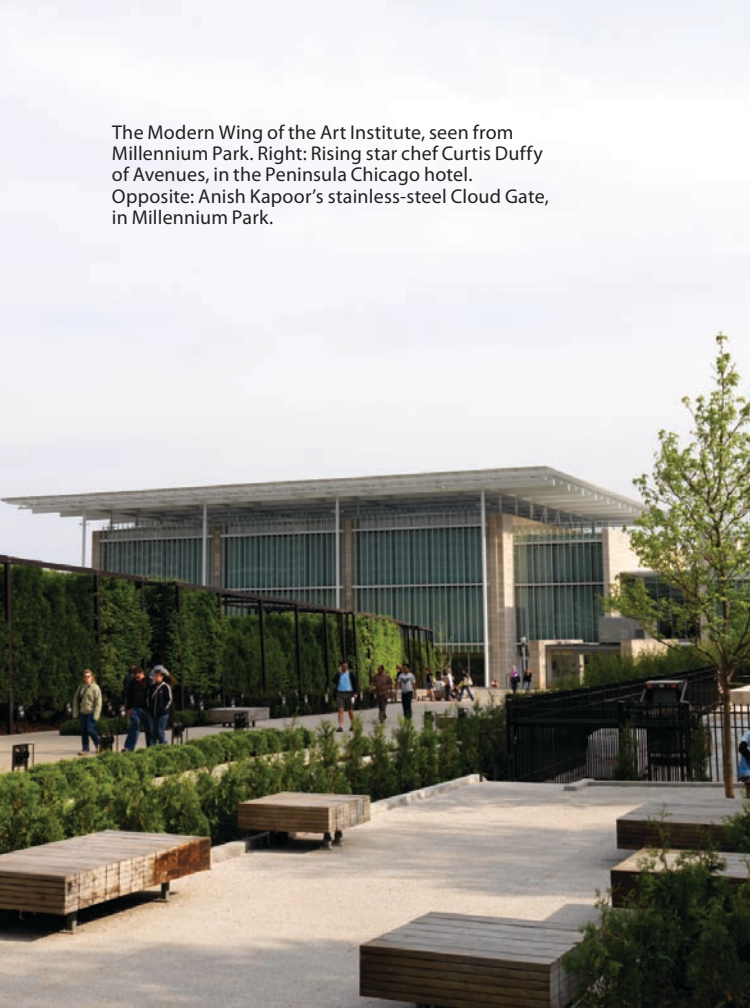
At a more accessible point on that arc lie stores like Hej fina, the Wicker Park emporium that some claim has the best fashion selection in the Central time zone and others accuse of having passed its hipster use-by date. Certainly Hej fina is well stocked with the limited production labels like Loden Dager and Adam Kimmel (jumpsuits, anyone?) that give the fashion-addicted the vapors.

But after years of following this stuff occupationally, I have learned that, if you only track the new, you risk missing out on what is classic and still first-rate. Instead, in a city I don't know, I'm often happiest playing the tourist card. Why not try the hokey double-decker bus tour? Why not see a new place the way you might if you were on a Shriners outing, but minus the name tag and the fez? After all, it would require several lifetimes to experience every one of what Chicago city maps call "22 unique (Continued on page 132; see page 124 for the Guide)

Cool by the Lake Clockwise from top left: Olafur Eliasson's 360° Room for All Colors at the Museum of Contemporary Art; diners at Cemitas Puebla, in Humboldt Park; the Museum of Contemporary Art's entrance, in the Magnificent Mile district; outside Lula Café, in Logan Square.



The Modern Wing of the Art Institute, seen from Millennium Park. Right: Rising star chef Curtis Duffy of Avenues, in the Peninsula Chicago hotel. Opposite: Anish Kapoor's stainless-steel Cloud Gate, in Millennium Park.



GUIDE: CHICAGO



120 E. Delaware Place; 800/819-5053 or 312/280-8800; fourseasons.com; doubles from \$425.

GREAT VALUE Hotel Indigo Chicago Downtown Quiet high-rise in the upscale Gold Coast neighborhood. 1244 N. Dearborn Pkwy.; 877/424-2449 or 312/787-4980; ichtelsgroup.com; doubles from \$179.

The James Hip boutique hotel—the lobby has a rotating gallery of works from the Melanie Melouche gallery—in the shopping district. 616 N. Rush St.; 312/337-

1000; jameshotels.com; doubles from \$339. Park Hyatt Chicago Modernist monument with an art gallery and the restaurant NoMI. 800 N. Michigan Ave.; 800/233-1234 or 312/335-1234; park.hyatt.com; doubles from \$545.

The Peninsula Chicago A sleek tower in the Magnificent Mile, with two top-notch restaurants: Avenues and Shanghai Terrace. 108 E. Superior St.; 866/288-8889 or 312/337-2888; peninsula.com; doubles from \$550.

EAT Alinea Deconstructed creations at the forefront of America's molecular gastronomy movement. 1723 N. Halsted St.; 312/867-0110; 12-course tasting menu for two \$290.

Cemitas Puebla 3619 W. North Ave.; 773/772-8435; lunch for two \$20.

L20 2300 Lincoln Park W.; 773/868-0002; six-course tasting menu for two \$180.

Lula Café 2537 N. Kedzie Blvd.; 773/489-9554; dinner for two \$30.

Urbanbelly 3053 N. California Ave.; 773/583-0500; lunch for two \$30.

DO Blake 212 W. Chicago Ave.; 312/202-0047.

Chicago Greeter 312/744-8000; chicagogreeter.com; free.

Chicago Line Cruises Architectural boat tours. 312/527-1977; chicagoline.com; 1.5-hour tours from \$36.

Hej fina 1529 N. Milwaukee Ave.; 773/772-0002; hej fina.com.

Ikram 873 N. Rush St.; 312/587-1000; ikram.com.

Tours-R-Us Chicago Personalized tours with Marshall Jacobson. 773/575-3176; toursruschicago.com; three-hour tours from \$120.

SEE Art Institute of Chicago 111 S. Michigan Ave.; 312/443-3600; artic.edu; adult admission \$18.

Museum of Contemporary Art 220 E. Chicago Ave.; 312/280-2660; mcachicago.org; suggested adult admission \$12.

Millennium Park Welcome center at 201 E. Randolph St.; 312/742-1168; millenniumpark.org.

GET THE GUIDE!
Find the best Windy City spots in our complete guide on travelandleisure.com.

STAY

Four Seasons Hotel Chicago Occupies floors 30–46 of a Michigan Avenue skyscraper; each room has dramatic city views.

Except for the stirring views of Victoria Harbour, there's nothing "local" about the place. But for oyster-chasing obsessives like me, it offers a chance to see the world—or at least taste it—in two dozen slurps.

The Namibian turned out to have a mouthfeel like a cream-filled donut, less oyster than oyster mousse. The Fine de Bretagne was a coppery, ornery beast, the size of a small banana. The Tasmanians were in even better condition than those I'd had in Australia; same with the Colchesters and Oregon Kumamotos. Here was final proof that oysters—stubbornly sedentary for most of their lives—can actually travel quite well, safely sealed in their shells and bathed in their own life-sustaining liquor. If properly transported and stored, an oyster will survive for weeks out of the water, and should lose little of its character in transit.

On my last afternoon in Hong Kong, I dropped by the Sheraton to survey the day's oyster offerings, and my heart leapt at a familiar name:

DAMARISCOTTAS (MAINE, U.S.A.)

Sweet Lord. You have to understand: Damariscottas are my all-time favorite oysters. Their beds lie just upstream from the chilly Atlantic on the tidal Damariscotta River. (Some of the more famous Damariscotta "brands" include Pemaquid, Glidden Point, and Dodge Cove.) The confluence of fresh- and saltwater infuses them with that coveted combination of sweetness and brine. Surviving the cold requires a strong constitution, so Damariscottas are hardy, thick-shelled oysters, firm in texture and (I like to think) resilient, not unlike the burly guys in galoshes who haunt the wharves of Maine's midcoast. They taste like—well, like how I imagine drowning might taste, but in a wholly good way. And here they were, a dozen time zones away, in Kow-freaking-loon.

In a fit of irrational exuberance, I shelled out \$78 for a dozen. They were worth every cent. I knocked back the first, and bang—just like always, I was immediately back on the beach, eight years old, dashing from the frigid surf to the warm comfort of a Star Wars towel, the wind in my ears and the salty Atlantic on my tongue.

Sure, they might have tasted even better plucked fresh from the Damariscotta River. But I prefer to imagine that, like me, they'd gained something in the journey. Or maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe they just tasted like home. ✚

Peter Jon Lindberg, *T+L's* editor-at-large, still has his Star Wars beach towel.

HOW WE CONDUCT THE WORLD'S BEST AWARDS

A questionnaire developed by the editors of *Travel + Leisure* in association with Harris Interactive, an independent research firm, was made available to *Travel + Leisure* readers at tlworldsbest.com from January 15, 2009, to March 29, 2009. In the February and March 2009 issues of *Travel + Leisure*, readers were invited to participate. A select group of readers also received invitations via e-mail. Respondents were permitted to complete the survey only once. To protect the integrity of the data, after March 29, 2009, respondents were screened by *Travel + Leisure* and responses from any identified travel-industry professionals who completed the survey were eliminated from the final tally by Harris Interactive. Only candidates that received a required minimum number of responses were eligible for inclusion. [Tlworldsbest.com](http://tlworldsbest.com) was maintained, monitored, and kept secure by *Travel + Leisure*, while the survey website, where respondents were redirected, was maintained by Harris Interactive, which collected and tabulated the responses and kept them confidential.

The scores are indexed averages of responses concerning applicable characteristics. Respondents were asked to rate hotels, islands, destination spas, and car rental agencies on five characteristics; cities, cruise lines, and tour operators/safari outfitters on six characteristics; and hotel spas and airlines on four characteristics (see below). In the hotel, cruise line/cruise ship, and airline categories, respondents could also rate additional optional characteristics; these ratings were not included in the final score. For each characteristic, respondents were asked to rate a candidate on a scale of 1 to 5, where "1" means poor and "5" means excellent. Required component ratings were then averaged, creating an overall score. A minimum number of responses was necessary for a candidate to be eligible for inclusion in the World's Best Awards listings. Some companies were rated in both the cruise lines and tour operators/safari outfitters categories; in these cases, they have different scores for each category.

These were the categories and characteristics:
 | For hotels: rooms/facilities, location, service, restaurants/food, value. Optional: for business, for families.

| Hotel types were determined using the number of rooms and suites. Inns have fewer than 40 rooms; Resorts have 40 rooms or more. Small City Hotels have fewer than 100 rooms; Large City Hotels have 100 rooms or more. In some regions, inns and resorts and large and small city hotels were grouped together.

| For destination spas: accommodations/ambience, treatments, service, food, value.

| For hotel spas: ambience, treatments, service, value.

| For cities: sights, culture/arts, restaurants/food, people, shopping, value.

| For islands: natural attractions, activities/sights, restaurants/food, people, value.

| For cruise lines/cruise ships: cabins, food, service, itineraries/destinations, activities, value. Optional: for families. Small-ship cruise lines carry 600 passengers or fewer.

| For tour operators and safari outfitters: staff/guides, itineraries/destinations, activities, accommodations, food, value.

| For airlines: cabin comfort, in-flight service, customer service, value. Optional: food.

| For car rental agencies: vehicle selection, vehicle availability, car-rental location, service, value.



(Continued from page 122)

neighborhoods," places in which English is barely a second language and where individual museums are dedicated to the cultures of Poland, Mexico, Greece, Sweden, and Ukraine, and, at the Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, to the artist Henry Darger's *Realms of the Unreal*, population: 1.

With just a little advance planning, I was able to cover art and architecture and also to make the important stations of the foodie cross—going high at gastronomic shrines like L20 and Avenues at the Peninsula (where Curtis Duffy is fast becoming a chef to watch), and low at winning ethnic joints like the funky Korean street food spot Urbanbelly, in Avondale, that drive Chowhound types to rapture.

"I really believe that, in the last two years, what people are saying about the food in Chicago mirrors what's going on in the culinary world," I was told by Michael Nagrant, a local journalist who blogs on *Serious Eats*. Once you have sampled the local cooking there is really no arguing the point. Sure, chefs like Laurent Gras at L20 have conjured a style of deconstructed cuisine that can sometimes feel obsessive in its wizardry and a wee bit Las Vegas in its effects. A dry-ice ritual performed at a rolling cart beside my table one evening was enacted with such priestly solemnity that I wondered whether I was being served an appetizer or receiving Communion.

But the restaurant was packed, with a smart-looking crowd that had apparently missed the memo about a recession. An average check at L20 runs \$200, and before they called for a wheelbarrow to haul me out the door I had anted up half again as much stuffing myself on poached lobster medallions in bisque and a slab of seared foie gras encased in a cotton-candy nest.

Luckily for my arteries I had spent the day walking, my pedestrian exertions acting as a kind of offset against the trillion or so calories I'd consumed. Happily for my wallet I had followed Nagrant's advice to get lunch at Cemitas Puebla, a taqueria in Humboldt Park.

Spoiled for choice, I could have gorged just as contentedly on the creations of gifted chefs like Chris Pandel at the Bristol, or Robert Levitt at Mado, or Graham Elliot Bowles at his eponymous gallery-district place, where the three-star cooking is taken down a welcome notch by the fact that the staff is dressed in sneakers and jeans. But Chicago, as Nagrant pointed out to me, has the largest Latino population outside California and a taco culture nearly as obsessive as that of L.A.

Cemitas Puebla more than merited the cabride to the western neighborhood of Humboldt Park, if only to partake of the narrative built into the restaurant's gestalt. Longing for the singular savor of cooking from his home place, Antonio Zurita—the proprietor, along with his son Tony Anteliz—travels to Puebla every three weeks to buy chipotles for their salsas and marinades. In former days they brought back seeds of the Mexican herb pápalo, which now thrives in their family's Chicago garden. Local food obsessives have long since sniffed out the Anteliz family and their pita-thick tortillas, their butterflied, breaded pork chops, their salsas flavored with thyme, pineapple, vinegar, and cloves.

"What people don't realize is that there's a totally interesting cross-section of cultures in the city," said Nagrant, whose catholic zeal does not differentiate between lauded top-shelf places like Alinea (for whose cookbook he wrote an essay), Pakistani barbecue joints along Western Avenue, and spots like Spoon Thai, a restaurant located in a nowhere part of town, whose "jungle" curries "are so crazy hot they blow your head off."

Because the best way to get a sense of Chicago's interlocking neighborhoods is to walk, I figured I would tap into a free Greeter program, which may seem pitched to an Elderhostel demographic but turns out to be a fine way of seeing the town. This is particularly true when one's assigned Greeter is an avuncular ham named Marshall Jacobson, retired some years back from a career in the nonprofit sector. When we met downtown on a Saturday morning, Jacobson handed me the keys to the city—or, anyway, a free one-day metro pass—and the two of us set off on a brisk three-hour tour of the architecturally historic Loop and also of Hyde Park, the neighborhood where Barack Obama made his political bones.

Anybody who can move and read a guidebook could probably wander around

Chicago as contentedly as we did; you can hardly leave your hotel without bumping into some International Style wonder or well-loved gem of the Prairie School. But for streamlining the itinerary and getting inside the buildings it pays to have someone like Marshall Jacobson by your side. Not a Greeter on earth could be more knowledgeably preoccupied with the subtext of architectural meanings, or so it struck me as Jacobson spouted information with the conviction of Brando doing Stanley Kowalski.

His passion proved contagious, whether for the structural innovations of the 1894 Marquette Building, the Sol LeWitt installation hidden on the exterior wall of a parking garage, or the vast limestone ghosts of Chicago's fabled mercantile palaces. He even pointed out the brick house on a Hyde Park corner from which young Bobby Franks—the hapless victim of the murderous lovers Leopold and Loeb—set forth on the day he was kidnapped.

Hyde Park itself is a leafy neighborhood roughly 20 minutes south of the city center by bus and is the political base for a small-time community organizer who appeared seemingly out of nowhere to jolt American history. I had asked to be shown the Obama residence and there it was, a modest brick structure, conspicuously less opulent than many around it, including the fortified compound inhabited by Louis Farrakhan. From the curb I could make out the Obama roofline, a porch, and the president's basketball backboard. Of greater interest, perhaps, is the house's location across from the historic Kam synagogue and some modest garden apartments, and about equal distance from the brain trust of the University of Chicago and the South Side projects that for decades served as reminders of the sharply demarcated separation between Chicago white and black.

We took in Italian Fiesta Pizzeria, the Obamas' favorite take-out joint, and also the president's barber shop (where his chair has now been cordoned off as a kind of shrine). Then I bid Jacobson what would turn out to be a temporary farewell. I had a date to preview the Renzo Piano addition to the Art Institute, a wing that would open in a week to a chorus of critical raves.

Even without the critics' endorsement, it seemed immediately clear that the building marks a new phase in the history of the city, a departure from the weighty forms it is known for in favor of

something serenely and confidently civilized. The new wing adds 264,000 square feet and gives breathing room to existing collections—of Impressionist paintings to rival those of any museum outside the Louvre; of architecture, in a department with 170,000 individual objects; of contemporary art—so fine they struck me as inadequately renowned.

It is not just that the Art Institute addition is transparent and airy, that it solves a challenging architectural program with grace. It is not even that it incorporates an element of whimsy in the form of a bridge vaulting the rail-bed tracks on which the 130-year-old museum stands, and connecting it to Millennium Park. This structure acts as a threshold from an older era to a new one. Like Millennium Park's Cloud Gate—the convex sculpture created by Anish Kapoor over what, until five years ago, had been a derelict train yard—it reflects a city in the process of being reinvented.

Instead of mirroring its own status back to a nascent class of white industrial barons, as the Classical brick and granite behemoths along Michigan Avenue did, the Piano building invites the general population to feel included in the cultural composition. Where the monuments of Chicago's past can sometimes be burdened with arriviste anxieties, it has the brio to be light.

This occurred to me as I was racing from the museum to meet a boat tour of the city's architectural marvels. An outing of that kind might ordinarily follow voluntary root canal on a must-do list, yet every visitor to Chicago should immediately take this ride, which compresses so much American architectural and social history into two hours that it is like taking a cruise through a highly informative Wikipedia entry.

"Look, look at that beautiful Art Deco façade," the tour guide said as we passed the former Chicago Main Post Office. His spiel sounded oddly familiar, and so I moved nearer to the bow from my seat at the stern for a closer look. Sure enough, the guy behind the tinted Prada glasses was Marshall Jacobson, my Chicago Zelig.

"You have to love a city that can come up with a building like that," he remarked into the mike clipped to his nylon windbreaker. And he was right. You do. ✚

Guy Trebay is a reporter for the New York Times.