

Travel

CURRENCY EXCHANGE

Approximate value of a U.S. dollar in these markets, as of Wednesday.

Euro — \$1.36
Canadian Dollar — 1.03
Swiss Franc — 0.91

Mexican Peso — 12.88
Japanese Yen — 97.70
Indian Rupee — 60.76

Thai Baht — 31.07
New Zealand Dollar — \$0.85

Australian Dollar — \$0.96
Swedish Krona — 6.46
Philippine Peso — 42.89

Euro, New Zealand dollar and Australian dollar rates given in U.S. equivalent; all others given in foreign equivalent.

CHICAGO

Weekend in the Windy City

Fall is a great time for Michigan residents to explore Chicago

By Andrea Tamboer
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With hunting season upon us in Michigan and the holidays approaching, fall is the perfect time for a women's getaway to Chicago. Here's an itinerary and some tips for some stress-free (yes, even in the big city), high-energy fun.

DAY 1

Getting there: Take the Northern Indiana commuter train to avoid the harried driving through heavy traffic and the costly parking fees. (Some hotels charge as much as \$60 per night to park.) Tickets are \$17 roundtrip, depending on where you catch the train. From West Michigan, Michigan City's Carroll Street station is about 120 miles. Park your car for the weekend and hop the train for the smooth ride to Millennium Station at Randolph and Michigan Avenue, adjacent to the popular Millennium Park. The train trip will add about 45 minutes to your trip to the city, so plan accordingly.

Lodging: Hotels are plentiful throughout the city, but we chose the Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel, 221 N. Columbus Drive, for its distinctive architecture, designed by Jeanne Gang. It's the world's largest skyscraper designed by a female architect and is the only Silver LEED-certified hotel in the city, using environmentally conscious materials when built in 2011. The structure has 334 hotel units and more than 50 condos on its highest floors. A stunning fireplace wall in the lobby features a 100-foot-long Egyptian bronze metal wall sculpture. The hotel also has an 8,000-square-foot fitness center, indoor and outdoor pools, an indoor basketball court, 1/5 mile running track, sauna and steam rooms. A gallery of works by Chicago artists leads to meeting areas and a 12,041-square-foot ballroom.

Beyond all of this is the hotel's location near the Chicago River in the Lakeshore East area; it's a two-block walk from the train station, and many of the city's major attractions are within walking distance. The view from our room, which had a balcony, included Navy

IF YOU GO

CHICAGO

Lodging: Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel, 221 N. Columbus Drive. 312-565-5258, radissonblu.com/aquahotel-chicago; room rates start at about \$200.

Activities: Shoreline Architectural Cruise, \$32-\$35 per adult, \$29-\$32 for seniors, \$18-\$21 for children; shoreline-sightseeing.com

Sumi Robata Bar: 702 N. Wells St. 312-988-7864, sumirobatabar.com

Choose Chicago: For ideas on Chicago-area sightseeing, 312-567-8569, choosechicago.com

Pier and glimpses of Lake Michigan between surrounding skyscrapers. At night, step outside on the balcony, and you're enveloped in the city lights and in-your-face breeze. Also within two blocks is Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile, famed for its shopping destinations.

Activities: Chicago is known for so many great attractions and activities — the Shedd Aquarium, Field Museum, Chicago Institute of Art and dozens of guided tours among them — that it behooves visitors to check out at least one while visiting. On a sunny September day, we boarded the Shoreline Architectural Cruise for a 60-minute informative and entertaining look at the city's past, present and future. Our guide, Victor, provided facts and anecdotes about hidden gems and the city's landmarks, tossing out terms such as flying buttresses and Art Deco, as we moved along the Chicago River. Passengers get a close-up view of bridges as well as the Tribune Building, Lyric Opera and the huge Merchandise Mart, which encompasses two city blocks, once was owned by the Kennedy family and has its own ZIP code.

Following the cruise, we hit Michigan Avenue, popularly known as the Magnificent Mile, in search of treasures at the many boutiques and stores with everything from high-end Cartier to trendy favorites such as H&M. The throngs of people and heavy traffic provide a high-energy boost that can't often be found in Michigan.

Evening: We found a great way to decompress right at our hotel at Felini's, which features contemporary authentic Italian cuisine.

The waitstaff is friendly and accommodating, and our food was simply exquisite, made with fresh ingredients,



With its distinctive "wavy" exterior, the Radisson Blu Aqua hotel in Chicago, designed by Jeanne Gang, is the only Silver LEED-certified hotel in the city. About half of the hotel rooms have balconies. (Courtesy)

from the grilled asparagus to the spaghetti with gulf shrimp, mussels, scallops and calamari in a spicy pomodoro sauce to the roasted chicken with peppery greens, currants and pine nuts. The interior is upscale and big-city chic.

Late evening: One more stop should be on everyone's list of big-city experiences: the 16th floor outdoor rooftop Terrace at the Trump International Hotel & Tower, 401 N. Wabash Ave., for spectacular, late-night views of the Chicago River and brilliant lights of neighboring skyscrapers. It's a perfect evening ending. But bring your wallet: A beer is \$12, cocktails start at about \$15, and a glass of wine is \$25.

DAY 2

Morning, afternoon: After breakfast, we jumped on the elevated train, or "L" as it's known, and took the brown line to Armitage (tickets are \$2.25 each way), where we began a self-guided tour of the Lincoln Park and Old Town neighborhoods. Amid the lovely, tree-lined streets with well-kept brownstone homes are boutique stores, resale shops and dozens of small pubs and restaurants. Our destination was St. Michael's Catholic Church, one of the oldest church buildings in Chicago, with its world-class stained glass and ceiling murals and old-world atmosphere.

The area is a nice change from the frenetic pace of the

city, and you'll want to linger over coffee at one of the many sidewalk cafes or stop for a before-dinner drink at one of the lively pubs, which literally open their walls when the weather is nice.

Early evening: Upon a recommendation, for dinner, we headed to Sumi Robata Bar, a Japanese small plates restaurant that opened in January in the River North district near Old Town. It is extraordinary. (See story below.)

Late evening: If you haven't been to Second City comedy club in a while, it might be time for a return trip. It has a lively club feel with interesting specialty drinks and an irreverent cast of comedians. The show we saw, "A Clown Car Named Desire," involved

a series of skits revolving around the theme of love and desire. The talented cast produced several laugh-out-loud moments that provided a perfect ending to the day.

DAY 3

After a lazy morning breakfast and a walk through Millennium Park to view "Cloud Gate," the "bean" and other sculptures, we made our way to a spot near our hotel, Mariano's Fresh Market, 333 E. Benton Place, a specialty market where downtown residents shop for groceries. The two-story market is filled with organic and specialty foods, and it's fun to browse among its shelves. It's a great stop for buying goodies for the train ride home.



Gina Mol, of Grand Rapids, watches chefs prepare dishes at Sumi Robata Bar, a Japanese small plates restaurant near Chicago. (Andrea Tamboer/MLive.com)

CHICAGO

Sumi Robata a hidden gem

MLive.com

Dining is one of the great delights in visiting Chicago. Food trends there eventually cross the pond and end up in cities across Michigan.

One recently opened and newly mined gem in the Windy City is the Sumi Robata Bar, a Japanese small plates restaurant that opened in January in the River North district near Old Town. The small eatery at 702 N. Wells St., which seats about 40, is worthy of the rave reviews it has been receiving.

Owner-chef Gene Kato, presiding over a 16-foot robata

grill, takes great pains to create dishes that are visually exquisite and superbly flavored.

From the Chilean sea bass to the gyoza, a chicken dumpling, to the grilled romaine to skirt steak with sansho pepper, every dish was a delight.

The chilled tofu, served with caviar and ginger, had a smooth, custard-like essence and draws swoons from diners, said Kato's wife and restaurant co-owner, Jessica. Best of all, the prices are affordable.

Info: 312-988-7864, sumirobatabar.com.



Skyscrapers — their history and future — are the focus of architectural cruises along the Chicago River. The tours generally start near the Michigan Avenue bridge, head to Lake Michigan and Navy Pier and then turn back into the heart of the city. Guides provide an entertaining and informative look at the city's world-renowned buildings. (Andrea Tamboer/MLive.com)