

A Local's Guide to the Perfect Long Weekend in Chicago

Sample gourmet Ukrainian food, watch a comedy show with puppets, and catch an all-ages jazz show.



You might come to Chicago for modernist fine dining, or you might seek a hot dog “[dragged through the garden](#).” It could be Tony Award-winning theater or late-night improv comedy. Or perhaps you want to marvel at soaring skyscrapers or, in summer, dig your toes in Lake Michigan sand. Chicago, rough and refined, gritty and good-humored, welcomes all comers.

After more than 30 years here, I can still travel around my city’s 77 neighborhoods and be surprised by a stoop-front concert, a pop-up market, or a how-did-I-not-know-about-this torta shop. And while I’ve been writing about Chicago for decades, the subject is never static in a city that still seems to channel the words of 19th-century city planner Daniel Burnham: “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood.”

So, come and be stirred. An extended four-day weekend provides enough time to sink your teeth into the meat of Chicago—and still leave you hungry for a return visit.

Thursday: An overview of art and architecture

I counsel visitors to start at the Loop, named for the elevated tracks surrounding this part of downtown, and work their way out. Between the Loop and Lake Michigan, [Millennium Park](#) testifies to the city’s motto, “Urbs in horto,” or “City in a garden.” At first glance at this multifaceted public space, the garden seems secondary to art, including Anish Kapoor’s magnetic kidney-bean-shaped sculpture [Cloud Gate](#) better known as The Bean, where, like everyone else, you will want to take a warped selfie in its mirrored surface. But go behind the hedges of the [Lurie Garden](#) to find “this hidden pocket prairie of native perennials that change colors throughout the seasons,” says Lauren Viera, author of [The 500 Hidden Secrets of Chicago](#). “It’s pretty and quiet.”

Cross the Chicago River via one of its iconic bridges to the River North neighborhood for lunch at [Mr. Beef](#), the iconic Italian beef sandwich shop that inspired the Hulu TV series *The Bear*. “Italian beef was on its way out, but now it’s got new life,” says Mike Gebert, who writes the local [Fooditor](#) newsletter and is writing a book on Chicago restaurant history. Order your sandwich “wet,” “dry,” or “dipped,” the latter immersed in cooking jus for a gloriously messy meal.

After the Great Chicago Fire razed much of the city in 1871, Chicago’s rebuilding produced the skyscraper. Modern and contemporary architecture remains a hallmark of the city, best appreciated through a 90-minute boat tour on the Chicago River run by the [Chicago Architecture Center](#) and popular with locals as well as visitors.

If you’re rolling with friends or looking to mingle, backtrack toward Millennium Park to find [Cindy’s](#), a celebratory rooftop bar overlooking the park and lake from the 13th-floor terrace of the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel.