



Michael Piazza

INSPIRATION

Falling Back in Love With Chicago, After Years Living in New York

A native Chicagoan returns to realize that the city's food, culture, and good nature may just make the Midwestern powerhouse the most likable city in America.

BY RIMA SUQI
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I landed in [Chicago](#) in the middle of a February heat wave that lasted about five days, three longer than my weather app had forecast. I'd packed cashmere sweaters, but the mercury hit the 50s and 60s, setting a single-day record and leaving me, a lover of cold winter days, disappointed. I was, by far, in the minority. Locals streamed to [Lake Michigan](#) to bike, jog, and stroll along the 18.5 miles of uninterrupted paths that stretch from the South Shore to Edgewater, or to bask in the sun on the many beaches and parks that line the lakefront. I traded my cashmere for cotton and joined them.

There are few things more glorious than walking along the lake in my [hometown](#). I'm embarrassed to admit that until recently I didn't know the lakefront was mostly man-made. In some areas, ashes from the Great Chicago Fire were used as landfill. It's all thanks to architect and urban planner Daniel Burnham's grand vision, which in 1909 set forth that the waterfront would be "forever open, clear, and free of any buildings or other obstructions." And that's exactly how it remains.

It made me appreciate just how different Chicago felt when, years later, I moved to West Chelsea in [New York City](#). I was surprised and dismayed to hear that the Hudson River, just two blocks from my apartment, was considered crime-ridden and dangerous, a place to be avoided at all costs. Today, of course, it's a completely different story.



On a recent trip I stayed at the [Chicago Athletic Association](#) hotel in an 1893 building that functioned for over a century as a members-only athletic club on South Michigan Avenue. The architecture of the public spaces remains largely intact, with vestiges of its past visible in spaces like Stagg Court, once a basketball court and gym.

A Chicago Athletic Association suite Michael Piazza