

our kind of town...



FALL GUY: Matt Cain on the glass platform 103 floors up the Willis Tower

A SHORE THING: Chicago is set around Lake Michigan

OFTEN OVERSHADOWED BY NEW YORK AND LOS ANGELES, CHICAGO IS ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST ATTRACTIVE AND EXCITING CITIES. AND, AS **MATT CAIN** DISCOVERS, IT'S ALSO HOME TO ONE OF THE BEST GAY SCENES IN THE WORLD



MY KIND OF PEOPLE: Matt Cain makes a couple of friends at Roscoe's

mark Twain once said of Chicago that the occasional visitor can never get to know the city because it changes so quickly. "She is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through last time," commented the author best known for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Prince and the Pauper*. Of course, you could say that about any city these days. But Twain made his assessment more than 100 years ago and it still holds true. I went for the first time in May and discovered a vibrant, beautiful city.

Situated on the shores of the almost impossibly turquoise Lake Michigan, fringed with 18 miles of gorgeous man-made beaches, Chicago is a much more pleasant city to visit than New York. It's better maintained and feels less claustrophobic than Manhattan; the skyscrapers here are built in the occasional cluster rather than towering over you from every direction. It's also much quieter than NYC, with a slower pace of life. On my first day, I went for a stroll along the shores of the lake, the only sound that of the occasional runner bounding past or the boats bobbing on the water. But be warned: although parks here are pretty,

they're not places for reflection; a walk in the park in Chicago is a bracing experience as you're buffeted by the wind that gives the city its nickname. Set a few blocks back from the lake is one of the Windy City's newest but most famous landmarks: Anish Kapoor's stainless steel reflective sculpture Cloud Gate, also known as The Bean. In and around the enormous curved structure, you'll find people having fun, pulling faces in the mirrored surfaces and taking selfies from unusual angles. This is public art at its best, art that engages everyone and prompts a wide range of emotional responses.

I started the following day with a visit to Skydeck, on the 103rd floor of the Willis Tower, 1,353ft above street level. The building claims to be the tallest in the Western hemisphere, although the lift only takes 60 seconds to reach the top. Once there, you can enjoy spectacular views all over the city. If you want to get the adrenaline pumping, step on to the several glass-bottomed balconies that allow you to walk over the sheer drop to the ground below. Jump up and down if you're feeling particularly brave. Back on street level, Chicago's well known for its excellent Art Institute, but I paid a visit to its recently unveiled American Writers Museum. Here, interactive displays showcase the work of many of the most celebrated American writers but there are also song lyrics, cookbooks, stand-up

comedy scripts and sports writing. You can even examine the sprawling manuscript scroll on which (the surprisingly hot) Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road*, and a "word waterfall" explores authors' ideas about what it means to be American. Another highlight was the Architecture River Cruise. A boat rather campily titled *The First Lady* transported us up and down the quiet and strikingly clean river, as a guide gave us a fascinating history of the city and talked us through the stories behind several of its most attention-grabbing buildings. My favourites were the Tribune Tower, a neo-Gothic structure that looks like a European cathedral, and the London Guarantee

"Almost impossibly turquoise Lake Michigan is fringed with 18 miles of the most gorgeous man-made beaches"

and Accident Building, with its curved front and rooftop dome. There are also several buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, who invented the first indigenous American architectural style. If you're not a lover of boats, stroll around the streets of Chicago and allow yourself to be charmed. Check out the Magnificent Mile for some great shopping, do as the locals do and "take the L" (the public transport system that's raised from street level on a famous loop), and treat yourself to tickets to a show on Chicago's thriving theatre scene. If you're a fan of the US, revel in the American-ness of this Midwestern city — and the hotness of the local



FLAG-BEARERS: Chicago has a thriving gay scene

TRAVEL

men. Mid-Westerners are *big* and they luxuriate in their size, striding around Chicago with supreme confidence. They're also friendly, love Brits and really do say "awesome" a lot.

Chicago is also a bar city and a haven for drinkers, so if you get carried away you won't have puritanical Americans judging you. Speaking of nights out, no trip to Chicago would be complete without a visit to the famous gay area of Boystown. Mine certainly wouldn't have been.

Located a 15-minute drive from

BEAN THERE, DONE THAT: Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate attracts lots of visitors



WHERE WE STAYED

ACME HOTEL

Located just a few blocks from the Magnificent Mile in downtown Chicago and a five-minute walk from the river, Acme is a new boutique hotel alternative. Hip but friendly, it's also affordable. There's a first-floor lounge, a ground-floor bar and a hot tub in the basement. There's also a café and pastry shop but the service could be improved and there's no breakfast restaurant. But the hotel oozes character and the contemporary design is full of quirks, such as the blackboard and chalk to leave messages on bedroom doors. The rooms and suites are enormous, although I found it impossible to use my wet room without initiating a small flood.

ALSO CHECK THESE OUT

OAK PARK

This quiet commuter suburb is located 20 minutes on the train from downtown Chicago and is the birthplace of Ernest Hemingway. It also boasts the highest concentration of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture anywhere in the world and an excellent museum based in the house and studio where the famous architect lived and worked for 20 years. And don't miss Obsessed restaurant, which provided easily the best meal of my trip.

GALENA

This adorable 19th century lead-mining town gave the US nine Civil War generals and looks as if it's been frozen in time. It's a good three-hour drive from Chicago but provides a total change of scene and is a delight to discover. Stay at the Jail Inn, a gay-run hotel in the refurbished former jailhouse, take a trolley tour of the town, and stroll along a Main Street rammed with Americana. Oh, and glance at Grindr where you'll be inundated by messages from local gays keen to entertain foreign visitors.

CIVIL SERVICE: Galena has the feel of a 19th-century town



downtown, Boystown is filled with the rainbow flags, sex shops and LGBT+ businesses you find in any gay area. But it's much prettier, with the low-rise, tree-lined streets of a residential neighbourhood.

At its heart is the Legacy Project, an educational initiative for bullied LGBT+ kids, which teaches them the history of their community. This consists of several bronze installations that look like rockets and line Halsted Street, each featuring a plaque that tells the story of an influential queer figure.

Appropriately enough, the one honouring sexologist Alfred Kinsey is located outside the highly popular Steamworks sauna (where several floors offer different experiences), if all

"The combination of Chicago's identity as a drinking town and its gay population means Boystown has a terrific bar scene"

that sightseeing has given you a thirst.

The combination of Chicago's huge gay population and its identity as a major drinking town means Boystown has a terrific bar scene. Sidetrack is always rammed and made up of several different bar spaces, Hydrate offers go-go dancers, Roscoe's has an unpretentious pub atmosphere with a dancefloor and a stage for drag shows, and Berlin is a queer club that attracts the cool kids from all edges of the rainbow spectrum.

Just remember: you will need to show photo ID to get into any bar or club no matter how old you look — Chicago



operates what is called a Card Hard scheme.

But Boystown isn't Chicago's only gay neighbourhood. Just two miles away is Andersonville, which was the lesbian area but is becoming more popular with gay men, particularly those in couples or with families. Here there are several more businesses and restaurants run by the queer community but fewer late-night bars and clubs; the neighbourhood tends to go to sleep at 11pm. But it's delightful, leafy and spacious with a more laid-back feel than Boystown.

And then there's Edgewater, which is fast becoming Chicago's third LGBT+ neighbourhood, with its concentration of leather bars, fetish clubs and an edgier, more underground vibe. I didn't get to pay a visit on this occasion but that means I have a reason to return soon.

This will also give me the chance to see if Mark Twain is right and Chicago really is always changing. If he is, I hope it doesn't change too much. **A**

To book your LGBT+ trip to Illinois, visit destiny-travel.co.uk or email jack.leaf@destiny-travel.co.uk