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EXPLORER

Seeing Chicago by Taxi, With a Venetian Twist



Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Kelly Fogwell of Jacksonville Fla., with her mother, Kathy Newman, left, reads about sites in Chicago while riding a water taxi on the Chicago River.

By RUSSELL WORKING
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IT'S a standard tourist activity in a [Chicago](#) summer: you descend from Michigan Avenue to the quay along the Chicago River, board a tour boat and glide along listening to a guide on a loudspeaker talk up the [architecture](#) and rib the poor tourists from Wisconsin. You get a pleasant, breezy introduction to the heart of the city. But for a more intimate, independent and easygoing waterborne view, there's a do-it-yourself alternative: create your own tour by water taxi.

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From late spring through fall, water taxis ply the river and venture out into Lake Michigan. They operate like buses, following scheduled routes that take you to standard tourist stops like the [Willis Tower](#) (until recently called the Sears Tower) with its 103rd-story Skydeck, or [Navy Pier](#), where you can take in a show or whirl around on a 15-story Ferris wheel. But you can also travel by water

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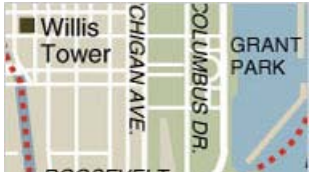
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Map
Chicago, Ill.

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times
The boats run up and down the Chicago River.

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times
The John Hancock Center, left, and Navy Pier.

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times
Families travel from Chicago's museum campus to Navy Pier via water taxi.

taxi to lesser known spots like Chinatown or a new museum about the river and its bridges. And you can stop whenever you want for lunch.

Two companies run distinct, though partly overlapping routes. [Wendella's Chicago Water Taxi](#) starts at a dock below Michigan Avenue and heads west on the river, around its sharp bend to the south, and all the way to Chinatown — a trip of about three and a half miles that takes a half-hour each way. [Shoreline Water Taxi](#) goes south only to the Willis Tower, but ventures out eastward into Lake Michigan.

Whatever your ultimate goal, it makes sense to start on the north end of the Michigan Avenue Bridge and glide along for a while to the west, squinting upward at the skyscrapers as you check out some of the city's renowned architecture. A helpful book is Jennifer Marjorie Bosch's "View From the River: The [Chicago Architecture Foundation](#) River Cruise" (Pomegranate Communications). Slim enough in paperback to fit in a backpack, it allows you to identify the buildings and gulp down popcornlike bites of architectural history.

There are dozens of landmarks, including the Marina City towers at 300 North State Street, designed to resemble corncobs; the sprawling Merchandise Mart at North Wells Street, built in 1930; and the [Civic Opera House](#) on North Wacker Drive, constructed in the Art Deco armchair form and nicknamed Insull's Throne after the tycoon who commissioned it.

A sunny day on the water is also a fine time to contemplate the river's squalid history. It once carried a greasy soup of raw sewage and hog remains from the stockyards into Lake Michigan. In "A View From the River," a resident recalls: "Bubbles of methane formed on the bed of the river and rose to the surface. ... Some of these bubbles were quite large and when they burst, a stink arose. There were many local names for this part of the river, most unprintable."

Engineers dug a canal to reverse the flow in 1900, sending a pungent hello from the citizens of Chicago downstream toward the Mississippi River and St. Louis. Nowadays kayakers ply the river, and its banks are lined with expensive water-view condos and gleaming commercial towers.

The Chicago Water Taxi's LaSalle/Clark Street stop lets passengers off at Fulton's on the River, a seafood and steak house, and across Clark is the Flatwater Restaurant, a pleasant place for lunch, also at river level. This is also close to the theater district: several of Chicago's main theaters lie within two blocks of the river, along with the [Joffrey Ballet](#) at 10 East Randolph Street. This stop is also a good access point for strolling the newly

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opened Riverwalk toward Michigan Avenue and beyond.

After the river bends south, both water taxi companies stop near the Willis Tower, where new glass-floored retractable bays at the Skydeck allow adventurous sightseers to scare themselves silly staring 1,353 feet straight down at the street. Across the river is Union Station, whose Beaux-Arts Great Hall has been featured in movies, including "The Untouchables."

On weekends, you can continue south on the Chicago Water Taxi to Ping Tom Memorial Park (named for a Chinese-American civic leader), and proceed on foot under an ornate gate into Chinatown, with its hole-in-the-wall restaurants and stores selling barrels of ginseng or aquariums full of live frogs.

Stop in at the one-room museum dedicated to the revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, whose photos include some from Sun's visit to Chicago shortly before he played a leading role in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty in 1911. At Chinatown Square, an outdoor mall, browse stores selling green tea and Chinese cookies, a Chinese newspaper's offices and your choice of restaurants.

Back at the other end of the river taxiway, in the southwest corner of the Michigan Avenue Bridge, is the new [McCormick Tribune Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum](#). There, visitors see the inner workings of a drawbridge and learn about the river's history, including the arrival of Jean Baptiste Point Du-Sable, a black French pioneer who settled here in the late 1780s.

Across the river is [Billy Goat Tavern](#), a watering hole favored by generations of reporters. A dimly lit cheeseburger joint may not be everyone's choice, but fans of that dwindling medium known as the newspaper will love the old photos and the memorials to legendary journalists like Mike Royko.

From either Michigan Avenue or the LaSalle/Clark stop, it's a short walk to the [House of Blues](#) on North Dearborn, where the Sunday morning "gospel brunch" includes a buffet with blackened catfish, jambalaya, fried chicken and omelets, along with exhilarating African-American worship and music.

For a nice ride out into Lake Michigan, take the Shoreline Water Taxi to the Navy Pier, change boats and go to the lakeside museum campus that is home to the [Field Museum](#), [Shedd Aquarium](#) and [Adler Planetarium](#). All are worth serious time, but for generations of children, the must-see has been the Field's dinosaur skeletons, including a Tyrannosaurus rex named Sue found in South Dakota in 1990.

Closer to the city center, though, the Navy Pier is home not only to carnival-like stalls and shops selling souvenirs and ice cream cones, but also to an indoor garden, a stained-glass museum and the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. "Richard III" opens in September, but the current hit is [Second City's "Rod Blagojevich Superstar."](#) Mr. Blagojevich himself, despite smarting from the scandal that cost him the Illinois governorship this year, took a turn onstage to lampoon himself at a June performance, reciting lines from "Henry V" and inviting the cast for dinner ("We'll be serving tarantulas").

Before you leave the pier, buy a ticket for the Ferris wheel and spin upward for another view of the lake and the city. And, of course, the river, where the taxis are still making their way.

WATER TOURS AND LAND EXCURSIONS

WHERE TO STAY

The **Hotel Sax** (333 North Dearborn Street; 312-245-0333; www.hotelsaxchicago.com), beneath Marina City towers, is a stylish place to stay, with a dark lounge filled with leather and velvet furniture. Standard doubles start at \$169.

The **Wit Hotel** (201 North State Street; 312-467-0200; www.thewithhotel.com) is a chic new place whose rooftop bar has become an instant hit. Rooms from \$179.

WHERE TO EAT

Spring World (2109 South China Place in Chinatown Square; 312-326-9966) serves the spicy food of Yunnan Province, with entrees starting at about \$8.

Billy Goat Tavern (430 North Michigan Avenue on the lower level; 312-222-1525; www.billygoattavern.com), still a journalists' watering hole, offers a newspaper-themed atmosphere and cheeseburgers starting at \$2.95. Take the stairs down from upper Michigan Avenue.

House of Blues (329 North Dearborn Street; 312-923-2000; www.houseofblues.com) offers live music every night. There is a cover charge of \$7 to \$10 after 10 p.m.; entrees start at \$10.99 for a hamburger. Sunday brunch is \$37.50, including taxes.

Flatwater (321 North Clark Street; 312-644-0283; www.flatwater.us) is at river level and serves a brunch that includes crab cakes Benedict (\$14) or dinner entrees starting at \$24. There's a wood-paneled interior and riverside tables to watch the boats.

GETTING AROUND

For **Wendella's Chicago Water Taxi** (400 North Michigan Avenue; 312-337-1446; www.chicagowatertaxi.com), go down the stairs on the north side of the Michigan Avenue Bridge by the Wrigley Building, then follow the signs to the taxi dock. An all-day pass costs \$4 on weekdays, \$6 on weekends and holidays.

To use **Shoreline Water Taxi** (401 North Michigan Avenue; 312-222-9328; www.shorelinewatertaxi.com), take the steps down on the northeast side of the Michigan Avenue Bridge. The fare to 200 South Wacker Drive is \$3; to the Museum Campus via Navy Pier, it's \$10.

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