

Chicago: A Water Wonderland



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From my perspective on the observation deck of 360 Chicago in the John Hancock Building, I have an eagle's-eye view of this Lake Michigan metropolis.

The city stretched out before us is a forest of concrete. Toward the lake – right below us – there's a beach volleyball game in progress. White triangles crisscross Caribbean-blue waters in the distance. Sunday morning must be race day – just like home.

From here we're off to our last adventure – a noonday sail.

Today's our fourth – and final – day here. We'll have been on the water for three of those days.

In his ode to Chicago, the poet Carl Sandburg called her “Hog Butcher for the World” and “City of the Big Shoulders.”

I've come up with a better nickname.

Chicago's a water wonderland.

A LITTLE NIGHTMUSIC

Our first night in the city begins with cocktails in the lakeside Shedd Aquarium. Vibes, tenor sax and bass are riffing on the changes of “Autumn Leaves”, first segment in a partnership between the Shedd and Shoreline Sightseeing. Welcome to “Jazzin' at the Shedd.”



Above: The evening fireworks cruise offers great views of the city skyline.

The next segment takes place onboard “Cap Streeter”, a boat inspired by Lake Michigan steamships and named for an erstwhile Chicago ‘ne’er-do-well’.

Having already been regaled with a little night music, out here on the indigo waters we share with a fleet of other boats, we’re serenaded by more tunes through a state-of-the-art sound system as we cut through the chop and drift, at last, off Navy Pier where our next delight awaits.



Inset: Captain Mike Blanchard and the author swap sailing stories as they sail close-hauled off Chicago.

Time for the Wednesday night edition of the twice-weekly summer fireworks.

It may get better than this but I don’t know how.

Now the very skies above burst into light, accompanied by cannonades and snare-drum rat-a-tats.

An alabaster curtain of fire dangles from the heavens over Navy Pier. A flower burst of fireworks soars above the city skyline. A kaleidoscope of colours swirls

and spirals in the night sky.

All to the strains of syncopated sambas. An evening on the water. A light show worthy of the Fourth of July. A little night music.

Feels like a water wonderland to me.

A FLOTILLA OF SKYSCRAPERS

There it is, off the starboard bow. Looks like a French cathedral but the Chicago Tribune building is taller than any mere church. Twenty-thousand people came to its opening in 1925.

Our Architecture Cruise on “Chicago’s First Lady,” a purpose-built ninety-eight-foot tour boat that traces the course of the Chicago River during a 90-minute lesson-slash-adventure, is considered the best perspective for viewing monuments like this one, part of a veritable flotilla of skyscrapers.

Now we’re gliding past majestic monoliths – masterpieces of Art Deco, Neoclassical, Modern and even Post-Modern. Some whimsical, some inspiring, some downright ecclesiastical in design.

The top floors of one building look like an Athenian temple, another structure – all glass and steel – soars graceful as an eagle.

Back in the late 1800’s a collision of events (most notably the Chicago fire) and technological advances resulted in the invention of the skyscraper right here in Chicago.



Top Left: Picking up a mooring at Monroe Harbor — AKA downtown Chicago.

Above Left: Cool statues decorate the exterior of the Shedd Aquarium, starting-point for the fireworks cruise.

Top Right: From your vantage-point atop the John Hancock Building you realize what a water wonderland Chicago is.

Next our tour guide regales us with some cool river trivia.

In 1900 engineers actually reversed the river's course so it wouldn't flow into Lake Michigan and pollute it. Upstream turned into downstream.

Come every St. Patrick's Day since

1962 they impregnate the river with dye, decorating its waters a vivid emerald for the parade.

Erin Go Braugh.

As "Chicago's First Lady" changes course toward the lake I notice an apartment complex shaped like a corn cob. Forget parking garages. This place boasts covered docks populated by cabin cruisers bobbing in our wake.

Hog Butcher for the World?

I think not.

CLOSE-HAULED OFF CHICAGO

It's only four hours before we're due to fly back to Toronto and we're sailing out of Chicago's Monroe Harbor.

Waters are indigo as opposed to the Caribbean blue we'd noted from our Chicago 360 vantage-point earlier this morning, but the sun's still grinning down at us and fifteen-knot-winds are pushing "Druid", a classic Shannon 28' cutter-rigged sloop, through white-tipped waves at a good seven.

We're closed-hauled off Chicago, thanks to skipper Mike Blanchard and a charter company boasting "Druid" and a Catalina 36', offering visitors day charters like this one, sunset charters and (on Wednesday evenings) combination fireworks/sunset adventures.

From our perspective out here the shoreline is nothing short of magnificent, though I could be biased since Blanchard's graciously turned the helm over to me and I'm feeling the wind and

admiring the view at the same time.

Trees shelter a park that follows the shoreline for miles, shading joggers who pass each other right beside water's edge, foreground for a skyline of skyscrapers that is the stuff of a mathematician's dream: rhombuses, rectangles, pyramid pinnacles.

Nice chatting with Blanchard too: think insider's guide to boating Chicago. "People come to Chicago and never discover this playground out here," he says, considering a question I've just posed. "Such perfect sailing, right at the foot of the city, yet so far away from it."

A sudden gust pushes "Druid" over a touch. Blanchard adjusts the main and grins at me.

"Windy City" he says, "get it?"

Windy City. Hog Butcher to the World. City of Big Shoulders.

"I've got a better name," I answer, reluctantly relinquishing the helm, gazing at the concatenation of boats sharing these waters with us.

"Welcome to a 'Water Wonderland.'" •

FLOAT PLAN

To plan your Chicago cruise - from places to stay to other, more lubberly attractions - click on www.choosechicago.com

For your sailing options with Captain Mike Blanchard, log on to www.comesailing.us