

June 2008: Family Vacation - South and Midwest

8. Chicago

Wednesday July 2: Chicago I: Like every city, the closer you get to downtown, the scuzzier it gets, and the further into the suburbs you get, the nicer it gets. Downtown is usually an oasis of niceness in a sea of scuzziness. This is true for Tucson. It's true for Chicago - only on a 10x basis. Our hotel is out in the southwest suburbs, in the village of Oakbrook. It's nice.

But Oakbrook doesn't have an identifiable town center, at least not that we ran across. Westmont does, a very attractive one, with flower baskets hanging from the lampposts on the main street, and clean little shops, and a fountain. And a rail station. Since we heard that it's pretty hard to park downtown, we made plans to take the Metra commuter train downtown.



Here comes the train. I'm not sure I saw a locomotive (if there *is* one, it's pushing this train). The southwest Metra line is operated by the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe railroad. Union Pacific runs a few of the northern lines. The cars are double-deckers, and we never were on it during the rush commuter times.

The train passes through all these pretty villages on the 30-minute ride. The last bit is through an industrial area. Then the train goes underground into a huge catacomb area, and stops. Everyone gets off, and the herd moves through the basement of Union Station, where there are food counters and "Arriving/Departing" tubes highly reminiscent of an airport. Then we ride an escalator up and emerge into Downtown Chicago!



Here are some of those "concrete canyons" you may have heard about. I suppose Chicago's high-density district doesn't compare with Manhattan, but it impresses this Tucson boy. It's also rather like a Mall, since the bottom floor of nearly all the buildings are shops of various kinds. Especially on North Michigan, but we'll see that in a few days. Note the "L" (Elevated) tracks overhead. The trains rumble by every five minutes or so. Another fun thing, not so much in these pictures for some reason; the traffic is quite dense (thank goodness we don't have to drive in it), and taxis and buses tend to use their horns more than their brakes.



Our first objective today is a scheduled tour by boat to see the waterfront and the river. In the 1800s, the city was more industrialized (now it is more white-collar businesses in those high-rises), particularly with the meat-packing industry (Chicago was the terminus for those famous cattle drives to Abilene and Kansas City), and the river was terribly polluted. It was dumping that

polluted water into Lake Michigan, the source of drinking water for Chicago and the neighboring cities. That wasn't going to fly, so they got the Army Corps of Engineers (including, at that time, Jefferson Davis!) on the problem, and they... reversed the flow of the river! So now it was taking the polluted water and dumping it... in the Mississippi! Didn't make St. Louis very happy, but that's the way it ended. Now there's not nearly so much pollution, so nobody fusses, but the river still runs backwards!



We took a bus from Union Station to the Michigan Avenue bridge where the tour boat was boarding. We observe water taxis and lots of other tour boats - tourism is clearly a major industry here. If only Tucson's buses ran so frequently and reliably.

All the bridges on the river are cantilevered drawbridges, even though it doesn't look like serious water traffic uses the river anymore. There are also apparently two levels of streets in places, so some of the bridges have a top (out in the sun) and lower deck. There are intersections on those underground streets, too - I shudder to think what traffic is like on those streets.





Michigan Avenue crosses the river at the foot of some of the most interesting buildings. Here is the Chicago Tribune building, with its gothic piles at the top.

And here is the Wrigley building. Then, the boat leaves the bank and heads out toward the lake.



Of course, as part of the engineering "fix" to the river problem, there's a lock before emerging on the lake. While we are in the lock, we can see the Ferris Wheel at Navy Pier. Jerri said she would ride this.

The downstream lock doors are closing. There's another tour boat in here with us. Note the stream of water arching over the river; I thought this was a fireboat checking its hoses, but it turns out there's a fountain at the foot of those condominium buildings which includes a "squirt across the river" jet that goes off periodically. Fun for tour boats that happen to be underneath when it does!



A lighthouse, run by the Coast Guard. There are discussions with the City to transfer this lighthouse to the City, at which time it will be opened to public tours. But not yet (sorry, lighthouse lady).



Tremendous skyline from the water. That's the Hancock building to the right; it used to be the world's tallest. Of course our tour guide pointed out all the different buildings, but there was no way I was going to keep up, so I didn't try.



More skyline. The AON Building to the right (at least, I think that's what it is)

looks taller than the Sears Building to the left, but that's just perspective. Note the marina, and the greenery at the water's edge. That's Millenium and Grant Parks.

A lot of these buildings are living areas, apartments and condominiums. The condos are quite pricey, of course, but the penthouses at the top - the guide said some go for \$40 Million - and parking stalls for \$60 Thousand. And there's enough big money in the big city that they're all taken.

Here's Navy Pier from the water. The big building is one of the two original structures from the '30s. It's really windy out here. Oh, yes; the story is that the "Windy City" handle isn't due to local climate conditions - when the city was competing with New York for the location of the World's Fair in the late 1800s, their politicians won, and then boasted about it. So the wind was hot air from the pols!



The tour boat went up and down the coast, and then back through the lock onto the river. We then got an eyeful of the tremendous buildings lining the water. I note there are lots of cafes outside of those buildings with a view of the river; it would be neat to eat there, but our schedule really doesn't permit.



The tour of the river concludes and we debark and cross back over the Michigan Avenue bridge. We are looking for the bus that goes to Navy Pier, and the map says to go past the Wrigley Building. So here is the sidewalk view. There are two structures with a common base and joined by a skybridge. Cool.

We walk past the Tribune Building and note what the guide said - the builders had embedded stones from different places all over the world. So we saw stones

from English castles and the Taj Mahal and the Grand Canyon as we moved toward where the bus was supposed to be. Apparently we are in a place where the streets run beneath, because anon we come to the edge of this upper level and take a flight of stairs down to the former lower level. Here we find the bus and go to Navy Pier.

Navy Pier started life as a real pier, for unloading ships, combined with a community park arrangement. Then, during the World Wars, the Army and Navy took it over for training purposes - so it actually became the Navy Pier. When the Navy decommissioned it, it lay empty for so long that the City considered demolishing it, but some businesses and civic organizations proposed turning it into an amusement park and convention center, which it is to this day.

First we have lunch. There's a mall-style Food Court in the land-ward original building - and I get a Chicago dog! Mustard, peppers, dill pickle - pretty good. Then we walk down toward the end of the pier. Charter boats are tied up here, and crewmen are hawking for customers. Bicycles for rent. Lots of kiosk sales, and Charity and Faith get trinkets for their friends back home. The Children's Museum, the Stained Glass Museum, and something about Chicago Law Enforcement fighting gangs, then (Al Capone times) and now. At the end of the pier is the other original building, a big theatre now being set up for a banquet. The wind is blowing something terrible, so we don't stay at this end very long. On the way back, we observe that the Ferris Wheel is shut down; I guess Jerri doesn't have to worry about it now. I also observe that my notions about it were wrong. It isn't nearly as tall (perhaps not even as tall as the big Wheel at the Pima County Fair), and the cars are not enclosed. Oh, well.

We spend a bit of time in the shops near the Food Court getting Chicago shirts and knick-knacks, and then leave to get on the bus. Something's up, the sky is cloudy and the wind is REALLY strong. The bus takes us back to Union Station, and we walk back across the bridge to Sears Tower.

Used to be the world's tallest, now outclassed by some building in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Although the informative video we are shown as part of our tower tour is unclear on the point: The Malay tower is taller because it has some spires on the top. In response, some tall HDTV antennae were erected on the Sears Tower. So counting habitable space, I'm not sure the Sears Tower was really outclassed, and counting sheer altitude, I'm still not sure. Anyways, our tour is conducted to the elevator, and up we go - at a rate of about 10 stories in 3 seconds. Fortunately the elevator has a sappy little video to distract claustrophobes and acrophobes like Jerri.



(Oh, yes - we get our family picture before entering the elevator! We don't get this one.)



Proof that Jerri was up here! The observation deck includes a history of Chicago, and some famous artists (Harrison Ford, Walt Disney, Frank Baum, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Louis Armstrong, many others). A tribute to Richard Daley and other Chicago politicians, including a nod to the famous Chicago culture of political corruption. The view outside is of course stunning. All enclosed, with pictures to identify what you're looking at. Kinda wierd to be looking *down* at the tops of huge buildings, including the Hancock Building in the left pane of the window here. Now, if we had gone up in the Hancock Building, we could have actually gone out in the breeze.

While we were up there, we noticed raindrop streaks on the windows. No, we

couldn't feel the building swaying in the wind. Mostly we were distracted by a large crowd of Japanese schoolkids (Jr. High age) that had arrived, so we were motivated to go on back down. There, we found that it was indeed raining, not a lot, but enough to discourage me from the visit to Grant Park that I had planned on. So we went back to Union Station to board our train back to Westmont.

The train leaves every hour, and we have some time, so after a scouting trip, I get the girls to go topside into the Grand Hall. Unimagineably vast. This was the airport terminal of its day. Lots of benches for waiting travellers. I'm actually surprised this picture came out so well, since it was pretty dark in here, and the cresset-style lamps didn't help much. The acoustics were awful, too; they would announce departures over the loudspeakers, but it was completely unintelligible. The only value was to encourage you to walk over to the displays on the central pylon and check on your train. Still, an impressive glimpse of the glories of the '20s and the day of the railroads.



We ride back on the 8:50pm train. It's crowded, and on the other side of the upper deck where we are is a clump of teens who had been to the beach today (July 2, summer break). With amazingly foul mouths. Suburban kids building themselves up in their own minds and their friends' with vulgarity. Another sign of cultural decay. We're glad to get off after 30 minutes of this.

On to Wisconsin: See Part 9

Friday July 4: Chicago II: Our last day on this mindblowing vacation will be spent visiting museums that other people who have been here recommend, and picking up a few more sights of the Big City.

Jerri says she hopes she can deal with the museums, since her feet are hurting.



The first unpleasant surprise was misreading the train schedule. Today is Independence Day, not Friday. Don't use the Friday schedule. Use the Sunday schedule, which a paragraph in the train guide says applies on holidays including Independence Day. Trains run every hour on Friday. Every two on Sunday/Holidays. We should have

gotten here 1/2 hr earlier, so now we have to wait (waste) an additional hour.

Once we get to Downtown, we proceed directly to an Elevated Train station - the "L". You can't go to Chicago and not try out the "L".



Here it comes. We take this train down south, into the Hyde Park area (Obama's turf). It passes through a pretty scuzzy area with run-down apartment buildings and graffiti-covered walls. Even now we notice a lot of family groups out around the barbeque. The train goes through a station in a black neighborhood where we get off and wait for the bus.

Another unpleasant surprise. After a short wait, the bus shows up, and we are headed into a nicer neighborhood, with a university campus. Then the bus stops at the Museum of Science and Industry.

Which is really a *very* impressive museum, and we don't have time to do the 3D or IMAX films that come with our admission. We head straight for the model fantasy castle donated by silent film star Colleen Moore, which the girls say is their favorite part. I hang out in the Energy exhibit enjoying a display where billiard balls are elevated on a screw, then trade their potential energy on a track for various other forms of energy (spinning up a bicycle wheel, playing a xylophone, etc.). There is an exhibit for genetics, which Charity enjoys, and another extensive exhibit on computer graphics and imaging. An exhibit on plumbing has cutaway working sinks and toilets and sewer pipes, along with an explanation of the Chicago water works.

There is quite the farm exhibit, with a robotic cow milker (which doesn't quite work), a display of using cow dung to generate electricity (it takes two wheelbarrowfuls to power the laptop I'm using!), an explanation of milk pasteurization, and this Deere corn combine. Little kids are "driving" the combine through a video cornfield. Faith finally gets to try it out.



I'm guessing John Deere is a corporate sponsor for the Museum.

We also enjoyed some videos of a calf and a piglet being born, images that will stick with Charity and Faith for some time.



I'm not quite sure how "circus" qualifies as "science" or "industry", but there was an exhibit of a mechanized circus model that was the hobby lifework of a railroad employee long ago. I saw it more as history, how circuses used to work (parade through town, bandwagon, sideshows) and how circuses were zoos (via the "menagerie") for rural people.

We probably spent too much time with the model ships in the Maritime exhibit. We just walked right through the automobile exhibit.



Big emphasis on trains. My favorite part perhaps was a *BIG* model train setup featuring... Chicago (of course). Locomotive 999 was here, which helped restore the railroad fortunes of New York rail baron Vanderbilt. And then there was this historic streamlined train, which showed the transition from steam to diesel, and how mail pick-up worked on the big express trains.

We had to leave the Museum of Science and Industry early since we wanted to get to the other museums back Downtown. So back on the bus to the "L" station where we wait and are entertained by a man who is either drunk or mentally disabled. On the train, another drunkard is singing loudly, and other passengers are shouting at him to shut up. Finally we arrive back Downtown and catch the bus for the Planetarium, Field Museum, and Aquarium. Second surprise is the construction on the "island" where these museums are located, and the driver who doesn't seem to want to let us off at the Aquarium. More wasted time.

By the time we get off, there are only 45 minutes to see the aquarium, so we buzz around quickly trying to see as much as we can. Beluga whales, check. Dolphins, check. Penguins, check ("hi, tux!"). River otters, check. Pretty much the same as every aquarium, and perhaps not as good as "The Sea" back in EPCOT.

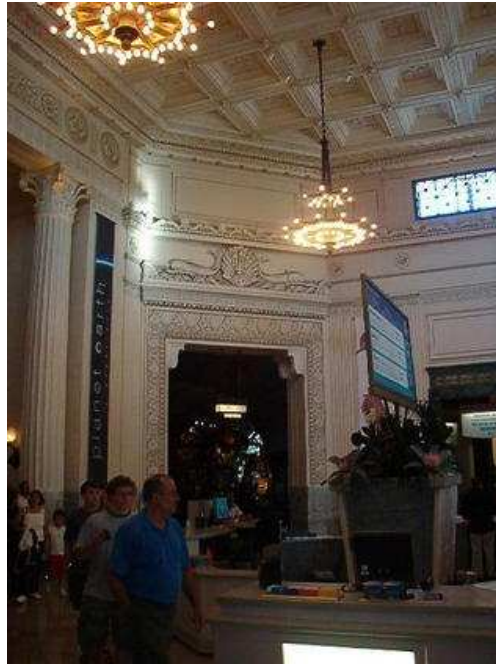




One unique and interesting exhibit was the Coral Reef. Here is a giant fibreglass coral polyp. Tanks held fish, vegetation, and coral animals typical to the Philippine coral reefs. One tank was set in the floor, so you could walk over and view the rays sitting in the sand on the bottom. Most of the tanks were dark, and you couldn't really see inside. Overall, I think "The Sea" at EPCOT wins again.

Every regional aquarium has an exhibit dedicated to local species, and how imported species (like African Carp) who don't have natural predators will supplant indigenous species. Here is a species that seems to be doing quite well in the freshwater Lake - giant snapping turtles. This one is a monster!





So overall, it's interesting, but being in the Second Largest U.S. City does not bestow an advantage over other aquariums. One thing that I thought *was* unique is the architecture. However up to date the exhibits inside are, the basic building is fairly old, and ornate. The ceiling is tiled in turtles and starfish. The lamps consist of exotic fish. The carving over the doorway over there calls to mind the naval Submarine Service motif. But the aquarium is closing, and we are waiting in the entry hall with the exiting guests streaming past us while mommy, who slipped in just before the doors were locked, is in the gift shop.

The Field Museum is already closed (we didn't really care; the Field Museum is "natural history", and we've already seen our dinosaurs and mammoths on this trip). The Planetarium is closed. So we can't use the rest of our City Pass ticket book. Oh, well. Instead, we walk along the shoreline and through the waterfront park. It's head-to-toe family groups with barbeques and picnic boxes. This must be how Chicagoans celebrate Independence Day. A public beach is here, so the girls put their feet in calmer and warmer waters.



Mommy's feet are hurting with all this walking. We head back to the bus stop.



A view of the Sears Tower from the "island", hazy in the afternoon sunlight.

The last part of my plan to actually turn out is to take the bus up Michigan Avenue to the high-end shopping district. The pitiful road atlas says there is a Visitor's Center up here, and we finally find it in here - which is also a display of the City water works. Of course, like Saks and Neimann-Marcus and Macy's, it's closed for Independence Day.





This is another famous Chicago landmark, the Water Tower. The Great Fire burned the city to the ground, but was stopped in its northward movement here.

Things start falling apart. We manage to wedge ourselves onto a packed southbound bus that picks slowly (lots of horn, a little brake) through unusually active traffic. And police barricades. Something's up.

We finally arrive at the Park. Millenium Park. We get a poor but expensive late lunch from a park vendor, and then go to look at this famous stainless steel Jelly Belly sculpture.





Millenium Park has a weird fountain with two large glass-brick prisms. The two sides facing each other are also video displays, and the giant faces of laughing children look at each other while real children waded in the ankle-deep water at their bases.

We leave by the south entrance to Millenium Park, and join a throng walking to Grant Park. Police and police traffic barricades are everywhere. Then I learn part of the answer - "A Taste Of Chicago" is going on. Like the Fourth Avenue Street Fair back home, only maybe ten times larger. Food vendors (much better food than we got from the cafe in Millenium Park), curio shops, people selling flashy night toys from pushcarts. *LOTS* of people - but not a million.

About 9:15, and a lot of walking (did I mention Mommy's feet hurt?), we reach Buckingham Fountain, which is neither running nor illuminated, but there are masses of people standing around expectantly. Yes, lousy picture, but Jerri's Olympus camera will do night shots, just needs a tripod.



Anyways, after a bit, realizing we leave tomorrow early and we can't miss the

10:40 train back to Westmont, we start back. As we do, fireworks start erupting over the Lake. It goes on and on, bigger and higher, reflecting in the windows of the skyscrapers. Tremendous; I can't imagine what the *real* fireworks show last night was like!

By the time we reach the entrance to Grant Park (looking over our shoulders the entire way), the show is over, and the crowds of people are leaving. It is clear that the events of the evening have disrupted the normal bus schedule and my

plans to ride back to the Station, so... we strike out to walk across Downtown. So while I *did* want to walk through Downtown, we do so at night, after everything is closed, in a crowd of people who just want to leave the City, with a wife whose feet are killing her. Finally, using the Sears Tower as our landmark, we make it back to Union Station, and sit on a bench in the Great Hall until it's time to board for our ride back to Westmont and Oakbrook after a long and busy day, at the end of a long and busy vacation trip.

The next morning, we rise, finish packing our bags, and take the toll-road to O'Hare. No problems, and after our three-hour flight, we are back in Tucson.

Having seen:

- **Florida:** Key West, Everglades, Disney World, and St. Augustine
- **Georgia:** Savannah and Atlanta (and, unfortunately, Decatur)
- **South Carolina:** Hilton Head
- **Tennessee:** Chattanooga and Nashville
- **Alabama:** Huntsville (and part of Decatur)
- **Kentucky:** Mammoth Cave, Lincoln Birthplace, Louisville (Churchill Downs), and the Creation Museum
- **Ohio:** Cincinnati
- **Indiana:** Indianapolis (and the Motor Speedway)
- **Illinois:** Chicago
- **Wisconsin:** Kenosha and Lake Geneva