



My Drift

Title: Chicago

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I have been to Chicago three times back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These were all TDY trips – once to attend a Share (computer) Conference and twice to attend IBM training. I thought Chicago was an interesting, fun, and safe city. Yes, I know you read and hear about all the murders and crime there, but I didn't see any of that when I was there. Here is what I learned about Chicago: Michigan Avenue is the main street running through the downtown area and is called the Magnificent Mile. This section of Michigan Avenue, running from the banks of the Chicago River to Oak Street, features more than 460 shops, bars, and restaurants. If you stay near Michigan Avenue or on the north side between it and Lake Michigan, you are on the good (and safe) side of the city. When I was there, I saw no homeless bums and there was a very strong police presence in this area. Needless to say, this is where you find the tourists and people with money. However, if you wander more than a couple of blocks south of Michigan Avenue you could be in trouble – this is where you find the poor people, the homeless, the gangs, and the thugs.

Chicago is a big city and there are many things to see and do, but in this article, I'm going to provide some general information and then talk about some of the things that I found interesting.



View of Downtown Chicago from Above



Chicago and Surrounding Area

General

Chicago, Illinois with a population of 2,750,000 is the third-most populous city in the United States after New York City and Los Angeles. As the seat of Cook County, the second-most populous county in the U.S., Chicago is the center of the Chicago metropolitan area, often colloquially called "Chicagoland" and home to 9.6 million residents.

Located on the shore of Lake Michigan, Chicago was incorporated as a city in 1837. It grew rapidly in the mid-19th century. In 1871, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed several square miles and left more than 100,000 homeless, but Chicago's population continued to grow. Chicago's population peaked at 3,621,092 in 1950. It has been going down since then.



The Great Chicago Fire

Chicago is an international hub for finance, culture, commerce, industry, education, technology, telecommunications, and transportation. It has the largest and most diverse derivatives market in the world, generating 20% of all volume in commodities and financial futures alone. O'Hare International Airport is routinely ranked among the world's top six busiest airports and the region is also the nation's railroad hub.

Chicago is a major destination for tourism, including visitors to its cultural institutions, and Lake Michigan beaches. Chicago's culture has contributed much to the visual arts, literature, film, theater, comedy (especially improvisational comedy), food, dance, and music (particularly jazz, blues, soul, hip-hop, gospel, and electronic dance music, including house music). Chicago is home to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, while the Art Institute of Chicago provides an influential visual arts museum and art school. The Chicago area also hosts the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and the University of Illinois Chicago, among other institutions of learning. Professional sports in Chicago include all major professional leagues, including two Major League Baseball teams.



On one of my trips to Chicago, I went to a Cubs baseball game. Wrigley Field is one of the most famous baseball stadiums in the country. I really enjoyed the game, and the beer and hotdogs were great.



Chicago River

The Chicago River is a system of rivers and canals with a combined length of 156 miles that runs through the city of Chicago, including its downtown center. I stayed at a nice hotel near the river and did my daily walk along the river and at the nearby Millennium Park.



Cloud Gate (The Bean) – Gateway to Millennium Park

One of the most popular places to spend time outdoors in the city, Millennium Park really is vast, covering a massive 24.5 acres. It hosts well-known pieces of public art and a long list of special events, including free concerts and movie screenings in the summer—plus it's also very good for a nice sit-down.

The Cloud Gate (a.k.a. the Bean) opened in 2006 so it wasn't there when I visited Chicago. Today, it is one of the most famous sites and places to go in Chicago. You can take a walk to the Boeing Galleries, go for a stroll through the serene Lurie Gardens or relax on the lawn in front of the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion.

The Sears Tower (Woops – Sorry – The Official Name since 2009 is the Willis Tower)

In 1988, Sears Roebuck and Company sold and moved out of the building, but the Sears Tower name remained until 2009 when the building was renamed after the Willis Group, a London-based global insurance broker. Most people (including me) still call this skyscraper the Sears Tower.

The Sears Tower is a 110-story, 1,451-foot skyscraper in downtown Chicago. Designed by architect Bruce Graham and engineer Fazlur Rahman Khan of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), it opened in 1973 as the world's tallest building, a title that it held for nearly 25 years. Today, it is the third-tallest building in the U.S., as well as the 23rd-tallest in the world. Each year, about 2 million people visit the Skydeck observation deck, the highest in the United States, making it one of Chicago's most popular tourist destinations.



The Sears (or Willis) Tower

I did go up to the Skydeck Observation Deck on my first trip to Chicago. The view of Chicago and Lake Michigan is great!!

At its peak as the world's biggest retailer in 2011, Sears boasted roughly 4,000 locations worldwide. Now in 2024, the Illinois-based company has just 11 stores nationwide, plus one in Puerto Rico. What the heck happened to cause the downfall of Sears? Here is the story:

History: Sears, Roebuck and Co. commonly known as Sears, is a chain of department stores founded in 1892 by Richard Warren Sears and Alvah Curtis Roebuck and reincorporated in 1906 by Richard Sears and Julius Rosenwald, with what began as a mail ordering catalog company migrating to opening retail locations in 1925, the first in Chicago. In 2005, the company was bought by the management of the American big box discount chain Kmart, which upon completion of the merger, formed Sears Holdings.



Sears Holdings (SHLD) filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy on Oct. 15, 2018. A wave of store closures and deals in desperate attempts to stay afloat failed to save the struggling retailer, which listed \$6.9 billion in assets and \$11.3 billion in liabilities in the filing.

What caused Sears to FAIL?

A failure to keep innovating. Why do companies stop innovating? It is usually because the drive and motivation that is necessary to create something out of nothing fades over time as the glow and trappings of success set in. Why experiment with something new if it might fail, bring reputational risk or forfeit current profits? Self-preservation is often the biggest enemy of success. Life is about growth and progress and as history shows it is unkind to those that try to hang on for too long to what made them successful in the past.

An inability to stay ahead of competitive threats. in 1990, Sears and Walmart were practically the same size, generating revenues of \$31.9 billion and \$32.6 billion respectively. Walmart saw a future in discount retailing and aggressively went after that market chipping away over time at consumers that once would have shopped at Sears. Then along came Target and Amazon.

Lack of focus. You could go to Sears and buy books, bicycles, pianos, sewing machines, ready to assemble homes and even cars at one point. Lack of focus didn't bring down Sears, but it certainly contributed to it. At some point Sears became so unwieldy that it was difficult to manage the business effectively. Think about going to a retail store to buy an outfit for an event and turning around and seeing a line of shiny fridges against the wall. It's easier to have an assortment like that online but it's hard to make a store experience like that work.

A lack of continual and sustained investment. Success in retail is founded in continual and sustained investment back into the business. Over time Sears stores started to look tired. That was not by accident. Over the years Sears stopped investing in its stores. In 2017 Sears spent approximately 91 cents per square foot to upgrade its stores and eCommerce site. At the same time JCPenney spent \$4.13 per square foot, Kohl's spent \$8.12, and Best Buy spent \$15.36 to make upgrades. As Sears' stores fell further into disrepair, they couldn't generate enough to finance their own upgrades leading to a negative investment cycle which generates lower and lower sales and less money to invest over time.

Too many missed opportunities. By the late 1980s the very asset that brought Sears its initial success started to weigh down the retailer. Sears' catalog business was losing up to \$1 million per day. The main culprit, something every retailer can relate to - high delivery costs. Distributing a catalog with as many as 1,500 pages was expensive, especially since Sears sold low margin items. Sears shut its catalogue business down in 1993. Amazon was launched in 1994. Sears failed to see that, yes, the traditional catalog was not the way forward, but the digital catalog would be. Theoretically, if they had the vision, they could have figured out how to move the catalog into eCommerce, but they didn't do that.

Billy Goat Tavern

The best place I found in Chicago to get pizza or a cheeseburger and a beer was at the Billy Goat Tavern. This famous establishment is located under Michigan Avenue about a block from the river.



Have you heard about the Billy Goat Curse? Here is the story:

The Billy Goat Curse

In 1945, Dizzy Gillespie was tearing up the music charts with “Salt Peanuts,” Time Magazine’s “Man of the Year” was President Harry S. Truman, and World War II was coming to an end.

A Major League Baseball team was about to be blighted by the Billy Goat Curse.



Legend has it a Chicago tavern owner named Bill “Billy Goat” Sianis pronounced a curse on the club on October 6, 1945 – just a couple months after the end of the war.

Sianis went to Wrigley to cheer on his beloved Cubs against the Detroit Tigers in the Fall Classic. For Game 4, he purchased a ticket for himself and one for his pet goat Murphy, thinking it would bring the Cubs luck. But ushers stopped Sianis from entering with Murphy. Sianis appealed directly to then club owner P.K. Wrigley, asking him why he couldn’t take his personal mascot to the game.

“Because the goat stinks,” Wrigley replied, according to the Billy Goat Tavern.

So, Sianis threw his arms up and cursed the team. “The Cubs ain’t gonna win no more!” he declared. When the Cubs lost the series to the Tigers, Sianis sent Wrigley a telegram.

“Who stinks now?” it read.

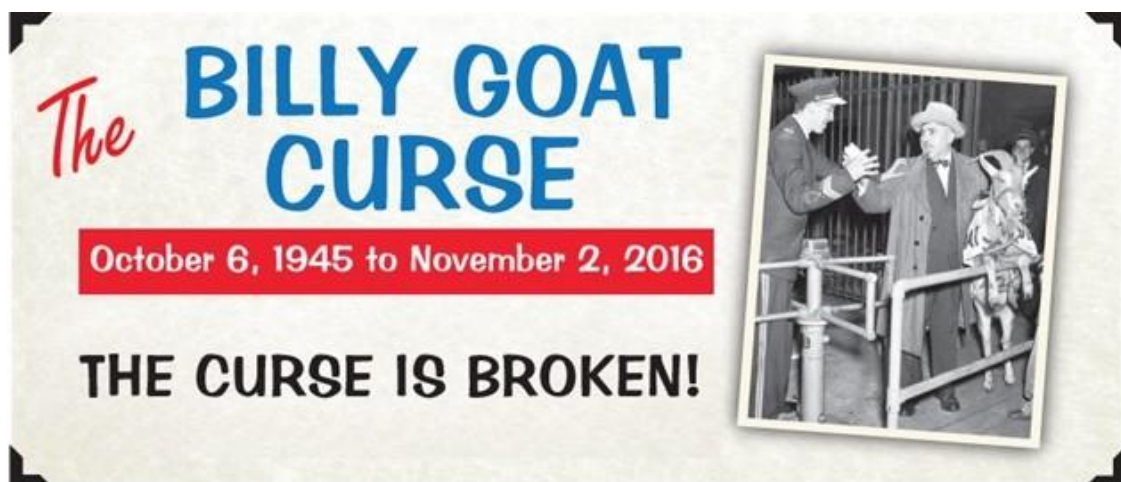
The Cubs were never the same again. Over the years, ghoulish pranksters left dead goats at the stadium. They became known as the “Lovable Losers.” A popular Chicago T-shirt reads, “What did Jesus say to the Cubs? Don’t do anything till I get back.”

Who could forget the eighth inning of Game 6 of the 2003 NLCS between the Cubs and Florida Marlins? The Cubs led 3-0. They were just five outs away from their first trip to the World Series since 1945.

Then a lifelong Cubs fan named Steve Bartman, seated down the left field line, reached for a foul ball. He tipped the ball away from the outstretched glove of leaping Cubs outfielder Moises Alou. His interference was the catalyst for a heartbreaking Marlins rally and eventual series win.

Attempts to break the Curse: Before his death on October 22, 1970, William Sianis himself attempted to lift the curse. Sam Sianis, his nephew, has gone to Wrigley Field with a goat multiple times in attempts to break the curse, including on Opening Day in 1984 and again in 1989, both years in which the Cubs went on to win their division. In 1994, Sam Sianis went again, with a goat, to stop a home losing streak, and in 1998 for the Wild Card tie-breaker game, which the Cubs won.

There were many other attempts to break the curse such as having a Greek Orthodox priest spraying holy water in and around the Cubs dugout during the 2008 playoffs. On April 10, 2013, a severed goat's head was delivered to the Cubs in a possible effort to lift the curse on the team. It was addressed to Cubs owner Thomas S. Ricketts. Nothing worked. The Cubs kept losing!



End of the Curse: The Cubs beat the Cleveland Indians in the 2016 World Series in seven games after trailing in the series 3 games to 1. They won Game 7 by a score of 8–7 in 10 innings at Progressive Field in Cleveland, Ohio, ending their 108-year drought.

Chicago's Beaches

You might know Chicago as the birthplace of the skyscraper, the home of deep-dish pizza, or as one of the largest urban cities in the country. But you might not know that we're home to miles and miles of sandy shoreline, where you can swim, bike, kayak, boat, jet ski, paddle board, sip cocktails on the waterfront, and more.



Oak Street Beach

(This is one of the beaches I walked by since it's close to downtown)

Chicago's 26 miles of scenic lakefront includes numerous public parks and gardens, an 18-mile Lakefront Trail — and more than two dozen free beaches that open to the public every summer in Chicago.

I enjoyed my visits to Chicago much more than my visits to New York City and Los Angeles.

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