

Chicago on the cheap

Holiday skyline's magic and the bustle of shopping streets can come at an affordable price

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Chicago has many nicknames: City of Broad Shoulders. Second City. Windy City. Bargain City.

Bargain City? The latter nickname hasn't made the rounds, perhaps for good reason, but it isn't out of the question. Chicago may never make the short list of the world's most affordable cities to live, but a visit there doesn't have to leave you with an empty bank account.

This is true even around the holidays, when many Chicago hotels offer discounted rates to lure visitors while the city itself sparkles with displays of lights and decorations.

Few urban settings can produce the atmosphere of Chicago during the holidays. From the hustle and bustle of holiday shoppers, to the myriad Christmas lights woven into the skyline, the setting is exciting and romantic.

Such magic comes at a price, of course, but if you do your homework, you may begin to spread the word about a Bargain City hidden beneath an expensive veneer.

Free stuff

- Among the many free attractions are Marshall Field's State Street holiday windows at its flagship store, 111 N. State St. Each year, 11 storefront windows are dedicated to a theme or story. This year, the windows tell the story of "The Night Before Christmas."

In addition to the store's annual holiday windows, its Great Tree in the Walnut Room has been an attraction since the 1920s. Admire the 45-foot-tall tree, adorned with more than 15,000 lights and 1,200 hand-crafted ornaments.

- Visit the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., and take in some of the special Christmas and Hanukkah programs, along with a great gift shop and the world's largest Tiffany glass dome. The Center is home to a variety of art exhibitions, concerts, films, lectures and other special events, many of them free. Call (312) 744-6630.

Here you'll also find the Museum of Broadcast Communications, a fun, nostalgic look at the history of radio and television. The displays are fabulous, and this free museum includes a television center where you can anchor your own newscast (with souvenir tapes of your performance available for purchase).

- Navy Pier's Winter WonderFest, Dec. 14-Jan. 6, also offers a wide variety of holiday activities and entertainment.

The Pier's Festival Hall is transformed into a winter wonderland featuring hundreds of decorated trees, sparkling lights and a town square.

An indoor ice skating rink and large-scale inflatable games, including a bungee run and climbing wall, are among the other attractions. Santa Claus and his toy-making elves are featured at Santa's Holiday Village. Admission is free; an \$8 wristband lets you participate in all activities.

Among the Pier's permanent attractions are an IMAX Theater, several restaurants, shops, live music and other daily shows. Also offered are a Stained Glass Windows museum, Chicago Children's Museum, the Shakespeare Theater and other games and entertainment. Call (800) 595-7437.

Affordable fun

- Lincoln Park Zoo, 2002 N. Cannon Drive, features its ZooLights festival through Jan. 7. Highlights include a water laser show presented nightly on a 15-foot water screen at the Kovler Sea Lion Pool. Santa's workshop is the making and visits with the Jolly Old Elf himself. Watch ice carvers create works of art or go on an animal scavenger hunt. All this, not to mention the collection of light displays, is available at the zoo. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$4 for children ages 4-12. Children age 3 and younger are admitted free. Call (312) 742-2000. Order tickets online (www.lpzoo.com/events/zl-home.html) and get \$1 off per ticket.

The Museum of Science and Industry, 57th Street and Lake Shore Drive, celebrates its 60th year of Christmas Around the World, a forest of nearly 50 trees each carefully decorated with handmade crafts and ornaments passed from one generation to the next. The museum, which includes an Omnimax Theater, is free on Thursdays. Regular admission for adults is \$9 and includes the Christmas exhibit, which runs through Jan. 26. Call (800) 468-6674.

- Ice skating is available, weather permitting, at several locations throughout the city. Major venues include Daley Bicentennial Plaza, 337 E. Randolph St. at Lake Shore Drive. Skates will cost you \$2 and there is a \$2 rink fee. The new Millennium Parkrink, at the foot of the Chicago skyline just north of the Art Institute, is scheduled to open Dec. 15. The rink is free; skate rental costs \$3.

City of lights

- If the weather is nice, you can't go wrong just strolling State Street and the Magnificent Mile during the holidays, especially in the evening. The decorations are magnificent, and the window shopping exquisite.

- Or take in the holiday splendor aboard one of the city's many horse carriages, which run year-round at a cost of about \$30 per half hour (from one to six passengers). Located at the northwest corner of Chicago and Michigan avenues, Noble Horse provides enclosed carriages and blankets for chillier days. Call (312) 266-7878.

- For indoor exploration, start at the Drake Hotel on the northernmost tip of Michigan Avenue, 1140 E. Walton St. The luxurious but cozy Drake goes all out for the holidays, highlighted by its impressive annual Christmas train

and a variety of seasonal touches.

- Spectacular trees and lights abound throughout the city. Don't miss the Bloomingdale's tree, looming large in the midst of some of the world's most elegant shops at 900 N. Michigan Ave.

- Across the street on the main concourse of John Hancock Center, 875 Michigan Ave., the Holiday Mountain Road exhibit features another elaborate train setup amid an assortment of Christmas trees and other decorations.

- The city's big tree is in Daley Plaza, 55 W. Randolph St. Made of 25 balsam firs from Tomahawk, Wis., the big tree has been a holiday tradition in Chicago for 88 years. Also, visit Santa's House through Dec. 23. The big fella will be there from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 4 to 8 p.m. daily.

Shopping

Shopping and Chicago go together like kids and Christmas, and the holidays only accentuate the experience.

Top destinations:

CHRISTKINDLMARKET, open from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily at Washington and Dearborn streets through Dec. 20, is a vast German marketplace stocked for the holidays. It features kiosks and shops, with vendors selling ornaments, handmade toys, food and spirits. Call (312) 644-2662.

THE MAGNIFICENT MILE: An elegant collection of more than 500 stores spread over eight city blocks on Michigan Avenue, north of the Chicago River. The strip includes the posh shops at 900 N. Michigan Ave., featuring Bloomingdale's Midwest flagship store; The Shops at North Bridge, anchored by Nordstroms; Chicago Place, anchored by Saks Fifth Avenue; American Girl Place, 111 E. Chicago Ave., a three-story doll emporium and theater celebrating girls, and Water Tower Place, Chicago's most well-known vertical mall.

OAK STREET: If boutiques, salons and brand names are your thing, then this is your street. It's located just north of the Magnificent Mile.

RIVER NORTH: This newly gentrified neighborhood on the north bank of the Chicago River west of Michigan Avenue features loft buildings with galleries, auction houses, antiques, jewelers and boutiques.

STATE STREET: In addition to Marshall Field's and Carson Pirie Scott, you'll find nationally known stores, such as Old Navy, Filene's Basement and T.J. Maxx on State, which runs north-south less than a quarter mile west of Michigan Avenue.

WOODFIELD MALL: This shopping center at Golf Road and Route 53 in the western suburb of Schaumburg offers 300 stores and 40 restaurants.

GURNEE MILLS MALL, 45 minutes north of downtown Chicago at Interstate 94 and Route 132 West in Gurnee, Ill, has more than 200 savings outlets offering great deals. Ask about its coupon book. Call (800) 937-7467.

Christmas shows

In addition to the holiday lights festivals and celebrations, Chicago has plenty of live entertainment. Among the

shows this year are:

- The Radio City Christmas Spectacular, featuring the world-famous Rockettes. This song and dance extravaganza has become an annual tradition in the Chicago area at the Rosemont Theater, 5400 N. River Road. As if the dancers and their elaborately choreographed routines weren't enough, the show features three camels, five sheep, two donkeys and a sheep stealing the stage during the "Living Nativity" scene. The show runs through Dec. 29. For more information, call (847) 671-5100; for tickets, call (312) 559-1212.

- "A Christmas Carol," an annual tradition at The Goodman Theater, 170 N. Dearborn St., has even greater significance this season — it's the first production in the newly renovated Goodman. This presentation of the granddaddy of all Christmas shows dwarfs most others, especially with the incorporation of an expanded set and facilities. For more information or tickets call (312) 443-3800, or log on to the Goodman Theater Web site at www.goodman-theater.com.

- "Miracle on 34th Street," the classic story made famous by the 1947 movie starring Maureen O'Hara and Natalie Wood, shows at the Chicago Center for the Performing Arts, 777 N. Green St., through Dec. 30. For more information and or tickets, call (312) 327-2000.

- The Joffrey Ballet's "Nutcracker" plays at the Auditorium Theater, 50 E. Congress Parkway, through Dec. 23. Tchaikovsky's ballet tells the familiar story of young Clara and her adventures with her Christmas present, a nutcracker doll made by her grandfather. For tickets or more information, call (312) 559-1212.

Where to stay

When choosing a hotel, first decide if you want to stay downtown. Excellent choices abound in and around the Loop, North Michigan Avenue and the near-north side.

Parking: If you decide to stay in the downtown area, you'll also likely have to pay a daily parking fee, although with the city's excellent public transportation you may not need to move your car at all during your stay. Be sure to ask about the parking when you book your room.

Budget: Several classes of hotels with various amenities are offering discounted rates. Perhaps the most well-located budget hotel is the Red Roof Inn at 162 E. Ontario St. (312) 787-3580.

Not downtown: If staying in the heart of the action isn't important, consider booking a room out of town at the Motel 6 in Arlington Heights, 441 W. Algonquin Road, (847) 806-1230. Room rates begin at less than \$50 with free parking, and Metra train service to downtown is just a short distance from the hotel. Finding a parking place at the Metra station can be difficult during the week, though.

Information: To learn more about Chicago travel packages and options for places to stay, check expedia.com or Chicago.citysearch.com. You also can call the hotel reservations network, (800) 964-6835, or Internet hotel discount hotline, (800) 336-0834.

