



## Chicago Offers Something for Everyone

by MIKE COHEN

Chicago is a bustling, energetic city that never stops no matter the season. It's a destination with world-class cultural attractions, diverse neighborhoods and architectural wonders ([www.choosechicago.com](http://www.choosechicago.com)). Chicago is known for critically-acclaimed restaurants, world-famous museums, first-class shopping, adventurous nightlife, action-packed sporting events and a thriving theater scene – all of which can be enjoyed by visitors with special needs thanks to a facilitative website created with exceptional travelers in mind.



Michigan Avenue Bridge

Called Accessible Chicago ([www.accessiblechicago.org](http://www.accessiblechicago.org)), the portal was created in 2005 by exceptional mother Catherine Marsden. Marsden was inspired by her late daughter, Helen, who had special needs, a desire to end the isolation of people with disabilities and her love for the Windy City. "As a special needs parent, I found disability travel very empowering," said Marsden. "The trips with my daughter taught me important lessons about the degrees of accessibility."

A free on-line resource, Accessible Chicago's network of users share

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detailed insights on the city's accessible hotels, restaurants and tourist attractions based on their past experiences. As Marsden notes, reading about the successful travels of excep-

tional people who have visited Chicago in the past is encouraging to others who are considering venturing on a similar trip.

Although Helen died last April, Marsden remains committed to maintaining and promoting Accessible Chicago as a tribute to her daughter's memory. "Helen's passing brings home the importance of getting those with disabilities out into the world to enjoy each day to its fullest," she said. "Since my own travels with a special needs child will discontinue, I need the disabled community to continue our legacy and add their own experiences about traveling to Chicago with physical disabilities now more than ever." You can reach Marsden at [admin@accessiblechicago.org](mailto:admin@accessiblechicago.org).

### Performing Arts

Chicago's theatre industry pushes the envelope with cutting-edge performances held on historic and state-of-the-art stages. The Goodman Theatre, LaSalle Bank, Cadillac Palace, Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University and the Ford Center have made visiting downtown a must for theatre lovers. Distinctive theaters can also be found throughout Chicago neighborhoods. Until I visited Chicago for the first time, I always thought



A NEW MUSICAL  
**WICKED**  
THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE WITCHES OF OZ

at no charge and may be secured from the house manager with a driver's license or major credit card. A schedule of performances that are interpreted for the people who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing is also available by calling the aforementioned number.

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senting some 1,500 species of fishes, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, birds and mammals from waters around the world. The accessible entrance is located south of the main one. Wheelchairs are available for checkout on a first-come, first-served basis with identification and a credit card. Accessible parking is available in the North Garage at Soldier Field and two nearby lots. With a minimum of two weeks notice, the aquarium will arrange for a sign language interpreter (provided the Chicago Hearing Society has one available that day) at no additional charge beyond regular admission for any guest with a hearing impairment. You must call (312) 939-2438 or (800) 526-0857 (TTY) to make arrangements.

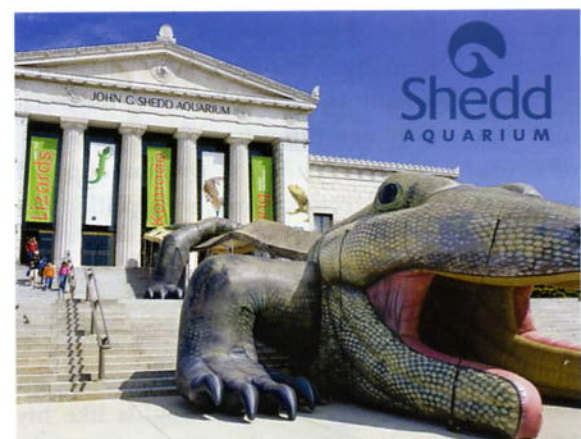
one had to travel to New York City to see true Broadway productions. Was I wrong! There's no place like the Windy City. Wicked, the Broadway musical phenomenon telling the untold story of the Witches of Oz, continues casting a spell on Chicago since its opening in June 2005. It remains the most popular show of all and is in an unprecedented open-ended run at the Ford Center. Even more remarkable is the show's status as a landmark destination for visitors and tourists; nearly 50 percent of Wicked's Chicago audience travels from outside the metropolitan area to see the hit musical.

### Museums and Attractions

Chicago is world-renowned for its diverse collection of museums, which explore a variety of subjects including Chicago history, art, African-American culture, astronomy, natural history and much more. Those visiting Chicago should plan on spending time at Chicago's Museum Campus. The scenic park conveniently joins the Adler

Chicago is also home to a variety of spectacular attractions. The Chicago Cultural Center is described as a "neo-classical masterpiece" that features two art-glass domes and glittering mosaic walls. Navy Pier is the city's lake-front playground and the state's most popular site, offering visitors a unique blend of family-oriented attractions. Chicago's newest global icon is Millennium Park which opened in 2004. The

Planning a complete Windy City Wicked getaway is easier than a click of the heels; tickets range in price from US \$25 to \$90 and should be purchased several weeks in advance via The Broadway In Chicago Ticketline at (312) 902-1400 or online at ticketmaster.com. Up-to-date ticket information is available at [www.wickedthemusical.com/chicago/tickets.htm](http://www.wickedthemusical.com/chicago/tickets.htm)



Planetarium & Astronomy Museum, the Shedd Aquarium/Oceanarium, and the Field Museum of Natural History with easy access to all three locations. If you are going to choose one place to visit, let that be the magnificent John G. Shedd Aquarium ([www.sheddaquarium.org](http://www.sheddaquarium.org)), a non-profit institution dedicated to public education and conservation.

24.5 acre park has instantly become a world-class attraction and a Chicago landmark. Other attractions not to be missed include Buckingham Fountain at Grant Park, the Hancock Observatory and the Sears Tower Skydeck.

The theatre is accessible for patrons with special needs. If you require special seating due to the use of a wheelchair or have a visual or mobility impairment, leave a message on the theatre's accessibility line at: (312) 977-1700 ext. 5 (TTY: (800) 359-2525). A staff member will take your priority reservation within 24 hours. For people with hearing impairments, assisted listening devices are available

Beautifully situated on the shores of Lake Michigan, the facility houses nearly 22,000 aquatic animals repre-

Six Flags Great America ([www.sixflags.com/greatAmerica](http://www.sixflags.com/greatAmerica)) is located in Gurnee, Illinois, halfway between Chicago and Milwaukee. The 31-year-old park, which is open May through October, boasts eight

themed sections, a 13-acre water park called Hurricane Harbor, three specially-themed children's areas and various other forms of entertainment. There are 13 rollercoasters, including everything from traditional woodies to a bone-rattling hypercoaster. Altogether there are over 75 rides and attractions. If you purchase a special "flash" pass, you will have the benefit of a shorter waiting time for some of the more popular rides. Strollers, wheelchairs and electric convenience vehicles are available for rent just inside the main entrance, on a first-come, first-served basis.

For information on services offered to exceptional guests, visit Guest Relations near the main entrance to pick up "A Guide to Fun at the Park for Guests with Disabilities," a brochure that provides detailed information on the accessibility of rides, shows, games, shops and restaurants at the park. For instance, some ride entrances have narrow queues bordered by railings that make wheelchair access difficult. In these situations, special access entrances are available to accommodate people with mobility impairments or other disabilities. These special entrances are generally the same as the ride exits and are identified by signs marked with the universal wheelchair symbol.



Six Flags

*If you are going to Chicago for an extended stay you'll want to stay somewhere comfortable, affordable and conveniently located.*

Since guests who are deaf or have hearing impairments may be unable to hear ride safety information communicated over a public address system, a written copy of safety regulations is supplied by the ride operator.

### Accommodations

If you are going to Chicago for an extended stay of 10 nights like my family did, you'll want to stay somewhere comfortable, affordable and

conveniently located. Homewood Suites ([www.homewoodsuiteschicago.com](http://www.homewoodsuiteschicago.com)) located right in the heart of downtown at 40 East Grand Avenue, puts you just seconds away from the Chicago Loop area. Guests of the hotel can enjoy the view of Chicago's well-known architecture while savouring the daily complimentary Suite Start hot breakfast or the Welcome Home reception featuring a complimentary light meal and beverages Monday through Thursday evenings. While the breakfasts are particularly special, an added bonus for families is the fact that the hotel encourages you to take food back to your room by providing take-out containers.

Certified by the American Disabilities Association (ADA) for conforming to general accessibility and room-size standards, the Homewood Suites has 12 exceptionally-designed rooms complete with wider doors, larger bathrooms and accessible counters and accessories. Plans call for roll-in showers to be installed in 2008.

For guests with hearing impairments, the hotel is also equipped with special smoke and fire alarms. Because it is considered an extended-stay hotel, the Homewood Suites is often used by families whose relatives are patients at the nearby Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago, whereby special room rates are applied. Room rates during the year range from US \$129 to \$409. ■

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