

Though I haven't yet traveled near and far as much as I plan to, I'd say at 25 years of age I have a fair amount of experience exploring several cities – including a brief stint in London, and nearly a year of living in Manhattan. And what I've quickly come to learn is that each place is a unique mosaic; a conglomeration of color. A city is a person, with a balanced heartbeat, predictable pulse, and an ever expanding memory. Its personality makes an indelible mark on the cells breathing inside its walls, yet simultaneously absorbs and morphs into the energy emitting from each individual cluster or community of cells.

What I mean is, each city becomes the people living inside of it, and the people become the city they're inhabiting. Much like a painting, each person that crosses the canvas imprints a mark that can never be erased. Some strokes are short, speckled dots, nearly indistinguishable by the naked eye, while other marks are bold and bright, obtuse and impossible to ignore. Regardless, each impression plays an integral role in the fabric of the painting. We give and we take, and that is the beauty of it all.

Recently, for five days in July, I was able to make a small imprint within the city of Chicago – or, better yet, Chicago stamped itself upon me. It welcomed me warmly, and we became fast acquaintances. By the second or third day, it had felt like we'd been friends in another lifetime. Chicago never felt strange or foreign, but rather, familiar and safe. It helps, perhaps, that I was traveling with my aunt, who lived there for about ten years in the early 2000s. Watching her navigate the streets and recount stories from her past was like watching a pair of former lovers embrace after years of separation. To be privy to such a reunion was as interesting as it was intimate; I could almost see the memories being rehearsed and replayed as if unfolding in real time, like through the lens of a time machine.

On the day we arrived, after navigating through O'Hare and taking the blue line, we first traversed through the quaint and quiet business district. I actually had to remind myself we were in Chicago, for it felt so much like New York– I even caught a few glimpses of London lurking between the streets. The more we walked, though, the more I could appreciate Chicago for its own individuality.

What I loved, and literally stopped in my tracks for, was the Chicago River. It transects the city like cerulean colored veins. We stood on one of the many bridges, staring at the kaleidoscope of architecture running parallel to the edge of the water. The buildings were tall, obviously, but not overwhelmingly so. I didn't feel small or lost amongst the skyscrapers.

I'd later learn, while on an architectural boat tour of the city, that a female architect named Jeanne Gang designed one of the more modern, glass buildings. It was quite interesting to literally navigate through time simply by using the architecture as a frame of reference. Glass and steel have grown quite prominent among the last decade or so, while art deco buildings are a sign of the late seventies and eighties. I was amazed by how much attention to detail truly went into so many of the designs– the aesthetic is clean and modern and blends so well with the overall surroundings.

Of all adjectives to describe Chicago, clean is something I thought of often. Maybe Chicago Natives wouldn't think so, but as someone who once lived in a roach infested apartment in Morningside Heights, Chicago seemed pristine to me. Not once did I find a piece of litter or smell the pungent scent of sewage– and we frequently walked far (from River North to South Loop).

As we continued our initial trek to our AirBnB on West Huron Street, my aunt soon pointed out the places she or her friends lived, sprinkling anecdotes along the sidewalks, and collecting memories long ago abandoned. I listened intently, realizing that, sadly, if I were to give someone a tour of Manhattan, I wouldn't really be able to share many exotic stories of my own. Then again, she did live in Chicago for nine more years than I had lived in New York City. I could probably also write a book about memories from my time in Buffalo while attending undergrad, but, I digress. I genuinely did enjoy, and was inspired by, tales of her history. And though we were only there for a short time, we now have a collection of new stories to tell.

By the end of that first day, we had walked well over twenty thousand steps– equivalent to 8.5 miles. Suffice it to say, our legs were aching. The deep-dish pizza we ordered (and devoured) from UNO that night was more than earned. It was better than I ever expected– my mouth waters when I think of the robust flavors. It was the first of many 'bucket-list' items we set out to accomplish, and it certainly did not disappoint. Exhausted and induced by a food-coma, Aunt Lynne and I crashed on the couch of our stunning AirBnB while watching the trainwreck of a sequel to the "Sex and the City" series.

If I had to choose my favorite day of the trip, the second day – a Tuesday– would certainly be it. It started slow and easy. Both Aunt Lynne and I are not morning people, so we took our time. She went across the street to a cafe for coffee, while I went downstairs toothie. Soon enough, we took an Uber to Millenium Park (or, as Aunt Lynne began to call it, 'Millenium Park').

I don't know why, or even when the desire came about, but I'd always wanted to see the 'bean' – what I've since learned is actually named "Cloud Gate". Its presence is bold, as expected, and big. It demands to be seen, but not in an obnoxious way. Rather, it's confident and sophisticated like a wealthy woman who knows her worth. I admired it for that, and as I gazed into the reflective polish, I began to see myself as such.

Naturally, I took close to one hundred photos– both of the bean itself, as well as myself posing in front of it. Poor Aunt Lynne had to take a fast crash course on how to take photos on an iPhone: Annie Liebowitz, she is not. In fact, we caught a few nasty glares from people as we cackled at the selfies she didn't know she was taking of herself. Here's one for reference:



(At least by the end of the trip, with lots of practice, her photography skills vastly improved).

Before our next destination, we stopped at a pop-up bar in the park and ordered frozen margaritas, giving me quite the buzz. Drinking on a Tuesday afternoon in the middle of a crowded city without a care in the world is just one of the many reasons why we should all travel.

Mildly drunk by that point, we walked the rest of South Loop, making a few pit stops in Grant Park and my aunt's former apartment complex on Wabash Avenue (where she recognized a former doorman).

Our next stop and bucket list item was Shedd Aquarium. I suppressed the guilt of contributing to the unfair containment of helpless sea animals because I longed to see sea turtles and clown fish up close. And aside from a throng of screaming, running children, I find aquariums to be therapeutic. Something about staring into the deep blue tanks, watching the unpredictable yet mesmerizing movement of fish to be incredibly tranquilizing– either that, or the overpowering scent of cleaning chemicals are asphyxiating.

I very well could have stayed there until closing, surveying the swimming of sharks, and laughing at the beluga whales spitting at the audience, but hunger and a headache was creeping in.

It was a long day and getting late, so when we got out of the Uber to the place we affectionately started calling home, we decided to try the Mediterranean Restaurant across the street. I know I was starving, and anything would have tasted good, but the grilled chicken gyros were, for lack of a better term, purely delectable. I don't normally like tsaski sauce, but I would gladly have drunk theirs. In fact, it was so good, I went back Thursday night and ordered chicken kebabs drenched in a savory garlic sauce. By no means would I consider myself a food connoisseur, but such a meal is worth writing about.

Induced by yet another food coma, Aunt Lynne and I continued our tradition of watching "Sex and the City", providing various commentary about how unrealistic it is, before heading to bed for the night.

The next day was our scheduled river tour in which we walked there and arrived almost an hour early– yet somehow, we were among the last people to board the boat (really, it was because we were sitting on a bench behind the dock, taking an online enneagram test).

Our docent was a former teacher, and reminded me of Mikey Day from SNL– a type of nerdy humor I am very much fond of. For the most part, I truly was stunned by the stories of the various architecture, but I couldn't help observing the other people on the tour: to the right of us were other New Yorkers, a middle-aged dad, his son, and the grandfather all decked out in Mets gear. On the other side of us was another young family with an adorable daughter who drew pictures of the buildings on a piece of paper and wrote, "this boat is fun". To me, that's one educated and creative kid.

However, I was most fascinated by the four twenty-somethings in front of us, who were from London. Aside from their lavish accents, I instantly knew they were European simply by the way they were dressed: the two girls were poshly decorated in hoop earrings and trendy outfits, whereas the two guys were decked out in rugby-team clothes. They were quite affectionate with one another– almost to the point where I wondered if perhaps they were swingers.

When the tour ended, we found a place with Spanish style food, then spent the rest of the afternoon shopping along the Gold Coast– where name brand designer stores mock you from every corner.

That day, like its predecessors, went fast – and before I knew it, it was Thursday and we were headed to the Art Institute of Chicago. Before my twenties, I didn't appreciate art or museums as much as I do now. Really, only in the last year or so have I started to take a true interest in it. With that said, I know just a handful of well-known works and an average number of famous painters. Among them, I'm genuinely fascinated by the works of Van Gogh, Edward Hopper, and in terms of more abstract art, Jackson Pollock. I was delighted to learn that the Art Institute housed my favorite painting: "Nighthawks" by Edward Hopper. I briefly recall learning about it in an elementary school art class, and I've always been fascinated by it. Unknowingly, I watched a documentary on the piece about a week before the trip and fell in love with it all over again. It was larger in person than I'd imagined, and I simply stood there, staring at it, marveling at how a simple painting – without a single word– can tell an entire story. There's so much to wonder: who are the people, why do they look so lonely, why are they there? As a night owl myself, I find so much peace and beauty in the somber solitude, and maybe that is why I admire it so much.

It was our last full day of the trip, but what a way to end it. My mom always has this saying whenever we go away, "I wish we could have one more day" -- and I laughed to myself because I thought that, too.

I'd love another day in Chicago, or an infinite number of days in Chicago, because like any person or painting (or in this case, city), you're never finished learning about it. It's ever evolving– simultaneously enhanced by the stories it is told, and the stories it can tell. History lives in every inch of space. The mark that Chicago imprinted upon me is a vibrant blue; a color I will see in the art I will continue to learn about, and the shade of the river I will see when I close my eyes and remember this summer. I'd like to think I too made a mark, if even a small one, within the streets of Chicago; that when I go back one day, maybe with my own future niece or nephew, or even child, I will be able to point something out and say, "this is where Aunt Lynne and I..."

The story will exist like a secret waiting to be found again.