

Chicago by James Bacon

I was headed for Capricon, in Wheeling, north of Chicago, but had arranged a few days holidays in Chicago. So I thought since I am as a big a tourist as you can find, and am continually in love with America, that I might write up the places that I visited, that may be of interest to others, who are going to be going to Chicago for Chicon 7, the forthcoming Worldcon.

I must say I found the city fairly friendly, and not just the Museums and Shops, like there was the guy on the 'L' who came out as I had pressed the cancel button repeatedly, and it make a very audible noise, perhaps so it can alert staff to the proximity of an idiot or in my case foreign idiot, and there was Terry in the Hyatt, who guided us around, and was happy to show me some things twice, because you know, I needed to burn them in my mind, but he was an example of the pleasantness that I continually experienced.

Although quite a destination city, it also felt manageable, sorta like Dublin. OK, not at all like Dublin, but like San Francisco. No, not like San Francisco. Anyhow, it felt manageable, despite its hugeness and height and massive metropolitan area, and yet everything was handy enough, and the roads and public transport were good. Not at all like LA, for example.

The public transport is cheap and good. OK I was caught out, because the buses and 'L' day tickets which were about \$6 (from Walgreen's) for 24 hours, don't work on the Metra Rail routes, but that was OK. It takes a foreigner to make that error.

I was excited. I still am excited.

The Hyatt is about as close to the city centre or 'Down town' as you would want. It is not inside the Loop, but on its northeastern edge. Now the Loop is a loop of Elevated railway, known here as the 'L'. The interior of this railway loop is about half a square mile, but the Loop is also a district of nearly 1.8 square miles, and includes the Hyatt, and many of the civic buildings, as well as the commercial heart of the city. So in other words, you are really as close as you could want to be, when you are at the Hyatt.

I was lucky ~~just~~ to be staying on the north side of The Chicago River, on Dearborn St, so it was about equidistant to the centre of the Railway loop as the Hyatt. So on foot, I was, and it is a great city centre to walk around.

I was stunned by how good the Hyatt was, there were other Bars, and many more suites and rooms, but generally after the second time round, I had the place, and that's pretty good going.

Chicago, city that grasps Culture.

Now one of the things about Chicago is that I found that it is a city that seems to really want Culture. Like they go out and fight to drag Culture into their city, they find vast amounts of money to make the culture happen, and although one may think this is somewhat artificial, those of us who appreciate and know art, know that it needs to be funded, to be nurtured, to be given space to flourish, and Chicago has that space, time and indeed, money.

There is so much culture. Although in fairness at times, I had enough of culture and so would enter a Deli and have a pastrami sandwich or some other delicacy, lest I become so infused with culture that I break out in dance.

A bit late Millennium Park

South of The Hyatt, about a five minute walk away, is Millennium Park. Aptly, this was opened about four years late, but it a massive space, with a number of attractions.

Dave McCarty and Helen Montgomery guided us around this space. The Jay Pritzker Pavilion is a massive open air auditorium, and apparently has free events, quite frequently. (<http://explorechicago.org/city/en/millennium.html>) As we walk past here, there is a bridge and path layout that looks like a tadpole from above, but like all public art has a more recognisable local nick-name: the Sperm. I noticed some women gently sidling beside the tadpole.

From here we loop around and walk past The Art Institute of Chicago which is south of Millennium Park, and onto further works of art. Next was The Crown Fountain, designed by Jaume Plensa. This fountain is cleverly made, two towers of glass bricks hide water falling down into a black granite area, and on the rear of the bricks, lights portray video footage. The sculptures are 50 foot tall, and sometimes faces are displayed on the bricks, and in certain points open mouths shoot out spouts of water. It cost millions.

From here, it was not far to Cloud Gate, also known as the Bean. This is a wonderful piece, designed by Anish Kapoor. It's in the shape of a bean, and is a thirty three foot tall, sixty six foot long bean, made from polished steel. It's huge and one can walk underneath easily. The steel acts like a massive mirror and also the shape distorts the reflection, giving some amazing visions of the cityscape. It cost millions.

There is also a Café and an Ice Rink, and as I watched I saw people pushing themselves around the edge while many others gracefully pirouetted and spun like swans. I realised that I would be comparable to the wounded Bismark, should I try, but it was there.

I returned to look at the bean - it really is quite an incredible thing.

The Pritzker Library

Now, you see this is one of those things that really impresses me about a city. When a city has a specialist shop or museum or library, it really speaks to me. This can be about any number of subjects that are close to my heart, and obviously London, where I currently live, has a few and so, I was tremendously impressed when the High Zoner, himself, Dave McCarty mentioned that there was a Military Library in the city, and just across from Millennium Park.

I was stunned. How could this be? And so it was that I ventured into the Pritzker Library, a Museum and Library on a number of floors, and of the highest quality. Although the Monroe building was built in 1912, a number of floors inside have been renovated and the library is not only new to this building, but also encompasses a two story high lecture hall, while there are some 35,000 books in the collection. It was immaculate.

As well as housing books, magazines and comics, there was a wonderful exhibit 'Don't be a Dope' of educational comic and cartoon art on display, which sated two hobby interests at once. There is also a permanent display section dedicated to The Congressional Medal of Honour. And they have one. Which is pretty awesome.

The library regularly has lectures and interviews upstairs and there is an ongoing project to speak with Medal of Honour winners, as well as involvement with books on the subject. It was like a finely tuned museum, here in a library, and they had a small but perfectly neat selection of militaria on display.

I was well impressed. And even more so by the assistants who sought out some books for me. I fear I may spend more time in the Library. It was like a secret gem in the middle of everything, and I felt I wanted more of this type of Culture. A \$5 charge in seemed meagre, and an excellent value for the money.

The Big ONE – MSI The Museum of Science and Industry,

During my visit, I got a bus to the Museum of Science and Industry in the loop, a number 10 or 6 was required, and as it passed The Field Museum, I wondered had I missed my stop. It was odd, as all I heard was Museum from the automated speaker. I wondered, worriedly.

And then I looked like I was chewing a wasp. Was I going the wrong way? My companion was Alissa McKersie and she was none the wiser, and also wondered what the hell way we were going. She suggested that we get off at the next stop, but suddenly the bus, now travelling on south Lake Shore Drive, a big wide free-way type road, was steadily increasing speed. There was a particular noise, and it felt like we were going at quite a pace for a bus, and no sign of a bus stop, and I reckoned we would soon be in Kansas. Thanks to the power of iPhone, we realised that our destination was still to come, and as we left the big road, we travelled through a lovely part of the city, with brown stone three story homes, and then as the road opened up there ahead was the grey gargantuan building of the MSI.

Now this is perhaps one of the best museums I have ever visited, and I have been going to museums for some time. It was \$10 to get in, but then we were offered the guided tour of the U-Boat for an extra \$8 or something.

Now this was something altogether amazing. The building itself is huge. As you walk in, you realise the shell is just that, a shell, as immediately you walk into a massive Cavernous hall, so huge, that as I look down, I see the streamlined monster of a Zephyr Train and it looks like a toy, with its immaculate polished steel and aerodynamic cab, hinting at what is to come or once was to come.

As we wound our way towards the U-Boat, we decided that we would not visit everything today, but just do our best, to get about. So we journeyed through a number of halls, and were soon at the beginning of what was a very detailed and interesting history of the U-Boat war, culminating in a sense, with the story of Captain Daniel V. Gallery, of a local parish, and his capture of U-505, a Type IX U-boat of the Kriegsmarine. It was something else. As you walk through a slew of images and videos, static displays and a recreation of the Bridge of the American pursuer, USS Guadalcanal, you round a corner and suddenly you are upon a U-Boat.

A proper to god, Wolf Pack, Donitz Demon. Sitting looking straight at you, the prow just at your height. There are only so many U-Boats in existence around the world, and here was a Type IX C, 1,100 tonnes fully loaded, just sitting in what felt like a massive U-Boat pen.

Yes, it's that eagerness for culture again. Sure the Americans captured this U-Boat fair and Square.

Gallery was amongst the boarding party, that put back in a stop cock and also diffused the explosives set to scuttle her, and his bravery captured this boat, and something more, an Enigma machine. You have to tip your hat to a man like that, and of course, it is honoured here.

It was due to be a target for practice in 1946 when Gallery's brother first came up with the idea of it as an exhibit, and in 1954 it was moved to Chicago, when local citizens gathered a quarter of a million dollars for it. It had been in dry dock in Portsmouth Yard, and anything that was removable, had been, so Gallery himself suggested that they contact the German manufacturers and seek replacements. In his book, "Eight Bells and All's Well" (1965), Gallery explains that every company sent parts, with no charge, lamenting that their U-Boat wouldn't be returned, but that it should surely look fine, as an example of German engineering.

The U-Boat was outside for years, and the ingenious locals decided that they would dig a freaking huge big hole, stick in the U-Boat, make it look like a pen, and hey presto, possibly the bestest single exhibit in any museum I have ever seen.

We took the tour, which was excellent. The U-Boat was not as claustrophobic as I expected, but then, I was only in there for a half hour or so, not for weeks and months on end, at depths that make the hull creak and shudder, but images from Das Boot filled my mind, as the lingering metallic smell filled my nostrils, and lights flicked on and off, with noises, to demonstrate what it was like on board.

Itchy. I bet it was itchy.

I decided to ask some questions at the end of the walking tour through the U-Boat and so, had nearly a whole second tour, it was so good, as the guide knew her history pretty well. Such a shark of the deep, a killing machine, that murders young men regardless of allegiance, the hunter and the hunted.

Such a capture, of course, elicited a huge amount of memorabilia, and the displays of weapons and trinkets was awesome. Like some child, I had a go on all those 'experience science' type of things they have, except at the MSI they seem to go for real life-sized stuff, so whether it was attempt to manage the trim of a U-Boat, use a real periscope linked to a computer to sink shipping, use real compressed air to make a vessel sink and float in real water, or clamber through hatches and into a bunk, you know there I was doing it all. Wishing my dad was here, with my brothers.

Most interesting was a video auditorium, that showed Captain(Oberleutnant) Harald Lange, the master of the U-Boat, and Captain Gallery talking about the incident in 1964. It's amazing how men who were sworn enemies could come together to reminisce and share the history together, in such a gentlemanly way. It was a fine way to end the exhibit, although I spent more time just looking and taking in the U-Boat.

And that was just ONE of the exhibits - I was already exhausted. Soon though I was re-energised as I went into the Space Exhibit, known as The Henry Crown Space centre. Like how couldn't you be excited when you are confronted by Scott Carpenter's Mercury Atlas 7 spacecraft called Aurora 7, or Commander Bormans space suit, or the trainer version of Eagle and the Lunar lander, and, well the Apollo 8 command capsule? It was too much.

The piece of Mission Control desk, the moon rock, the Atlantis Mock up, the Apollo food, defecation disposal kit, tools, it was just brilliant, and that's before all the interactive stuff, like a mock up of a flight sim, docking Gemini, controlling a Mars lander, or landing a shuttle (which I did rather badly(inverted)).

There are over 2,000 exhibits at the MSI, in over 75 individual halls.

The real science fun stuff, which as High Zoner pointed out, is sorta super-sized science experiments stuff, done on a gargantuan scale, was incredible, from the pendulum telling the time in time with the earth's movement to the whirlwind maker three stories high.

And there was so much more: a Spitfire flying by a 727, a Stuka (Ju-87) entering a dive, a replica of the Wright brothers first achievement, trains, trains, trains and a 3,500-square-foot model railway, that explains the history of the railway from Chicago to Seattle, and has a wonderful section of 'L' and in many cities, let alone countries would be exhibit enough on its own right.

You just gotta go. They have a U-boat.

Around the City in Movies

So, yeah, you know that one of the things I really wanted to do was to get around the city and see places which had been made famous by movies. Like if any of you are ever in Dublin, I can show you round where Michael Collins was filmed, but there are some movies which were just huge for me and the family, which were set in Chicago.

The Untouchables. I loved Kevin Costner as Eliot Ness in this, nearly as much as I liked Robert De Niro as Al Capone. I can still see the address, Racine, in the match-book, and the violence of it, so graphic and yet compelling, and the music as the Canadian Mounted police charge towards the Bridge. You either know it or you don't. So much of Chicago is in this movie, and so much of the movie is Chicago.

Malone is mortally wounded, and yet, again to music that is heart rending, he tells Ness where to find the money man Payne, and so Ness and Stone, a man who takes a gun to a knife fight, head to Union Station and with the slow-motion shots of a runaway pram, and a fierce shoot-out, in itself a homage to the Battleship Potemkin, Odessa Steps scene, they get their man. And so this was one of the places I went, to stand at the bottom and top of a set of steps, and wonder about Capone.

I didn't find the Rookery Building, 202 South La Salle Street. Built in 1886, it is used as The Police HQ, and also for the confrontation between Batman and the Joker in The Dark Knight. I did walk across the Michigan Bridge, although I may try it at night, and hope to meet an honest copper.

As I walked, with Dave, Helen and Alissa around Chicago, we stood at the bottom of Sears Tower. Its got a new name, but no one has mentioned this to the locals. I thought about it, but again, want something for my next trip, and so looked up, at its height and thought of a real hero. Ferris Beuller.

Helen was kind enough to drive me to the infamous Wrigley Field, for it is not nearby, and one wonders why Ferris did not use the Ferrari to get there.. It is much smaller than I expected, but none the less, very cool. I was impressed how adjacent buildings had seating on their roofs. We walked down Dearborn, and at West Adams had taken a turn to go to The Berghoff for lunch, (which was incredible) and of course just there, is where the German-American Parade footage was shot, with Ferris miming Danke Schoen and singing the Beatle's version of Twist and Shout. Dave pointed out the Chicago Board of Trade, where Ferris proposes to Sloane, and it is also Wayne Enterprises in Batman Begins.

Now if any movie came to mind, it must be the sound of wheels going on the metal grid-like

bridges, and it is immediately The Blues Brothers, which uses way too many location for me to even think about getting to. Obviously I had seen Wrigley field, and I, of course, went to the Richard J. Daley Plaza and saw where a Bluesmobile had actually crashed into The Daley centre, and of course saw the Cook County Building adjacent. I saw some unusual views of lower Wacker drive, which had been used for many Police shots, and of course I passed by, twice, due to mis-navigation, the junction of N La Salle Blvd and West Lake St, where the infamous police pile up occurred.

How Chicago is not at all like Dublin

The Dublin Metro Region of County Dublin has an area of 356 sq mi (922 km²), 1.3% of the state of The Republic of Ireland, and has a population of 1,187,176 which is about 30% of the population.

Chicago has 2.7 million residents, and the metropolitan area known as Chicagoland has 9.8 million. The Chicago Metro area is 10,874 sq mi (28,160 km²) which is about thirty times the size of County Dublin.

The whole island of Ireland, comprising both the Republic and Northern Ireland (UK) at 31,520.65 sq mi is a bit smaller than South Carolina and a decent bit bigger than West Virginia, but between those two states she would sit in size.

You'd fit two Republics (27,133 sq m) into one Illinois, and you'd probably get six of them into California. I tell you for such a small place, we have a load of culture though and I think there might be a fire sale on, I must mention it.