

Travel

# Forget 2020. Chicago invites travelers to make the most of 2021.



A visitor stands upside down on the Skydeck Ledge at Willis Tower. (Shutterstock)

By Jen Rose Smith

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Chicago, like many of us, wants a 2020 do-over. In the earliest days of the pandemic, the city inaugurated the 2020 Year of Chicago Music, announcing a lineup that would,

eventually, mostly be called off. Now it's moving on: Welcome to the 2021 [Year of Chicago Music](#).

“We’re calling it an extension,” said Mark Kelly, commissioner of the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, chuckling a little. Highlights of this musical year include the first-ever [Chicago in Tune](#) festival beginning Aug. 19, a genre-hopping, month-long event featuring free and ticketed shows at concert halls, clubs and the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion.

“There will literally be music in every corner of the city,” Kelly said. “The energy is starting to come back.” Travelers are ready. Though hotel occupancy still lags behind 2019 numbers, it is rising fast, said David Whitaker, president and CEO of Choose Chicago. Whitaker said demand for Chicago hotel rooms was the third-highest of any U.S. city in May, trailing only New York and Orlando.

“We’re super excited,” Whitaker said, noting that the influx ranges from young tourists on city breaks to affluent older travelers who might otherwise go abroad. “The visitor economy is going to be a big, big part of Chicago’s overall recovery from covid.”

Signaling that recovery is a packed lineup at music festival [Lollapalooza](#) starting July 29, plus the more classical strains of the [Grant Park Music Festival](#) through Aug. 21. Recent months have brought new attractions, hotels and restaurants across the city — here is what’s fresh for travelers:

A vertigo-inducing 103 stories above the city streets, the [Skydeck at Willis Tower](#) (nee Sears Tower) reopened in April after extensive renovations. Now, multimedia monitors offer visitors to the observation deck interactive lessons in Chicago history and architecture, as well as aerial images of the city to console visitors on days with less-than-spectacular views.

Mind-bending visuals at the [Museum of Illusions Chicago](#), which opened last fall, comprise 80 exhibits of holograms, optical illusions, and Magic Eye-style stereograms. Interactive displays and explainers offer a side of brain science in a selfie wonderland that is a favorite for kids.



A group of visitors pose for a photo in the Rotated Room at the Museum of Illusions Chicago, which opened last fall. (Dietz Studio)

Joining the blitz of sound-and-light Van Gogh exhibits now showing across the United States is the [Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit Chicago](#), with tickets available through Nov. 28. And next month, the unauthorized touring exhibit [Art of Banksy](#) opens in the city's 42,000-square-foot Epiphany Center for the Arts with more than 80 of the artist's original artworks including screen prints and sculptures, through Oct. 31.

Hewing to 2021's musical theme, the [Exchange Listening Room](#) opened June 24 with a clublike dining experience inspired by Japanese "listening bars." A vegetable-forward New American menu goes with playlists delivered on impressive speakers; cocktails here are stirred, not shaken, to avoid noisy interruptions to aural immersion. (The Listening Room is the first of five eateries slated for the historic, Daniel Burnham-designed Railway Exchange Building, including a cafe in the airy, marble-clad atrium.)

A longtime favorite for its encyclopedic craft-beer collection — the bar [Bitter Pops](#) opened a restaurant in May whose concise menu of fried, salty, and highly spiced foods is an ode to brew-friendly flavors. Try Irish-inspired spice bags, chicken fingers and fries tossed with fresh chile and five-spice seasoning.



The Sable at Navy Pier Chicago. The hotel, which opened March 18, is named for training ship USS Sable. (Michael Schwartz Photography)

Outdoor seating makes the lakeside [Lírica](#), which remixes Spanish classics with Argentine empanadas and Mexican tortas, a perfect sunny-day destination. New in June, it is the house restaurant for the 223-room hotel [Sable at Navy Pier](#), which opened on March 18 as part of Hilton’s Curio Collection. Weathered brass and blue-green flourishes give the hotel, named for training ship USS Sable, a nautical feel, while angled window seats make the most of lake and skyline views.

Landlocked but magnificent, the Art Deco Carbide and Carbon building is home to the city’s most luxurious new accommodations, the 364-room [Pendry Chicago](#) that opened May 26. A Michigan Avenue location means it is just a stroll from the Willis Tower and the [Art Institute of Chicago](#), exhibiting work by portrait quilt artist Bisa Butler now through Sept. 6.

And while warm weather holds, pink drinks will flow at the hotel’s seasonal 24th-floor Château Carbide, a rooftop lounge inspired by the faraway Côte d’Azur. It has bottles of

Provençal rosé, flirty cocktails and picnic hampers. Unlike the French Riviera, it also has great views of Chicago.

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