

Great Escape

G R E A T L A K E S

Start your American road trip in **Detroit**, home of Motown, then sample Michigan wine in **Traverse City** and its vine-stripped countryside. Take in lakes, dunes and a lighthouse in **Ludington State Park**, dig into farm-to-table food and craft beer in **Madison**, and end with sky-high views and big laughs in **Chicago**.

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A restored foghorn tower stands on the edge of Lake Michigan in Ludington State Park, one of the largest expanses of freshwater dunes in the world

Plan your trip

- 1** In **Detroit** (p48), the one-time Motor City, find a rich musical heritage, new venues and talent leading the city's comeback.
- 2** Visit lakeside vineyards and innovative wineries in **Traverse City** (p50), the heart of Michigan's top wine region.
- 3** Scale dunes and kayak over lakes in **Ludington State Park** (p52), one of Lake Michigan's most beautiful spots.
- 4** Head to arty **Madison** (p54), where local produce and a taste for invention fuel a blossoming food and craft-beer scene.
- 5** Soak up the nightlife in architecturally epic **Chicago** (p56), whose rooftop bars and comedy clubs are the height of fun.



MAP ILLUSTRATION: ALEX VERHILLE. PHOTOGRAPHS: AUBRIE PICK, RB/REDFERNS/GETTY, SUZIFOOT/GETTY

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HOW TO GET THERE

Airlines including BA, Delta and Virgin Atlantic fly direct from London into Detroit and out of Chicago, and via connecting flights from cities such as Manchester and Edinburgh (from £790; delta.com). Detroit and Chicago are a 4½-hour drive apart, so you can also fly return from either (Chicago from £560; united.com).

HOW TO GET AROUND

A car is essential for exploring beyond the big cities. All the usual hire firms have offices in Detroit and Chicago (from £170 a week including insurance; budget.co.uk). Pick up when you're leaving town to avoid costly, and often elusive, parking (from about £9 a day, more at hotels). Carry change for Illinois' toll roads – Madison to Chicago is about \$8 (£6). It's possible to drive around Lake Michigan from Ludington to Madison, then loop back to Chicago, but the shorter, more fun option is to cruise aboard the SS *Badger* (a 60-mile, four-hour journey). This car ferry – a National Historic Landmark dating from 1952 and America's last coal-fired steamship – heads west from Ludington to Manitowoc in Wisconsin, 2½ hours from Madison (from £90 including car; ssbadger.com).

HOW LONG TO SPEND

Plan to spend a couple of days in each place – ideally more in culture-packed Detroit and Chicago. This itinerary takes in about 600 miles, so factor in driving times and rest breaks. It's possible to do in about 10 days, but best to allow at least two weeks.

WHAT TO BUDGET

Overall, prices in the Midwest – even in Detroit and Chicago – are lower than the US average. Travelling well doesn't have to break the bank, with plenty of free attractions and budget-friendly options like cafés, diners and b&b's around. Hotels in Chicago are pricey – from £110 for a room, compared to about £60 in

small-town Michigan. You'll need to add state and local sales taxes to prices, which vary from about 6 per cent to 10.5 per cent. Petrol costs roughly £1.70 per gallon (around 40p a litre); budget about £100 for the trip based on a full-size vehicle. Don't forget to tip: 10–15 per cent for taxi drivers, 15–20 per cent for waiter service, \$2–\$5 for cleaning staff and porters, and at least \$1 per drink.

WHEN TO GO

The region is at its liveliest (and hottest) in July and August, but prime summer weather lasts from May to September and the shoulder seasons offer fewer crowds, lower rates and fair days. Early autumn also brings the harvest in farms, orchards and vineyards. In winter, cities' cultural offerings crank up a notch while prices – and temperatures – plummet, but winter-sports fans will be in heaven.

WHO CAN HELP

This trip is easy to plan yourself, but many operators offer customisable itineraries. Travelpack's 15-day Great Cities of the Great Lakes self-drive trip includes time exploring Chicago, Detroit, Traverse City, northern Michigan and coastal Wisconsin, plus Toronto, Niagara Falls and Cleveland, Ohio (from £2,399 per person including international flights and car hire; travelpack.com).

HOW TO PLAN

Pick up Lonely Planet's *Eastern USA* guide or download the 'Great Lakes' chapter (£2.99; lonelyplanet.com) and our free Guides app, which features Chicago. For more Great Lakes road-trip inspiration, see the *USA's Best Trips* guide (£16.99). Find even more ideas at choosechicago.com, visitdetroit.com, traversecity.com, visitludington.com, visitmadison.com and, finally, greatlakesusa.co.uk.



ON THE ROAD

Eat

Cherries in Traverse City, America's 'Cherry Capital' and one of the world's top growers. Head to the Cherry Republic store on Front Street for everything from cherry pie to cherry coffee, ketchup and even cherry wine.



Buy

Mittens in Michigan, fondly nicknamed 'The Mitten State', 'The High Five State' and even 'The Mitten' in honour of its distinctively shaped mainland.

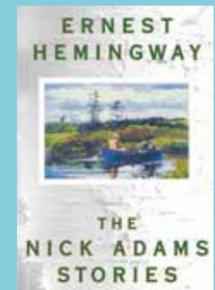


Look out for

Pink flamingos in Madison. A '70s prank that saw 1,000 plastic birds appear on Bascom Hill was so successful that they reappear every autumn and are now a beloved tradition – and the city's official bird.

Read

Ernest Hemingway's *Nick Adams* stories, set in northern Michigan, where he spent his first 22 summers. He later called it, 'the best place in the world to do nothing. It is beautiful country... and nobody knows about it but us'.



Listen

To the sweet sounds of Motown, Detroit's most infectious export – download the *From Motown with Love* compilation or check out Spotify's 'Motown' playlist.

Brave

TILT on the 94th-floor observation deck of 360 Chicago, which pivots visitors 30° over Chicago. (£16.50 with online discount; 360chicago.com).





The shot

Photographer Aubrie Pick on capturing the Chicago riverside

I took this photo aboard the Chicago Architecture Foundation River Cruise as it made its way up the Chicago River. I wanted to touch on the story of Chicago and the role the river has played in its history, from its layout to its culture, and I also loved the way the blue of the sky reflected in the glass of the skyscrapers, which then reflected in the water. I used a wide angle lens to capture the sense of scale and focused on the midground, with a wide depth of field, to ensure the picture was sharp throughout. The shot was tricky, because being low in the water with the buildings so high ran the risk of parallax, an effect where objects appear to veer together. To counteract this, I tried not to shoot up, instead keeping my camera level with the horizon.

Shot on a Canon EOS 5D MARK IV // 24–70mm lens // ISO 400 // aperture f/10 // shutter speed 1/250





Dennis Coffey plays at the Northern Lights Lounge. BELOW Sunset over Detroit as seen from Belle Isle in the Detroit River



The Fox Theatre, the largest surviving movie palace of the 1920s and now a music venue



Third Man Records occupies a former factory in Midtown. LEFT Jordan Lyons outside the Motown Museum



The rooftop of the Z Lot car park, whose 27 storeys each feature the work of a different street artist. RIGHT A boy plays guitar at Third Man Records



GREAT ESCAPE

1. Detroit

Visit the home of Motown to discover a city with a rich musical heritage that's made a strong comeback from a financial downturn to enjoy a new lease of life

IT'S 11 ON A WEDNESDAY morning and a roomful of strangers is singing at the top of their lungs. 'My girl,' they croon, 'Talking 'bout my girl...' It's the final stop on their tour of the Motown Museum and charismatic guide Jordan Lyons is leading the group in a rendition of The Temptations' *My Girl* in the studio where it was recorded. On the walls are a bewildering array of knobs, gauges and buttons, with cables dangling from hooks beside an arsenal of amps and instruments, including a Steinway grand piano. The air is slightly musty and the sound deadened. Set in two of the modest homes that first housed the Motown record company, the

museum traces the story of its sound, one of the most uplifting and influential of the 20th century – and Detroit through and through. The company was founded in 1959 by songwriter and entrepreneur Berry Gordy, its name a riff on Detroit's status as America's Motor City. Having worked on a car assembly line, Gordy was struck by the idea of making music in the same way: taking talented local kids and turning them into stars. He devised a rigorous artist development process and, in the garage of the little house he named Hitsville, opened a studio where acts and producers could lay down tracks at any hour of the day or night. The results are legendary: a musical empire that produced over 180 number ones,

and gave the world some of its most beloved songs and biggest stars – like the Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross and Marvin Gaye. And, in the era of the civil rights movement, Motown transcended racial boundaries. 'It brought together the nation and the world at a time when lines were drawn in the sand,' says Jordan, as visitors file out reluctantly in a stream of profuse thanks and selfie requests. A producer and singer, he was raised on Motown and his passion is contagious. 'It still resonates today, not just because it was great music, but because it had a great message. It was about love, friendship, pain; it's timeless.' While the Motown Museum preserves a slice of '60s Detroit – from reels of tape

to 35¢ cigarette machines – outside its walls, a lot has changed. As the motor industry failed, the city began a notorious decline that culminated in its bankruptcy in 2013. But in the past few years, Detroit has seen a buzz of new life, with restaurants, bars and hotels opening, an influx of entrepreneurs and artists, a kaleidoscopic palette of street art, and even trams and bike-hire schemes. Though the music never died in Detroit – cradle of techno, hip-hop, Madonna and Eminem – today it's everywhere. Performers gig on pavements and in galleries; Art Deco jewels like the Fox and Fisher theatres have been renovated; and new venues small, big and even arena-sized are opening. Housed within a former Jeep factory is Third Man Records, a music store, recording studio and vinyl pressing plant founded two years ago by Detroit native Jack White, of The White Stripes. Its cavernous yellow-and-black space is filled with records, instruments and merchandise, plus curios

like a 1940s recording booth, while a stage hosts local acts and touring bands. Behind a wall of windows at the back, staff are busy hand-pressing vinyl records. Much of the focus here is on Detroit's up-and-coming acts and musical legacy – reissues include early Motown hits. It's a continuity that Dennis Coffey would appreciate. A guitarist in the Funk Brothers band, which played on most Motown songs, he now takes to the stage at the moodily lit Northern Lights Lounge, his fingers dancing over the fretboard as the audience whoops and claps. 'Detroit has a tremendous heritage – music is in the DNA of the city,' Dennis says, taking a break between sets. As the home of Motown continues to evolve, he can't wait to see what it does next. 'Detroit right now is getting ready to take off.' Drive northwest through Michigan for 250 miles (around four hours) to reach the town of Traverse City, set on an eastern bay of Lake Michigan.

Essentials



Set in the lively downtown Detroit neighbourhood of Greektown, **Atheneum Suite Hotel** has roomy suites with marble bathrooms and Jacuzzis, and plum views over the city's Art Deco skyline (from £120; atheneumsuites.com). Admission to the **Motown Museum** is by guided tour only (£12; motownmuseum.org). Visit **Third Man Records** (thirdmanrecords.com) and see Dennis Coffey play at **Northern Lights Lounge** (northernlightslounge.com).

Father and daughter Bob Begin and Marie-Chantal Dalese chat at their winery, Chateau Chantal



2. Traverse City

Head to this lake-hugging town and the countryside around it to discover unique wines and vintage views in Michigan's premier wine region

HALF OF WHAT WE DO here is look out the window,' says Bob Begin. He chuckles as he strolls beside a row of vines with daughter Marie-Chantal, as clusters of grapes sway in the summer breeze. Bob is joking, of course, but this is an easy view to get lost in: vine-striped land slopes past oak trees, orchards and cherry-red barns towards the vastness of Lake Michigan.

The family's winery, Chateau Chantal, is one of nearly 40 to be found along two peninsulas, Old Mission and Leelanau, that curve like the spurs of a wishbone above the laid-back Michigan lake town of Traverse City. The location has proven to be lucky – set, like Bordeaux, on the 45th parallel, its gentle hillsides and deep, cool waters provide a temperate microclimate perfect for making wine.

'It's a remarkably special piece of land,' says Marie-Chantal of their setting on the Old Mission Peninsula, as the pair inspect the bloom on their nascent grapes. Named for the missionaries who first settled here in the 1830s, the peninsula couldn't have been a more fitting place for her parents, a former priest and nun, to set up shop. As a boy, Bob worked on his family farm and he hoped to reconnect with the land. 'But my dad doesn't dream small; he wasn't going to farm wheat,' says Marie-Chantal. 'He wanted to maintain this biblical connection.' The region's soil is suited to fruity, aromatic whites and the winery, like most nearby, specialises in riesling, also making pinot blanc, chardonnay and a few reds. Last year,

its ice wine, made from grapes frozen on the vine, was served at the White House.

That was a timely nod to the quality of the state's wines, which have been steadily building their reputation since the '70s and today are picking up awards and fans across the globe. In the past decade, Michigan's vine area has doubled in size and visitors flock to wine trails that meander, via meadows and villages, through the Traverse City area. Driving it all is Michigan's unique terroir. 'The landscape is ever changing – that's the beauty of it,' says Marie-Chantal. 'We have four dramatic seasons around here and that makes for nuances in the wine. You're not hitting repeat – every year you're coming up with something different.'

At the Left Foot Charley winery, this idiosyncrasy extends far beyond the drink. 'These are our only vines!' says Bryan Ulbrich, plucking a sprig of fragrant grape blossom from the solitary row flanking the winery's entrance. Founded 13 years ago, it's the sole winery in Traverse City, a movie-set-pretty town of pastel-painted houses with flag-bedecked verandas mixed with galleries and boutiques. Inside its window-lined bar, customers make notes with tiny pencils as they sip wines from a pick of 18 local vineyards – all bottled by Bryan and his team. Each comes from a small, independent farmer without a winery, their lovingly tended vines rescued from huge blends and aged in oak barrels in a handsome old cellar.

'They love work and they love wine – it's hard to tell which more,' says Bryan, as he sips a golden Missing Spire riesling. Born

in Illinois, he was so enamoured with the area's wine that he moved to Traverse City and opened Left Foot Charley. 'I'd call Michigan's white wines as interesting as any in the world,' says Bryan, raising his glass to his lips. 'I love how we're keeping a diary of the climate, what happened that year. Each bottle is a time capsule.'

Head south for 100 miles (around two hours) to reach Ludington State Park, or take the scenic route (30 minutes longer), via the forest and lakeshore on the M-22 highway.

Essentials

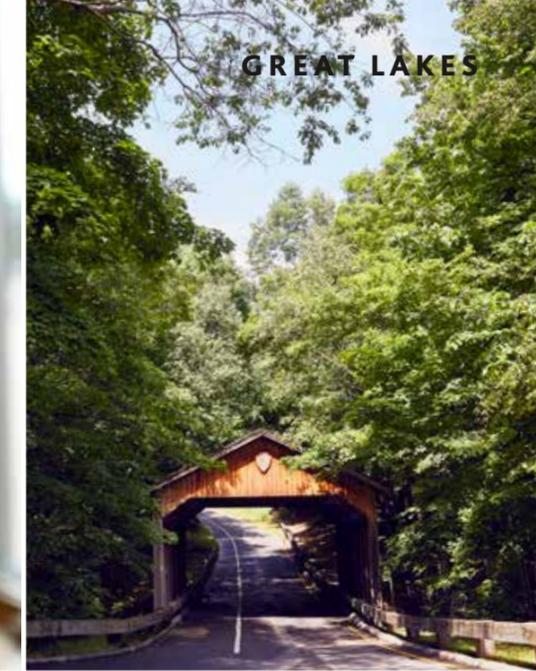


Set on Traverse City's Lake Michigan shore, **Pointes North Beachfront Resort Hotel** has huge suites with Jacuzzis and decks or balconies looking over its private beach and the lake. If you don't fancy a dip, there's also a heated pool (from £55; pointesnorth.com).

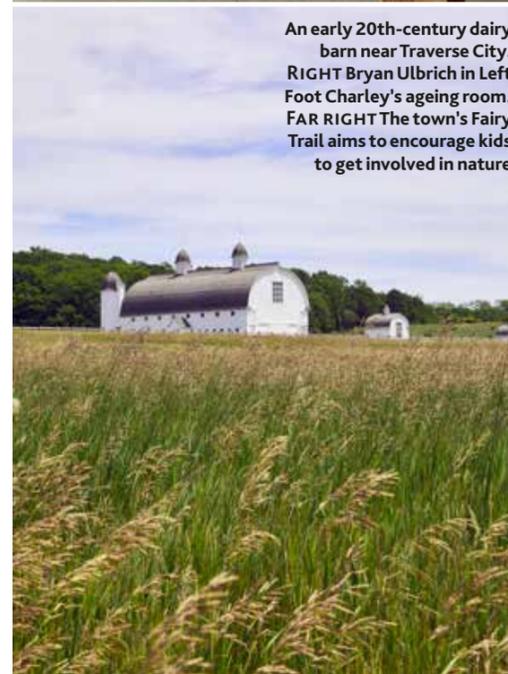
A five-wine tasting at **Chateau Chantal** is £4 (chateauchantal.com) and wine at **Left Foot Charley** from £4.50 (leftfootcharley.com). For **wine trails**, see grandtraversebiketours.com.



A trio of wines at Chateau Chantal. LEFT Traverse City is famed for its Victorian houses. RIGHT Many of Michigan's covered bridges are on the USA's National Register of Historic Places



A rest stop on the Leelanau Peninsula wine trail. LEFT Left Foot Charley's 125-year-old ageing room hosts private dinners. RIGHT Ageing wines at Left Foot Charley



An early 20th-century dairy barn near Traverse City. RIGHT Bryan Ulbrich in Left Foot Charley's ageing room. FAR RIGHT The town's Fairy Trail aims to encourage kids to get involved in nature



GREAT ESCAPE

3. Ludington State Park

From tranquil waters to towering dunes and abundant wildlife, get a taster of Michigan's great outdoors in its most popular state park

WHERE OTHER STATE mottoes trumpet lofty sentiments of justice and power, Michigan's commands simply (and with Midwestern modesty), 'If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you'. It's easy to see why Michiganders are preoccupied with their setting: fronting four of the five Great Lakes – and with 11,000 smaller lakes – the state is a water-hewn wonderland that, come summer, beckons to vacationers from across the Midwest and beyond. Few spots are as beloved as Ludington State Park, 5,300 acres of wetland, woods and vast dunes set on Lake Michigan.

'It's just this little slice of land with so many opportunities for recreation and to see different ecosystems,' says Park Manager Jim Gallie as he guides his kayak through the narrows of Lost Lake, his oar slipping past lily pads and fat yellow buds before re-emerging in a shimmer of droplets. Jim was once set on becoming a hydrologist, until a college summer had him hooked on park life – from exploring numerous trails to voyaging across inland lakes.

'It just feels good to paddle,' says Jim, as he glides between banks thick with red oak, his orange kayak mirage-bright in the hot afternoon. 'You almost feel weightless out here.' Blue dragonflies dart overhead as the faint smell of woodsmoke drifts from a nearby campsite. As Jim emerges onto the wide opening of Hamlin Lake, sunlight

hits the water in a spangle of stars.

The park teems with diverse wildlife, including deer, porcupines, herons and eagles, and Jim relishes the access that heading out by boat affords. 'You can get closer to wildlife,' he says, as he skirts a wooded island where a couple huddle around a crackling ham radio, their kayak resting on the rocky shore. 'It lets you see the environment from a different perspective.'

It's not only wild animals that call the park home. Volunteers come to stay at Big Sable Point Lighthouse, which looms above jack pines on the Lake Michigan shoreline – a sea of dunes whose shaggy backs sport marram grass, beach peas and yellow-flowered hairy puccoon. Built 150 years ago, the lighthouse once guided cargo ships as they ferried lumber across the tempestuous lake. Today, volunteer lighthouse keepers stay for two weeks and have easier duties, like manning the visitor centre and gift shop.

Tim Heaton, a gregarious professor from Ohio, has volunteered for the past three years with his wife, Martha. 'It's like a vacation by the ocean, except there's no salt and no sharks,' he says, greeting a mother and daughter as they come puffing up the last of the tower's 130 steps. 'It takes you away from the humdrum of everyday life. You look out your window and see the waves crashing on the shore and an eagle flying by, or a storm coming in off the lake – it's beautiful.' He stops to take in the

view, tiny figures strolling the beach far below beside gently breaking waves. The wind tugs at his sunhat, its whistling accompanied by the low roar of the lake. 'If this is a job, I want to do it every day.'

Board the twice-daily *SS Badger* car ferry for the four-hour trip across Lake Michigan to Manitowoc, then drive southwest for 2½ hours to Madison; or drive west around Lake Michigan for 6½ hours. 

Essentials



 Set in an elegant Victorian house in the town of Ludington, the **Lamplighter B&B** is full of antiques, from vintage beds and tiled fireplaces to objets d'art. Breakfast includes homemade treats like lemon cake, and there's also a pretty garden (from £105; ludington-michigan.com).

 A pass for all **Michigan state parks** is £7 per day. Hire a kayak at **Dune Grass Concessions** (from £15; dunegrassludington.com) and climb **Big Sable Point Lighthouse** (£4; splka.org).



Big Sable Point Lighthouse rises 30 metres high on the Lake Michigan shore. Despite the presence of lighthouses, Lake Michigan conceals hundreds of shipwrecks

4. Madison

America's dairyland is raising the bar with its artisan produce, from cheese to chocolate – stop by its food-obsessed capital to sample the best

IT'S A QUIET START TO THE DAY in downtown Madison, birds chirruping lazily in the trees around its domed capitol as the occasional car sidles by. At the Fromagination cheese shop a few steps away, there's far more activity: customers pile in, browsing cheese and condiments, and chatting at the counter with owner Ken Monteleone. One regular fancies something new, but is not sure what. 'Want to try the gouda?' asks Ken, dashing to a wheel and carving off a chunk. The counter is stacked with plump roundels of cheese, some dandelion yellow, others mottled and leathery like silver birch bark. Behind the glass are soft, blue-etched slabs speckled with dill and chipotle.

Fromagination is one of a host of artisan retailers in Madison, an arty college town set on a strip of land between two lakes. It is the capital of Wisconsin, a state with rolling hills and rich pastureland that is the dairy heartland of America.

'The perception used to be that Wisconsin didn't do artisan cheese,' says Ken. 'Now, we get people from all over wanting it – it's like going to Napa Valley and loading up on wine.' Hailing from Colorado, Ken opened his shop 10 years ago after he moved to Madison and fell in love with its food culture. While he stocks a curated selection of foreign cheese, he's proud that most of his 100-plus varieties are local. 'We have amazing farms here, passed down through the generations. Some of our cheese-makers are up and down in the pastures daily, and sometimes you can taste the flowers the cows are grazing on. You really understand the thoughtfulness of these producers.'

This care over provenance runs deep in Madison, which was at the vanguard of the farm-to-table movement and has a strong farmers' market tradition. It's particularly evident in the city's once-industrial east side, which in the past 20 years has been transformed into a blossoming restaurant quarter. On Madison Eats tours, guide Jenina Mella delivers a moveable feast at some of the areas's best spots: like Alchemy, which serves sandwiches of soft Madison-made sourdough and sweet potato slices with a kick of jalapeño jam; and the neon-lit Tex



Dawn breaks over the 100-year-old Wisconsin State Capitol in downtown Madison

Tubb's Taco Palace, whose tangy salsas are made in-house. At Chocolaterian, owner Leanne Cordisco knows the name of each cow whose milk is used in her creations: shiny chocolates, gooey cakes and 'ugly cookies' with cocoa nibs and oozing toffee.

The city's craft-beer scene is also on the rise – drawing, like its dairy farmers, on deep-rooted traditions. Many Wisconsinites have German or Czech ancestry, and before Prohibition, Wisconsin was a top brewing state – now a wave of newcomers is putting it back on the map. Helping them is local outfit Hop Head Tours, which runs cycle trips to the likes of Next Door Brewing Company, whose small-batch beer plays with flavours like lavender and peach blossom, to gluten-free brewery Alt Brew, and to Ale Asylum, where Hathaway Dilba and her colleagues use just four ingredients in homage to the 1516 German Beer Purity Law and are trialling barrel-aged varieties. Innovation, it seems, is in Madison's blood. 'It's a very sustainable, collective, curious town – people want to be the first to try everything', says Hathaway, a Los Angeles native who's lived in Madison for 25 years. 'We have the most exciting restaurant scene here out of anywhere I've been in my life.'

Drive southeast for around 150 miles to reach the Midwest's greatest metropolis, Chicago. 📍

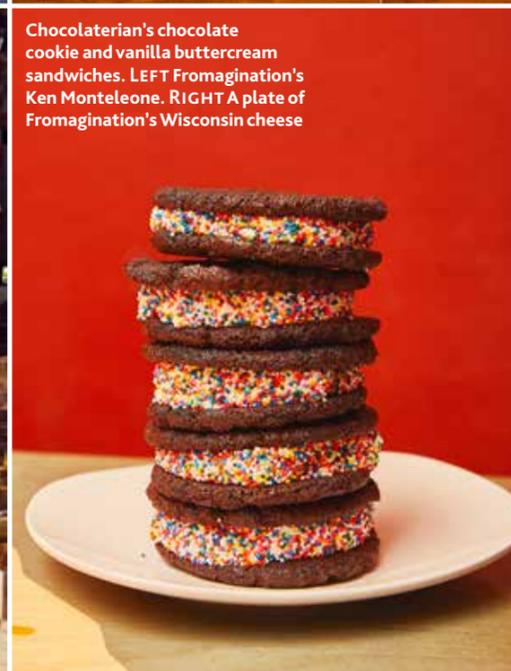
Essentials



📍 A stroll from the capitol, **Graduate Madison** riffs on the city's college and lake culture in quirky spaces decked out with retro phones, vintage posters and even light fixtures inside canoes. There's also a café and a rooftop restaurant (from £125; graduatemadison.com).
 📍 Visit **Fromagination** (fromagination.com), take a food tour with **Madison Eats** (from £40; madisoneats.net) and cycle with **Hop Head Tours** (from £38; hopheadtours.com).



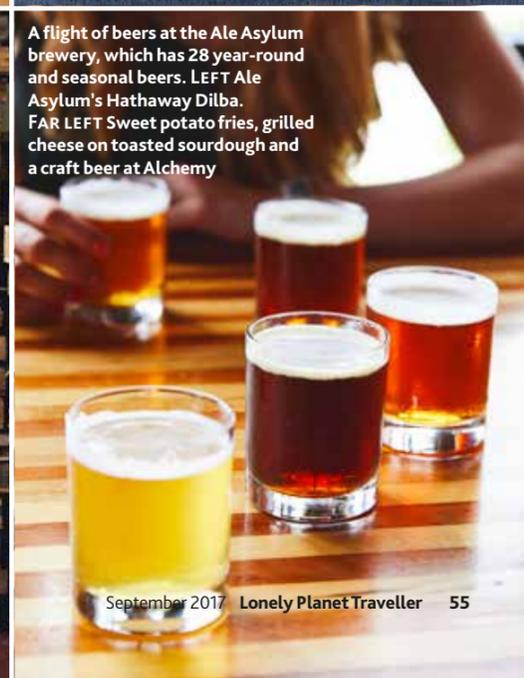
Jenina Mella of Madison Eats. LEFT Retro chairs in Tex Tubb's Taco Palace. FAR LEFT 11 beers are on tap at the Next Door Brewing Company



Chocolaterian's chocolate cookie and vanilla buttercream sandwiches. LEFT Fromagination's Ken Monteleone. RIGHT A plate of Fromagination's Wisconsin cheese



GREAT ESCAPE



A flight of beers at the Ale Asylum brewery, which has 28 year-round and seasonal beers. LEFT Ale Asylum's Hathaway Dilba. FAR LEFT Sweet potato fries, grilled cheese on toasted sourdough and a craft beer at Alchemy

5. Chicago

Head to the birthplace of the skyscraper to find nightlife that pushes the limits, from rooftop bars with big views to the comedy acts of the future

AS MILE ONE OF ROUTE 66, Chicago is the city that's launched many millions of road trips. But driving in to the Windy City has its own magic: the skyline rising suddenly above suburban blocks like a pop-up picture book flung open, crowded with Art Deco towers and glittering, Tetris-block megaliths that chart the story of modern architecture.

Chicago rose, ultimately, from the ashes of a devastating 1871 fire, becoming the perfect canvas on which to let loose visionary architects. Today, nearly 150 years later, its grand façades, concrete curves and mirrored glass are a chronicle of structural superlatives – including the world's first skyscraper (the 1885 Home Insurance Building) and the former tallest (the 1973 Willis Tower). Running among them is the vivid teal-coloured Chicago River – another feat of ingenuity, reversed in its flow in 1900 using canal locks to draw clean water through the city from Lake Michigan.

Chicago's latest building trend gives an ideal way to take it all in. Rooftop bars have sprung up on dozens of skyscrapers: from Apogee, where mixologists whip up cocktails using edible flowers, dehydrated fruit and wafer-paper butterflies – all served

in hand-blown glasses – to LH Rooftop, where drinkers can watch the sun set over the Chicago River, with skyscrapers rising from its banks like canyon walls.

The best views are from the veteran Signature Lounge, perched 96 storeys high in the black steel obelisk of the John Hancock Center. As the sun sinks low, couples sip Old Fashioneds that glow amber in the fading light, while families pose for selfies by the huge panoramic windows lining the bar. Each window frames a different city scene: Downtown's densely packed towers; the grid of traffic flowing far below; the curls of parkland and beach that fringe Lake Michigan.

While drinking holes are (literally) raising the limits at ground level. The Hollywood of comedy, it's where the sketch, stand-up and improv stars of the future come to make a mark; they cut their teeth in its countless clubs, theatres, bars and back rooms.

'I can't think of a major city that provides as many opportunities for performers,' says comedian Jamison Webb, chatting to co-star Rashawn Scott backstage at Second City, a celebrated comedy club and improv school tucked behind a porticoed townhouse. 'People are here for the joy of it, and for the

chance to fail and grow and learn and spend 10 years getting better.'

It's 10 years since Florida-born Jamison first came here. Tonight, he and Rashawn are starring in *The Winner of Our Discontent*, a six-person show that races through the American psyche in a fever-dream of political hot potatoes and surreal skits, from a soul tribute to Senator Maxine Walters to a riff on *Downton Abbey* – with a final act improvised from suggestions.

Its two laughter-packed hours may be a glimpse of the future. Many of Second City's performers will hope to graduate to TV stardom on the likes of *Saturday Night Live*, as alumni Joan Rivers, Bill Murray and Tina Fey did before them. 'It's incredible that what started as a little cabaret theatre has gone on to be the dominant influence in American comedy,' says Jamison. 'You're carrying the torch for the next generation.' For both, it's a dream come true. 'It still feels surreal,' says Rashawn. 'You're a part of history – it's an honour.' Minutes later, they burst onto the neon-lit stage, and the drama of quips and quickstep begins. ▶



SOPHIE MCGRATH is pining hard for another pint of Next Door Brewing's Livacious, her new favourite beer.

Essentials



▶ Set in a 1920s showstopper resembling a champagne bottle, **Hard Rock Hotel Chicago** has sleek rooms with eye-popping downtown views, plus a musical room service of vinyl and guitars (from £110; hardrockhotelchicago.com).
 ▶ Sip a sundowner at **Apogee** (apogeechicago.com), **LH Rooftop** (londonhousechicago.com) or **Signature Lounge** (signatureroom.com). Tickets to Second City's **The Winner of Our Discontent** are from £18 (secondcity.com).



Cocktails at the Signature Lounge. **RIGHT** Comedians Jamison Webb and Rashawn Scott of Second City



NEXT MONTH
Great Escape:
 BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

The view south over Chicago from the John Hancock Center's 360 Chicago observation deck, two floors below the Signature Lounge