



Checking In: Radisson Blu Aqua a hip take on downtown Chicago life

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The Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel is a new star in the architecturally-rich Chicago skyline.

Those are powerful words in a city of buildings created by some of the best — Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Henri Sullivan, Frank Gehry, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Daniel Burnham, who built the Chicago World's Fair with the first Ferris wheel, and was one of the lead characters in the novel, The Devil in the

White City by Erik Larson.

The new Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel Chicago has impressive credentials, too. It is located on the first 18 floors of the 81-storey Aqua Tower, which is the world's tallest skyscraper designed by a woman, Chicago architect Jeanne Gang. And it shows.

In a city that has spawned some of the United States' tallest phallic monoliths, the curvy white Aqua Tower is distinctively feminine, said to be inspired by rolling sand dunes or perhaps the waves on Lake Michigan. It was named Skyscraper of the Year by the international building guru Emporis, and Gang was honoured by the American Institute of Architects.

Upscale spinoff brand

Radisson Blu is an upscale brand of Radisson, a spinoff that emphasizes service and dazzling contemporary interiors.

Several features make the Radisson Blu Aqua Chicago a standout. It is a great buy and family-friendly. And, for a downtown hotel, the Blu boasts exceptional fitness installations, many outdoors. Its sprawling open-air terrace features a year-round jogging track, and in warm weather, a heated lap pool and a children's pool.

Partly because there are residents in condos and apartments on the upper floors, the Radisson Blu Aqua has home-away-from-home facilities such as barbecues, cabanas and a firepit for family cookouts or after-dark mingling.

I was so enthralled with the outdoor scene that I totally missed an important tech aspect of the hotel. The guest room TVs have menus for requesting room service, wake-up calls and housekeeping, and even better, a cellphone app is available for the same functions, so you can make those arrangements from outside the premises.

Darling of design

Designers decked out the lobby with flashy materials. The reception area is glamorous, with mirrored front desks and a sapphire LED light. The lobby lounge is warmed by a long, lean, 18-metre gas fireplace, deep cosseting wing chairs, a wall of reclaimed brick and another of shimmering gold-plated discs.

The guest rooms and suites, 334 in all, are all about light and minimalist furniture, with a fresh palette of soothing blues and dark chocolate against crisp white. More than half have balconies and many have both a glass shower and a soaking tub. As a bonus, there is a choice of carpeted or wooden floors.

Dining, drinking

The Radisson Blu Aqua also has updated traditional hotel dining. The scene here is trendy and casual. The Filini Bar & Restaurant is a stunning space with a glass wall of wine, an open kitchen and a patio. There is a nightlife feel, with long communal tables for parties and silvery leather banquettes for romance.

Executive chef Carolina Diaz was in the kitchen when I visited and she sent out a delectable Italian feast for the table to share — charcuterie such as sopresatta and bresaola, a cheese plate with Gorgonzola and burrata with figs; a rich and dreamy pasta with prosciutto, mascarpone and truffle oil; an impressive branzino (a whole fish) roasted with citrus and fennel; and comfort desserts that no one could pass up — panna cotta and gelato.

Around Chicago

The Radisson Blu Aqua is near stop No. 9, Michigan Avenue, of the Chicago Trolley & Double Decker Co., so I hopped on a bright red bus and tootled around town. We rode by the vast and beautiful lakefront, with its truly magnificent and historic sites such as The Field Museum, the Shedd Aquarium and the Adler Planetarium. The hotel has a retail therapy package with discounts, so I bee-lined for the Shops at North Bridge, an indoor mall on Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile which is home to Nordstrom, Sephora and Swatch.

I had always thought of Chicago as a big-business city and an incomparably rich cultural centre. It is both, but it also has so many outdoor recreation options that you can plan a visit built

entirely around fresh air and exercise. Kids especially love the Navy Pier amusement park and beaches on Lake Michigan, the 32-kilometre Lakefront Trail for cycling, the lively Chicago Riverfront walking promenade and Millennium Park with its giant sculptures, free concerts and skating in winter.

I saved the most intense art experience for my last day. The prestigious Art Institute of Chicago, home of the largest collection of Impressionist works outside of France, recently was named Trip Advisor's No. 1 museum in the world.

The Art Institute is a deep immersion in art history, home to treasures from 4,000-year-old Etruscan artifacts to modern-day Picassos and beyond. A terrific photography exhibit is The City Lost and Found: Capturing New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, 1960—1980, which will run until Jan. 11.

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IF YOU GO

Air Canada flies non-stop to Chicago from Montreal and Toronto. Porter flies from Montreal to Chicago with a change at Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport. Prices start at \$208 one-way, at certain times.

Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel Chicago: 800-333-3333, 312-565-5258, radissonblu.com/aquahotel-chicago; 221 N. Columbus Drive. Pet-friendly. Children 17 and under stay for free.

Price: The hotel's website has a best-rate guarantee. Rooms, some with balconies, \$219-\$350 U.S., depending on the season; suites cost more. Business Class rooms have lounge access with breakfast, evening cocktails. Rates include Wi-Fi, daily newspaper, pools and fitness facilities. Packages feature spa treatments, shopping discounts, romantic add-ons (Champagne, chocolates, turndown gift) and Chicago attractions.

Filini Bar & Restaurant: 312-477-0234, www.filinichicago.com; daily breakfast, lunch, dinner and 24-hour room service; seasonal patio.

Chicago info: choosechicago.com, bikechicago.com; Architectural River Cruise: 312-922-3432, architecture.org/rivercruise; Chicago Trolley & Double-Decker Tours: 773-648-5000, chicagotrolley.com.