

**Aoi Travel.**

CANADA

## Chicago's Skyscrapers By Boat by D. Grant Black



For the city tourist, Chicago has it all: eccentric neighbourhoods, engaging history, stunning architecture, great food, established comedy and blues clubs, friendly Midwesterners and Showtime's unyielding *Shameless* (with William H. Macy) shooting exteriors in one of the city's worst neighbourhoods.

Starting April 28, the new floating season begins for Chicago's

First Lady Cruises who annually partner with the Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) for their now famous River Cruise architectural tours. This is one of Chicago's premier tourist activities and it's one of the best ways to experience Chicago's iconic skyscrapers - in the city that invented the skyscraper.



Piloting under one of 13 bridges

My partner, Patricia, and I took this stunning river tour on a sunny afternoon in mid-July. Over 90-minutes, the open-air First Lady meanders into the three downtown branches of the Chicago River and under 13 bridges to better view Chicago's world-famous architecture.

First we had to find our way from our downtown hotel, across

the Michigan Avenue bridge then down some well-worn stairs to Riverside Gardens where Chicago's First Lady is docked near their blue ticket awning booth. The Caribbean-blue Lake Michigan is just a few streets to the east, past the famous Lake Shore Drive. You can pre-purchase your tickets but if you miss the boat, you literally miss the boat. Unlike an airline, once the First Lady sets sail, tickets can't be refunded or exchanged.

We wisely put on our floppy bucket hats, sunglasses and brought our cameras. We also packed lots of bottled water; anybody who takes to the water during summer knows: hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. For those who need to hide from the heat, the lower berth of this luxurious vessel offers air-conditioned seating, two full-service bars, oblong windows, marble and granite restrooms and an upright baby grand piano. But I suggest the open deck for the best views.

2012 marks Chicago's First Lady Cruises' 19th year in partnership with the Chicago Architecture Foundation and its team of highly knowledgeable, volunteer docents. We were able to learn about the architecture and design of over 50 buildings, knowledgeably and succinctly described by these CAF-certified volunteer guides, as they entered into sight. At no point did we have to tug on a volunteers' arm (the appendage not holding the microphone) to ask: "what's that building called?" and "what's the history of that building?" like school children on a field trip.

There are several companies that offer Chicago River cruises but First Lady Cruises is the only one aligned with the Chicago Architecture Foundation. So make sure you're not boarding a

boat with river guides who are just winging it for a quick buck and calling out the wrong stunning landmarks in downtown Chicago. It's the difference between a knockoff Rolex and the real thing. Watch for the CAF logo.



Willis Tower (formerly Sears Tower) in background

First Lady Cruises began in the 1930s when Portuguese immigrant Arthur Agra begin to operate speed boat rides from the south-east corner of Navy Pier with a boat that carried only six passengers. In 2011, Robert Agra III, a fourth-generation family member, joined the business full-time.

The First Lady fleet has since expanded to include Chicago's First Lady (30-225 passengers), Chicago's Fair Lady (25-125), Chicago's Leading Lady (100-300), Chicago's Little Lady (10-

100) and the tiny Lady Grebe (2–6 passengers), a 48-foot mahogany and teak vintage yacht (built in Chicago in 1961) for private cruises on the Chicago River or lakefront. The navy of the Chicago River provides boats for architecture tours, weddings and private functions.

Guests don't have to bring their river/sea legs; our boat glided along the water like a double-decker bus with open-air views of Chicago's two largest skyscrapers: the 108-storey Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower) and the 100-storey John Hancock Center.

One of my favourite edifices during the Chicago Architecture



Marina City

Foundation River Cruise is Marina City, the iconic, riverside condo-parking towers also found on the cover of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, a 2002 release by Chicago indie band Wilco.

Marina City and the Chicago River are also visible during the opening credits of *The Bob Newhart Show* (the 1970s sit-com version when this Chicago-native played a shrink).



Chicago Tribune Tower

Another keeper is the Chicago Tribune Tower, a Gothic revival design by New York architects John Mead Howells and Raymond Hood, and completed in 1925. When we stayed at the Trump International Hotel and Tower Chicago, the headquarters for one of Chicago's daily broadsheet newspapers and WGN Radio was lit up like a Spanish castle directly across the Chicago River.

For anybody who has ever shopped with department stores who also offered a mail order division, there's The Montgomery Ward Company Complex, an interesting structure that skirts the waterfront on the river's North Branch. It previously served as the national headquarters for U.S.'s oldest mail order firm, Montgomery Ward, until its 2001 bankruptcy.

The hulking Montgomery Ward structure has since been converted into upscale condominiums. (A Canadian equivalent is the defunct Eaton's chain, which closed its catalogues in 1999

and Sears subsequently bought its Canada-wide department stores; by 2002, several of Eaton's downtown stores were sold for condo retrofits.)

Advance tickets for the Chicago Architecture Foundation River Cruises are \$35/person or \$38/person for same-day tickets. A portion of the cruise fee supports architecture education, which is provided by The Chicago Architecture Foundation.

2012 dates: April 28–November 18. All tours depart from Riverside Gardens, Michigan Ave. and Wacker Dr. (south-east corner of the Michigan Avenue Bridge). Look for the First Lady's blue awning – and don't miss the boat!