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Our turf

A Chicagoan's guide to Chicago guidebooks

By Patrick T Reardon

There's something exceedingly pleasant, in an almost visceral way, about the photograph of a father and four heavily bundled children walking through the snow along the lakefront on a bright- sunshine day. In the background, powerful whitecaps are rolling in, and you can almost hear their deep rumble. You can almost feel the frigid wind that has reddened the unprotected cheeks of the oldest boy.

It's an iconic Chicago scene. What makes it particularly delightful, though, is that -- wonder of wonders -- it's in a guidebook about the city.

Paging through the dozens of Chicago guidebooks available can be a frustrating experience for a Chicagoan. There's so much about restaurants, hotels and "attractions." And so little about life as it's lived on Western Avenue, or in Orland Park, or on the Dan Ryan Expressway. It's almost as if the city is nothing more than a giant theme park.

But not always. There are some travel guides that do a good job, even a great job, of capturing the character of the city and its region.

So here is a guide to Chicago guidebooks -- travel books that attempt to give visitors a wide-scope view of the city (as opposed to specialized works that focus on a particular subject, such as restaurants or bike paths).

Best of the bunch

But, as good as the Schnedler-Bzdak book is, it's not the best of the bunch. That honor goes to "Chicago: Eyewitness Travel Guide" (Dorling Kindersley), written by Lorraine Johnson, John Ryan and others. What sets this book apart is its high-quality design, which incorporates hundreds of photographs, maps, timelines and graphics in a pleasing package that's not only elegant but also sturdy and easy to slip into a purse or jacket pocket.

There are three-dimensional bird's-eye maps to help visitors navigate city neighborhoods and three-dimensional floor plans of major buildings. The one for the Art Institute, for instance, shows what gallery Grant Wood's "American Gothic" is in, and where to find Georges Seurat's "A Sunday on La Grande Jatte -- 1884." That's more direction than the Art Institute provides.

Most distinctive, though, is the book's heavy use of photographs -- 382 over its 208 pages. Many pages feature as many as five photos, which means the shots are fairly small. Yet, the editors and designers have chosen images that, even in such a constrained format, remain clear and interesting, even compelling.

By contrast, the vast majority of the 118 photos displayed in "Moon Metro Chicago" (Avalon) are virtually indecipherable because they're not very interesting to begin with and are reduced so small -- about half the size of a postage stamp -- as to be little more than blotches of color.

The bulk of this overdesigned book is taken up by nine sections of laminated paper, each of which cleverly folds out to reveal a colorful map and a listing of places to go (highlighted by many of those tiny photos). But though these sections are attractive to the eye, the maps and the lists provide no information. For that, readers are directed elsewhere in the book for the barest of thumbnail sketches about shops, restaurants and other amusements.

It's a case of cleverness for the sake of cleverness, and a showiness that gets in the way of transmitting information. The emphasis on unusual design is an obvious attempt to set "Moon Metro" apart in the struggle to grab the American guidebook dollar.

Travel guides and other related books were a growth industry in the 1990s, with consumer spending rising 45 percent from \$153 million in 1994 to \$222 million in 2000, according to annual surveys by the Chicago-based Ipsos BookTrends. But the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the souring of the U.S. economy threw a wrench into the works, accounting for a 28 percent drop to \$159 million in 2002.

Souvenir value

One strategy for grabbing sales is to create books that serve not only as a sort of glorified Yellow Pages for a visit to a destination, but also as a souvenir. The Dorling Kindersley and Schnedler-Bzdak books are examples of this approach. So is the well-packaged "Chicago" (Lonely Planet) by former Chicagoan Ryan Ver Berkmoes.

What gives this book added oomph are essays sprinkled through its pages on such esoterica of Chicago history and everyday life as Lincoln Towing and its unsavory reputation; the white flight to the suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s; and the role of Montgomery Ward in protecting the lakefront from development. These essays, which help make the book one of the best, can even offer insights into the city for longtime residents, such as the fact that the zipper was invented in Chicago in 1893 and the Hostess Twinkie in 1930.

"Time Out Chicago" (Penguin USA) takes a similar approach, providing interesting photography, an attractive design and quirky essays. A big negative, though: 12 pages of advertisements scattered throughout the book.

For Chicagoans

Two of the guidebooks examined by Tempo are designed specifically for Chicagoans, but could be of use to visitors as well:

- **"NFT: Not for Tourists Guide to Chicago"** (Happy Mazza Media) is the better one, providing detailed maps of 44 square-mile sections of Chicago (covering the areas from 63rd Place to the city's northern border and from the lake as far west as Kedzie Avenue). These multicolor maps show the location of a wide array of local institutions, including gas stations, banks, hospitals, parking lots, pharmacies, supermarkets, schools, pizza parlors, other restaurants, liquor stores, gyms, shops and video rental stores. A drawback, though, is that, while addresses are provided, phone numbers are given for only some locations, and only in category listings in the back of the book.

- "Fodor's Cityguide Chicago: The Sourcebook for Your Hometown" provides phone numbers to the hundreds of places it lists, but, with page after page after page of listings, few maps and no illustrations, it has the gray feel of a small phone book.

Maps matter

Three other books -- "Frommer's Chicago 2003," "Fodor's Chicago" and "Chicago for Dummies" -- also have that gray, just-the-facts- ma'am, phone-book feel. They're useful, but not much fun to look at. And they give little or no sense of the city's character. The Frommer's book is a tad better since, inside the back cover, there's a detachable street map.

But that map pales in comparison with the multicolored, highly detailed, easy-to-use one in "Citypack Chicago" (Fodor's). In addition to the map, the Citypack includes a small, attractive 96-page booklet with key information about the city.

"Chicago Condensed" (Lonely Planet) is a similarly small, attractive booklet of 128 pages.

It's fine as far as it goes, but without the big map, it's of limited usefulness.

Rating the attractions

An unusual entry in the guidebook competition is "The Unofficial Guide to Chicago" (Wiley) by Joe Surkiewicz and Bob Sehlinger.

This has the bland look of the phone book-like travel guides, but, among the guidebooks evaluated, it's the only one that rates hotels, restaurants and attractions.

For example, the authors not only give the DuSable Museum of African-American History in Hyde Park 3 1/2 stars out of a possible five, but they also rate its appeal for six age groups -- from preschool (1 1/2 stars) to seniors (four stars).

In addition, "The Unofficial Guide" provides the most extensive collection of street maps, ranging far into the suburbs -- extending from Highland Park's Deerfield Road in the north to central DuPage County on the west to I-80 on the south. The maps and other detailed information about suburban locations are recognitions that Chicago isn't just the city, but a vast hinterland as well.

The city isn't simply a stroll down Michigan Avenue, but a wealth of other sights, smells and experiences in Rogers Park and Highland Park and Evergreen Park, to name just a few.

There is a complexity that is Chicago -- and the best guidebooks reflect that.

Best to worst: A quick tour

1. Chicago: Eyewitness Travel Guide (DK)

Beautifully designed, delightfully presented information, in a solid, sturdy package; great use of photos, maps and graphics.

2. Chicago (Compass American Guides/Fodor's)

Best photos, new and historic, well-packaged; sprightly text -- an eminently readable book.

3. Chicago (Lonely Planet)

Wonderfully idiosyncratic essays on such subjects as snow, Lincoln Towing and white flight; attractive design; solidly packaged.

4. The Unofficial Guide to Chicago (Wiley)

Distinctive (and unusual) for its ratings of hotels, restaurants and attractions; wealth of information; extensive maps, even of the suburbs.

5. NFT: Not For Tourists Guide to Chicago (Happy Mazza)

Jam-packed with highly detailed information of about half of the city's neighborhoods; would be useful to tourists too.

6. Citypack Chicago (Fodor's)

A great, highly detailed, highly readable, foldout street map in a handy plastic folder with a short, well-designed guidebook.

7. Time Out Chicago

Good use of photos; interesting, odd sidebars, including one on mass murderers; 12 pages of ads are a negative.

8. Chicago Condensed (Lonely Planet)

Solid, small book with the basics; pocket size.

9. Frommer's Chicago 2003

Pleasant design makes up somewhat for lack of illustrations; detachable street map is a plus.

10. Fodor's Cityguide Chicago: The Sourcebook for Your Hometown
Listings and listings and listings; not much character.

11. Fodor's Chicago
Has a gray feel with lots of listings but little about the city's soul.

12. Chicago For Dummies
Has a generic, canned quality; fails to provide the city's historical and social context.

13. Moon Metro Chicago (Avalon)
Over-designed; noteworthy for its extensive use of photos smaller than postage stamps and fold-open maps with little information on them.

How they stack up

Any travel guide can list attractions and landmarks; these earn Ferris wheels (on a scale of 1-5) for telling us about Chicago's character.

1. Chicago: Eyewitness Travel Guide (DK)
\$20, 208 pages
(5 Ferris wheels)

2. Chicago (Compass American Guides/Fodor's)
\$21, 284 pages
(4 1/2 Ferris wheels)

3. Chicago (Lonely Planet)
\$17.99, 360 pages
(4 Ferris wheels)

4. The Unofficial Guide to Chicago (Wiley)
\$16.99, 414 pages
(4 Ferris wheels)

5. NFT: Not For Tourists Guide to Chicago (Happy Mazza)
\$19.95, 298 pages
(3 Ferris wheels) 1/2

6. Citypack Chicago (Fodor's)
\$12, 96 pages
(3 Ferris wheels) 1/2

7. Time Out Chicago
\$15.95, 316 pages
(3 Ferris wheels)

8. Chicago Condensed (Lonely Planet)
\$11.99, 128 pages
(2 Ferris wheels) 1/2.

9. Frommer's Chicago 2003
\$15.99, 315 pages
(2 Ferris wheels) 1/2.

10. Fodor's Cityguide
\$19, 335 pages
(2 1/2 Ferris wheels)

11. Fodor's Chicago
\$16.95, 230 pages
(Ferris wheel) 1/2

12. Chicago For Dummies
\$16, 309 pages
(Ferris wheel) 1/2

13. Moon Metro Chicago (Avalon)
\$16.95, 91 pages
(Ferris wheel)