

Chicago Culture Weekend: Two Museums, a River Cruise, and Deep Dish

A tight, well-fed, two-night culture sprint through the Loop and River North, with every museum day proven open, one architecture cruise on the water, and all your food boxes ticked.

o) Your Details at a Glance

Item	Detail
Dates	Friday, October 2 to Sunday, October 4, 2026 (2 nights)
Group	2 adults
Budget	Up to \$1,100 total
Must-haves	Art Institute, one more museum, architecture boat tour, deep dish once
Special requests	Verify each museum's open days in October, note free/discounted days honestly for Illinois vs. out-of-state visitors, and schedule so all three are provably open
Food wishes	Deep dish, Italian beef, one nice dinner
Arrival	Flying into O'Hare (ORD)

A quick honesty note up front: three museums plus a cruise plus one nice dinner on a \$1,100 total budget (excluding your flights) is doable, but it leaves little slack. The plan below hits every wish and lands under budget, with the tradeoff being a mid-range hotel rather than a luxury one. More on that in the cost overview.

1) At a Glance

Element	Pick	Key facts (as of June 2026)
Museum 1	Art Institute of Chicago	Adult \$32, non-resident. Fri–Sun 11 AM–5 PM. Closed only Tuesdays. 111 S Michigan Ave
Museum 2	Field Museum	Adult (non-resident) \$27 basic General Admission. Open daily 9 AM–5 PM, last entry 4 PM. 1400 S Lake Shore Dr
Museum 3 (choose one)	Chicago Architecture Center OR Museum of Science & Industry	CAC Center admission \$15 (or \$5 add-on with a cruise ticket); MSI is a larger natural fit for the architecture-and-boat theme
Boat tour	CAC River Cruise aboard <i>First Lady</i>	90 minutes, from \$57/person. Boards at 112 E Wacker Dr, arrive 30 min early

Element	Pick	Key facts (as of June 2026)
Deep dish	Lou Malnati's (River North)	Chicago deep dish institution; see Day 2
Italian beef	Portillo's, River North	100 W Ontario St, open daily 10 AM–1 AM
Nice dinner	The Purple Pig	444 N Michigan Ave, Mediterranean small plates, Michelin-listed
Lodging	Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago-Downtown (River North)	Guide value ~\$180–\$260/night, see 1b/1c
Airport transfer	CTA Blue Line from O'Hare	\$5 boarding fare at O'Hare; ~45 min to the Loop

The open-days verdict (your special request, answered): Your dates are a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The Art Institute is open Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and closed only on Tuesdays. So it is open all three of your days. The Field Museum is open daily 9 am–5 pm (last entry 4 pm), closed only Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. The Chicago Architecture Center is open Sun–Thu 10 AM–5 PM and Fri–Sat 10 AM–7 PM. All three of your museum candidates are open every day of your trip.

Free/discounted days, honestly: The Art Institute offers Illinois-resident discounts and free days, but its scheduled free periods are wintertime. Free Winter Weekdays run January 5–February 27, when all Illinois residents visit free every weekday from 11 a.m. through closing, and free December weekdays run December 1–18. None of these fall in early October, and in any case they apply only to Illinois residents. As out-of-state visitors, you would pay full non-resident admission (\$32 each). At the Field Museum, free-day tickets are available for Illinois residents every Wednesday, with advance online reservations strongly recommended. Your visit is not on a Wednesday and you are not Illinois residents, so this does not apply to you either. Bottom line: no legitimate free or resident discount applies to your specific dates and residency. Anyone claiming otherwise is bending the rules.

1b) Recommendation and Best Alternative

Recommended third museum: the Chicago Architecture Center (CAC). Since your architecture boat cruise is already run by the CAC, this is the elegant pairing. You can add admission to the Center for just \$5 (regular price \$15) as an event extra in your Ticketmaster cart when you buy your cruise ticket, which makes your third museum nearly free and thematically perfect: exhibitions, the famous scale model of Chicago, and context for everything you'll see on the water. It sits right at the cruise dock area (111 E Wacker Dr).

Best alternative: the Museum of Science and Industry (MSI). If you want a bigger, blockbuster third museum with more wow factor (the coal mine, the U-505 submarine, the giant model railroad), MSI is the classic choice. The tradeoff is location: it's in Hyde Park, about 8 miles

south of the Loop (roughly a 20–25 minute drive or a 30-minute train-plus-walk), which eats more of your tight weekend than the CAC does. For a two-night culture sprint I recommend CAC; choose MSI only if a science-and-industry giant beats convenience for you.

Why the Art Institute and Field Museum as your fixed two: The Art Institute is your stated must-see and one of the great encyclopedic art museums in the world. The Field pairs beautifully as a contrast (natural history, SUE the T. rex, ancient Egypt) and sits on the lakefront Museum Campus, an easy trip from downtown.

1c) Book Now

What	By when	Where / link
CAC River Cruise aboard <i>First Lady</i> (2 tickets, + \$5 Center admission each)	As soon as October dates open; weekend afternoon slots sell out	Official CAC page → Ticketmaster: architecture.org/...
Art Institute general admission (2 adults)	A few days ahead to lock a time; walk-up also available	artic.edu/...
Field Museum General Admission (2 adults)	A few days ahead	fieldmuseum.org/...
Hotel (Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago-Downtown or an alternative)	4–6 weeks out for best rate	hilton.com (search Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago-Downtown)
The Purple Pig dinner reservation (Saturday)	2–3 weeks ahead for a weekend table	resy.com/...

For the hotel: You will see the binding price for your exact dates and occupancy at the provider's booking step, it changes daily.

💡 **Cruise timing tip:** The *First Lady* cruise is strict about missed boats. Tickets may not be refunded or exchanged if you miss your boat, so allow extra time, and guests board 15 minutes before departure. Aim to be at the dock 30 minutes early.

2) Day-by-Day Plan

Day 1, Friday, October 2: Arrive, settle in, Italian beef, and the Art Institute

- **Afternoon: Fly into O'Hare, take the Blue Line downtown.** The cheapest, most reliable transfer is the CTA Blue Line. A special \$5 fare applies when boarding the CTA Blue Line at O'Hare paying transit value or buying a single-ride ticket, and the Blue Line runs 24/7, roughly 45 minutes from the Loop. Buy a Ventra ticket at the airport vending machines. From a downtown Blue Line stop it's a short walk or quick rideshare to your River North hotel.
- **Check in** at the Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago-Downtown, then drop bags.

- **Late lunch / early dinner: Italian beef at Portillo's.** Your Italian beef box, ticked at the River North classic. Portillo's & Barnelli's is at 100 W Ontario St, Chicago, IL 60610, phone (312) 587-8910, open daily 10:00 am to 1:00 am. Order the dipped Italian beef with hot giardiniera. It's a 5-minute walk from most River North hotels. Map: [Open in maps](#)
- **Evening: The Art Institute of Chicago.** On Fridays it's open until 5 PM (Fri–Sun 11–5), so head straight over after your beef. Adult admission is \$32 for out-of-state adults. See the Impressionists, the Thorne Miniature Rooms, and *American Gothic*. Map: [Open in maps](#)

💡 **Tip:** Ordering advance tickets is encouraged but not required, and tickets can be purchased on-site. If you'd rather not rush, do a lighter Art Institute pass on Friday evening and return isn't needed; one focused two-hour visit covers the highlights.

Plan B (rain): No change needed. Friday is entirely indoors (beef + art), so weather is irrelevant.

Day 2, Saturday, October 3: Field Museum, architecture cruise, deep dish, nice dinner

- **Morning: The Field Museum.** Open daily 9 am–5 pm, last entry 4 pm; arrive near opening to beat groups. Adult basic General Admission is \$27 for out-of-town adults (children 5–18 \$24, infants under 4 free). Must-sees: SUE the T. rex, Máximo the Titanosaur, Inside Ancient Egypt, and the Grainger Hall of Gems. Give it 2.5–3 hours. Map: [Open in maps](#)
- **Early afternoon: Architecture River Cruise.** Head back toward the Loop for the CAC River Cruise aboard *First Lady*, a 90-minute cruise led by CAC's trained docent volunteers, from \$57 per person, starting. Book a mid-afternoon departure (for example a 1:00–3:00 PM slot) so you have margin after the Field. Meet at the northeast corner of Michigan Ave. and E. Wacker Dr (112 E. Wacker Drive); look for the black awning at the stairway entrance. Map: [Open in maps](#)
- **Pair it:** Use the \$5 CAC Center admission add-on to make the Center itself your official third museum right by the dock.
- **Late afternoon: deep dish.** Your one-and-done deep dish. Lou Malnati's River North location (439 N Wells St) is a Chicago deep-dish institution; order the "Malnati Chicago Classic." A quick line-based lunch/snack, so save room for dinner. Map: [Open in maps](#)
- **Evening: your nice dinner at The Purple Pig.** Mediterranean small plates on the Magnificent Mile, and a James Beard Award-winning restaurant serving Mediterranean-inspired small plates, cheese, charcuterie, and wine, at 444 N Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60611. Saturday hours run 11:00 am–10:00 pm. Signature dishes include the milk-braised pork shoulder and whipped feta. Reserve ahead. Map: [Open in maps](#)

💡 **Tip:** The Purple Pig plates arrive as they're ready, not all at once, so it's a leisurely, sharing-style meal. Budget about 90 minutes and order in a couple of rounds. Reservations strongly advised on weekends.

Plan B (rain): The cruise runs rain or shine, with a climate-controlled cabin available, so a shower won't cancel it. If it's a genuine downpour and you'd rather skip the water, swap the cruise slot for the CAC Center exhibitions (indoors) and the interior architecture tour, and move the cruise to Sunday morning.

Day 3, Sunday, October 4: A slow morning, one last look, fly out

- **Morning:** If you want a third distinct museum experience beyond the CAC, use Sunday morning. The Art Institute is open Sunday 11–5 if you want a return visit to a wing you missed, and the Field is open daily 9 am–5 pm if you'd prefer more dinosaur time. Otherwise, take a relaxed Riverwalk stroll and coffee.
- **Brunch:** Grab a light bite near your hotel (Portillo's is open from 10 AM if you want one more Chicago dog for the road).
- **Afternoon: Fly out of O'Hare.** Reverse the Blue Line trip. From downtown the O'Hare-bound Blue Line boarding is the standard rail fare (\$2.75 with a Ventra card as of the February 2026 fare update; the \$5 premium applies only when boarding *at* O'Hare). Allow ~45 minutes plus airport time.

💡 **Tip:** Check out and store bags at the hotel desk in the morning so your last hours are hands-free.

Plan B (rain): Everything Sunday is flexible and mostly indoors or transit-based, so no weather contingency needed. If it's pouring, lean into a longer museum morning instead of the Riverwalk.

3) Practical Notes and Checklist

Getting around: The Loop and River North are walkable, and the CTA covers the rest. As of the February 2026 fare update, a train ride is \$2.75 and a bus ride is \$2.50 with a Ventra card. Download the Ventra app before you arrive. The Field Museum is the one spot that's a short ride rather than a walk from downtown.

Tipping (US convention): Tip 15–20% at sit-down restaurants (The Purple Pig, and table service anywhere). Counter spots like Portillo's and Lou Malnati's carryout don't require tipping, though a dollar or two in the jar is kind.

Sales tax: Chicago prices are generally posted "plus tax." Chicago's combined sales tax is high (about 10.25% on general goods, with prepared food/restaurant meals in the central area taxed even higher). Budget roughly 11–12% on restaurant checks on top of the menu price, before tip. Museum admission and the cruise are the prices listed.

Museum entry, once more, clearly:

- Art Institute: Adult \$32, non-resident, open your Fri/Sat/Sun.
- Field Museum: Adult \$27 basic non-resident, open daily.
- CAC Center: \$5 add-on with cruise, \$15 standalone.

Checklist:

- ☐ Book cruise tickets (weekend afternoon slot) + \$5 Center add-on
- ☐ Reserve The Purple Pig for Saturday evening
- ☐ Book hotel and note the cancellation policy
- ☐ Buy Art Institute + Field tickets online (or plan to buy on-site)
- ☐ Load the Ventra app for airport + city transit
- ☐ Pack a light layer; the cruise upper deck is breezy in October

- ☐ Photo ID for hotel check-in (a \$400 card deposit may be held; see below)

Estimated cost overview (2 adults, excluding flights), mirrored against your \$1,100 budget:

Item	Estimate (USD)	Notes
Hotel, 2 nights	\$360–\$520	Guide value, check the exact date price with the provider. Excludes tax and any parking.
Hotel tax (~17.4% Chicago hotel tax)	~\$63–\$90	Chicago hotel accommodations tax, approximate
Art Institute, 2 adults	\$64	2 × \$32
Field Museum, 2 adults	\$54	2 × \$27 basic
CAC River Cruise, 2 adults	\$114	2 × \$57, from
CAC Center admission, 2 adults	\$10	2 × \$5 add-on
Portillo's (Italian beef, 2)	~\$30	plus tax
Lou Malnati's deep dish (share)	~\$35	plus tax
The Purple Pig dinner, 2	~\$120–\$160	small plates + a drink, plus tax and 15–20% tip
CTA transit (airport + city, 2)	~\$40	2 × \$5 O'Hare boarding + several city rides
Incidentals / coffee / snacks	~\$40–\$60	buffer
Total	~\$930–\$1,175	Lands around or just over budget depending on the hotel rate

Honest budget reality: If the hotel prices out at the top of its range for a peak Saturday, you'll brush or slightly exceed \$1,100. Two easy levers keep you comfortably under: pick a cheaper-rated night at the hotel (Saturdays run higher), or swap The Purple Pig for a more modest sit-down dinner. The museum, cruise, and food-wish costs are fixed and total only about \$475, so lodging is your main variable.

Accommodation detail and named alternatives (all in River North / Loop, all meeting your area wish):

- **Recommended: Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago-Downtown**, River North. Nestled in River North, steps from the Magnificent Mile and Navy Pier, with free breakfast and an indoor pool. Guide value roughly \$180–\$260/night for two (as of June 2026; the exact figure sits behind a live booking widget). Note two mandatory extras from the property: a \$400 damage deposit is required on arrival, collected by credit card and reimbursed within 7 days of check-out, and private car parking is available for USD 69 per day (skip the car, you won't need it).

- **Alternative 1: Club Quarters Hotel Central Loop.** Right in the Loop near the Art Institute; less than 1 mile from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Art Institute of Chicago and Millennium Park, at 111 West Adams Street, Chicago, IL 60603, phone +1 312 214 6400. Guide value roughly \$150–\$230/night (as of June 2026). Note: a \$100 damage deposit is required on arrival, and continental breakfast is available for a fee at about USD 26 per person.
- **Alternative 2: Fairfield Inn & Suites Chicago Downtown/River North or Hyatt Place Chicago/River North,** both a couple of blocks from the Hampton in River North, similar mid-range positioning and typically comparable nightly rates.

For all three, you'll see the binding price for your exact dates and occupancy at the provider's booking step, it changes daily.

4) Sources

Checked June 2026. Prices, hours and tariffs can change; the booking-critical items (hotel and cruise) are confirmed on the pages below, but final hotel rates are live and date-dependent.

Museums

- Art Institute of Chicago (hours, admission, free days): [artic.edu/...](https://artic.edu/)
- Field Museum (tickets, pricing, free days): [fieldmuseum.org/...](https://fieldmuseum.org/)
- Field Museum (visit info): [fieldmuseum.org/...](https://fieldmuseum.org/)

Architecture cruise / third museum

- CAC River Cruise aboard *First Lady* (price, meeting point, schedule notes, Center add-on): [architecture.org/...](https://architecture.org/)

Dining

- Portillo's River North (address, hours, phone): [locations.portillos.com/...](https://locations.portillos.com/)
- The Purple Pig (official site): thepurplepigchicago.com
- The Purple Pig (reservations): [resy.com/...](https://resy.com/)

Lodging

- Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago-Downtown (official Hilton booking): hilton.com
- Club Quarters Central Loop (official): [clubquartershotels.com/...](https://clubquartershotels.com/)

Transit

- CTA fares: [transitchicago.com/...](https://transitchicago.com/)
- RTA paying for your ride (O'Hare \$5 fare): [rtachicago.org/...](https://rtachicago.org/)

Have a fantastic Chicago weekend. Between SUE the T. rex, a Monet or three, and a boat full of skyscraper stories, you'll cram a lot of culture into 48 hours, with just enough deep dish to earn the extra layer for the cruise deck.