

Go around the world in these 5 Chicago neighborhoods

TRAVEL By Amelia Rayno - Star Tribune (Minneapolis)



On Devon Ave., on Chicago's north side, visitors can window shop for beautiful saris and vibrant produce as some 19 blocks of Indian restaurants send whiffs of garlic and curry into the air. (Amelia Rayno/Minneapolis Star Tribune/TNS)

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The modest “kitchen,” if it could be called that, had drawn a crowd.

Under the shade of a white plastic tent, a man and woman bowed over a grill, flipping tortillas. Fragrant smoke spiraled into the air. A cluster of diners stood in the street, eagerly awaiting their prizes.

“Try one of these quesadillas, chica,” a man observing the operation told me. “You’ll feel like you’re in Mexico.”

Wandering Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood indeed felt like an experience near to a Mexican vacation. And Mexico wasn’t the only country I immersed myself in after a quick flight to Chicago, where a host of vibrant, long established neighborhoods let travelers feel as if they have landed abroad.

Over the course of a long weekend, I explored five such areas, starting with Pilsen, where I stayed.

Populated predominantly by people of Hispanic heritage since the 1970s — before that, the makeup was heavily Polish — Pilsen has deep Latin roots and wears them on its sleeve.

Taquerias, panaderias and bodegas line its bustling main thoroughfares, 18th Street and Blue Island Avenue, near the popular Loop. Walking along the residential streets, I more often heard Spanish than English.

Like many major-city neighborhoods, gentrification is taking hold — a subject that inevitably arises in neighborhood coffee shops and bars — but Pilsen’s charms have not been lost.

Fifteen years ago, gang violence made it difficult for even the people who lived there, let alone tourists, to fully experience the beauty of the neighborhood. These days, mercados sit next to boutiques, juice bars and artist studios. Hotshot restaurants have pulled in food lovers from across the city. Crime has drastically dropped.

Sombreros are worn on the streets. Carts sell chicharrons (pork rinds) outside Harrison Park. Beautiful brick and stone buildings, erected in Eastern European architectural style, are awash in color with street art tableaux painted over their once somber exteriors.

The 2.8-square-mile neighborhood claims enough taquerias for a week's worth of crawls — Taqueria Atotonilco was the best I found. Bakeries such as Panaderia Nuevo Leon fill the sidewalks with the smell of baking masa and pastries. The highlight? One afternoon, I crammed along with dozens of others into Carnitas Uruapan, a small restaurant touting a major pork operation. As I waited for a table, I watched the parade of trays with meat and chicharrons coming from the kitchen to the counter, where a man was lopping off pieces and wrapping them in paper for customers to take home.

"This is the best carnitas in the city," said Polo Mendoza, who immigrated to the neighborhood with his family in the 1970s. "But you also have to try the brain taquitos. I wouldn't touch them as a kid, but one time I accidentally ate one at home, and it was amazing. So creamy."

He invited me to sit with him and his family, and we ordered taquitos. He was right. Pilsen's bold flavor and warm spirit had gotten me again.

It was time to move on to other parts of the city, but I could barely pull myself away.

INDIA ON DEVON AVENUE

My nose alerted me to my arrival on Devon Avenue.

Whiffs, then waves, of curry, garlic and onions drifted through the open windows of my Lyft. It was immediately clear: I had made it to Chicago's desi corridor.

The area — about 20 blocks of Devon Avenue, near the city's northern boundary — is one of the best known of its kind. It became popular after the first location of the Patel Brothers' store, an Asian-American grocery chain with outlets nationwide, debuted there in the mid-1970s. Today, the stretch is lined with restaurants, bakeries and Indian snack shops, markets overflowing with produce and stores with racks of saris pulled out onto the sidewalks.

With scores of authentic eateries, it wasn't hard to find a good meal. I chose Mysore Woodlands because of its creative approach to vegetables. For the \$9.99 lunch special, I received a spinach and cheese dosa (rice crepe) much larger than my head and two medhu vada (savory doughnuts dipped in a lentil soup) along with a spicy Indian tea.

LITTLE ITALY

Welcome to Little Italy, the sign greeted me, then implored, Time to mangia.

Just like the Italians to get right down to business with the food.

First, I wanted to take in the scenery — and attempt to walk off some of my extensive mangia-ing of the previous couple of days.

After arriving at one end of Taylor Street, where most of the activity resides, I wandered over to the beautiful Arrigo Park — named for Victor Arrigo, a former Illinois state representative and vocal advocate of the Italian-American community — and admired the European-style architecture that surrounded it. Nearby was the National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame. Across the street, a statue of New York Yankees great Joe DiMaggio, born to Italian immigrants, perpetually swings his mighty bat.

In recent years the neighborhood — on Chicago's Near West Side, just north of Pilsen — has become more of a mixed bag of food cultures, lessening the feeling of strolling through Rome. Still, I got the feeling that inside the marinara-infused restaurants — especially the likes of the Rosebud, a mainstay for 39 years — little has changed.

Around happy hour, as the many eateries churned to life, the scent of roasting garlic gave me the only hint I needed. It was time to mangia. Davanti Enoteca was jammed with patrons clinking glasses of red wine and diving into bowls of pasta; I followed their lead.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN ON ARGYLE STREET

The petite woman worked with practiced precision, slicing open the oversized, buttery croissants that would be made into sandwiches later, one by one.

It was still early, and Argyle Street — a packed three-block stretch in the heart of Uptown, just inland from Lake Michigan's lovely Montrose Beach — was just stirring to life. The area that has long served as home to Southeast Asian restaurants and businesses was quiet, with few cars and bikes weaving through the bridge arch that reads "Asia on Argyle."

Inside La Patisserie P., a tiny French-Vietnamese bakery boasting several cases of carb-laden treats, the day was in full swing. Eyeballing the coconut tarts and curry buns, I finally chose a jian dui — a Chinese rice-flour doughnut filled with sweet red bean paste — savoring the sesame-covered pastry slowly.

After a brisk walk along Lake Michigan, I turned back toward the neighborhood's streets. Shopkeepers, some selling intricate china vases and hosts of maneki-nekos (the waving Japanese cat figurines), pulled baby kumquat trees and aloe plants onto the street to tempt passersby. Suddenly, the area, ablaze with painted murals, had come alive.

The area is perhaps most vibrant on Thursday evenings in July and August, when it hosts a night market filled with food stalls. But on this day, I was simply on the hunt for lunch, and the pho shops had all just opened.

I landed at Pho 777, not for a steaming bowl of noodle goodness, but for the banh xeo — a shrimp and pork egg crepe that is served with lettuce and herbs for wrapping around each bite. Armed with a Vietnamese coffee to go, I walked out onto the sidewalk. A little boy chased after a mob of pigeons. People gathered on benches to drink tea and chat. And I felt as awake and alive as the street.

GERMANY IN LINCOLN SQUARE

It was Sunday afternoon, near the end of my trip, and I was in Lincoln Square, the historic German area on Chicago's North Side — along with everyone else. Bikers and dog walkers wandered through, along with a couple of men smoking cigars. The families, though, stayed, converting the quaint, brownstone- and shop-surrounded plaza into a makeshift playground, albeit one as picturesque as they come. Under the gaze of cherubs, which beamed from the intricate bases of vintage-style green lampposts, tiny stamping feet galloped and twirled. It was still April, and the fountains hadn't yet been activated, but the atmosphere felt perfect — and not too far away from Europe.

For some, the three-block stretch of Lincoln Avenue has played the role of a sort of mini-Europe since the late 1800s, when German immigrants started a pickling operation nearby, and ultimately settled by the thousands. Unfortunately, the Chicago Brauhaus, the 40-year-old brick behemoth that fronts the plaza with bold German architecture, recently closed, taking with it a dose of European flair. But the real gem of the mini 'hood — stretching from one green entrance arch to another — is still going strong. I could have spent an hour in Gene's Sausage Shop, a two-story maze of cured meats, cheeses, beer and so much more, particularly if the rooftop were open for sausage grilling and beer drinking, as it is in the summer months. But I tore myself away for a pint at Huettenbar, one of the longest-standing pubs in the area.

There was more to see, but it was almost time to go home. Before arranging a Lyft, I sat in the square, among the cherubs, and let the sun stream onto my face to the soundtrack of tiny giggles. I was full from all the food; sore from all the walking. I was happy and tired. After all: I'd been around the world and back.
