

# Exploring Chicago's Museums: Adler Planetarium, Shedd Aquarium, and Field Museum

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Head to any major city and you're bound to find a bewildering range of museums to suit just about every taste.

That's the case in Chicago, but perhaps unusually for a city, you'll find three of their most stunning and unusual attractions all located together on the Museum Campus to the south of the city. Literally, within a 15 minute walk of each other, the Adler Planetarium, Shedd Aquarium, and Field Museum combine together to offer a great couple of days out in the city.

Our first stop took us to the Adler Planetarium. I must admit that my first thought as we walked in was that the shore of Lake Michigan was a strange place to put a planetarium, but there's quite a history to this place that I wasn't aware of. The Adler first opened in 1930 and was the first modern planetarium in the western hemisphere. Somehow I wasn't surprised to learn that, as we had already discovered that Chicago likes to have the first, tallest, and biggest of things!

Those roots can be seen most clearly in the Atwood Sphere, which is a walk-in planetarium, built in 1913. It's a simple enough idea, with hundreds of holes drilled into the surface of what is essentially a huge metal ball, representing the stars you can see in the night sky above Chicago. You enter the sphere in what can only be described as the equivalent of a small mining car or elevator that heads into the sphere on tracks. Seating about seven or eight people, you then watch the stars move across the sky, as the sphere slowly rotates. It's an amazing piece of engineering, when you remember how old the thing now is, and it's surprisingly relaxing to be in there.

Somehow, this was perhaps more enjoyable than some of the Adler's e-ticket attractions, the planetarium theaters. There are three of them, and you're faced with a bewildering choice of shows to pick from when you enter. We went with Skywatchers of Africa, simply because it fitted the timescale of our visit. Interesting though it was, it obviously didn't engage any of us enough, as the three of us all managed to rest our eyes at least once during the presentation. We blamed it on some very comfortable seats!

Outside of the planetarium shows themselves, there are some

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fascinating exhibits to be found here, including one called Shoot to the Moon, which recalls the moon landings 40 years earlier. We were pleasantly surprised at the content of this exhibit and, sadly, the Kennedy Space Center in Florida could learn a lot from the presentation here, as it's much more engaging than they manage.

Heading further out in the stars, you can also learn about our Solar System and the Milky Way Galaxy and, once again, there was a lot to do here, with plenty of hands-on exhibits for younger members of the family -- and some older ones too!

Tearing yourself from here isn't easy and you could easily spend the entire day here, but there's much more to explore on Museum Campus. Head west and you'll find the John G. Shedd Aquarium, which opened in the same year as the Adler. Unfortunately for us, time was taking its toll on the Shedd when we visited, with the main attraction, the Oceanarium, closed for the first time in its 17 year history, which was a great shame. Having heard so much about the Oceanarium, I was expecting to very disappointed by the Shedd without it, but nothing could have been further from the truth.

Other highlights you can enjoy here until June 2009, when the Oceanarium is scheduled to re-open, include Wild Reef in the underground wing, which takes you on a fascinating journey through coral reefs of the world. As one of the newer areas of the Shedd, it uses the latest techniques to showcase the marine life to you. I was particularly impressed with the stingrays swimming right beneath us.

As you enter, you can't miss the Caribbean Reef, a floor to ceiling circular tank that's home to more than 250 tropical animals. Amazon Rising was another exhibit well worth seeing, taking you on a journey into what you can find along the Amazon River. It does perhaps need to come with a health warning, as some of the snakes in there would send shivers down most people's spines!

The final part of Museum Campus is the Field Museum and this is perhaps the hardest to describe, as it's so wide ranging. As a natural history museum, exhibits there certainly have a focus on the animal world, with birds and animals from around the world on display. Some of the most stunning exhibits including African panoramas, Bushman (a famous lowland gorilla who lived at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo), and the Lions of Tsavo.

But that's only a small part of what the museum is all about. Culture is a huge focus here, with exhibits looking at people from across the world. These include the chance to walk through mummies' tombs in the Inside

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Ancient Egypt exhibit, while you can also journey to the other side of the world and see a Maori Meeting House from New Zealand. Other exhibits take you through Polynesia and into the world of jewels with the Hall of Jades and the Grainger Hall of Gems. Sadly, both of these last two exhibits were looking in need of an update when we visited, but I'm sure that's something the Field Museum will be doing, judging by their newer additions.

These include Underground Adventure, where you're shrunk down to insect size to meet giant bugs. However, just like the Amazon Rising exhibit at the Shedd, there's a health warning on this one, as some of the creepy crawlies you see are worryingly life-like. There were a couple of spots where I did speed up my pace to get away from some of the life forms we saw!

Another recent addition is Evolving Planet, taking from the origins of life on our planet through the days of the dinosaur. This is a fascinating display where we all learned a great deal, not least that the earth has been subject to a series of extinctions, rather than just the one we all know about that killed off the dinosaurs. Speaking of dinosaurs, it's worth mentioning that when you walk into the Field Museum, you'll see their mascot, Sue, the world's largest Tyrannosaurus Rex, in the Stanley Field Hall and she's an impressive sight! Unsurprisingly, the museum doesn't miss a trick, with lots of "Sue-venirs" on sale. [Ed. A full-size model of Sue can be found at Disney's Animal Kingdom park.]

Entrance into the three museums, as you'd expect, isn't cheap. General adult admission to the Field Museum will set you back \$15, but if you want to enjoy all the exhibits described in here, you'll need a gold pass at \$23. Chicago residents get a \$2 reduction on these prices. Admission to the Shedd Aquarium is either \$15.95 or \$17.95, depending if you want to see the 4D movies on offer, with a 25% discount for Chicago residents. The Adler Planetarium will set you back a minimum of \$10 for just the exhibits, but to see one show and the Atwood Sphere, tickets are \$19. If you want to visit all three, it is well worth looking into the [Go Chicago Card](#), which we found quickly paid for itself. For one day, it costs \$59.99/adults and \$44.99/children, while two days is \$89.99/adults or \$69.99/children.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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