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BEFORE YOU GO

Shop Chicago

When hunting for fashion treasure in the Windy City, don't limit yourself to the Magnificent Mile.

Story and Photos By Katherine Rodeghier

Shopping is the No. 1 activity of Windy City visitors, according to the Chicago Office of Tourism. For many, that means a stroll down the Magnificent Mile, that stretch of Michigan Avenue between the Chicago River and Oak Street, home to Bloomingdales, American Girl Place, Neiman Marcus, the Disney Store, Nordstrom, Tiffany & Co., Ralph Lauren, and other big-name retailers.



Above: A shopper browses shoes on the Magnificent Mile.

Below: The Magnificent Mile, downtown Chicago, is the most popular area in the Windy City.



Shoppers will find \$180 jeans, as well as \$39 jeans. Though the demographic of customers varies, the target audience is age 15 to 40.

"We have teeny boppers who walk in with their moms and both will walk out with something," says Wang.

But savvy shoppers don't limit themselves to this narrow corridor of retail opportunities. With 300 independently owned retailers and 75 distinct communities, Chicago has much to offer anyone who digs deeper into the shopping scene in the city's trendy enclaves.

"We're getting a lot more people who stay downtown on Michigan Avenue, yet go out to explore the neighborhoods," says Tracey Glibowski, who opened Cerato boutique in the Lakeview Southport section of the city in 2010. Chicago is home to more than 400 fashion designers, and Cerato dedicates itself to showcasing their work.

"I felt Chicago didn't get enough credit for fashion. I want to focus and support the talent that we have here," says Glibowski. In her 1,200-square-foot vintage storefront hang the creations of more than 25 Chicago designers, including Brynn Capella handbags, print dresses by Eskell, baubles by Jules, and blouses by Kate Boggiano. Prices are capped at \$350 with the average range falling between \$100 and \$250. (Cerato, 3451 N. Southport Ave., 773-248-8604, www.ceratoboutique.com)

One of the city's fastest-growing independent retailers is Akira, which opened in the Bucktown neighborhood in 2002. It has since expanded to 17 stores in the Chicago metro area, including in the trendy Lincoln Park neighborhood and inside Water Tower Place on Michigan Avenue. Its flagship store remains its largest at about 7,000 square feet. (Akira, 1814 W. North Ave., 773-489-0818, www.shopakira.com)

In addition to more than 200 designer brands, Akira has two private brands, Akira Red Label, which is casual, and the dressier Akira Black.

"We keep it pretty exclusive and priced reasonably," says co-owner Erika Wang.

Celebrate Chicago's 175th birthday with 175 days of special events, festivals, and promotions from March 4–Aug. 26. For more information, contact the Chicago Office of Tourism, www.explorechicago.org. Visit www.chicagofashionresource.com for information on Chicago's fashion scene, including the scoop on hot boutiques and shopping itineraries. Reserve your Chicago hotel accommodations at AAA.com/travel.

To visit Chicago, first stop by your nearest [AAA service office](#) for maps, reservations, TripTiks® and TourBook® guides.

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Two characteristics set Akira apart. One is customer service.

“Our stylists spend a lot of time with individual customers” helping them find just the right look, says Wang. “We have that one-on-one interaction with them.”

The other is community involvement. Details about its many fashion shows and events benefiting charities can be found on its Web site, plus Facebook and Twitter platforms.

Return of that Great Street

Akira was among the first retailers to occupy Block 37, the only vertical mall on State Street.

“We thought this would be the next Michigan Avenue and we wanted to jump on the bandwagon,” says Wang. “It’s been a work in progress.”

State Street, once known as “that Great Street,” fell on hard times when the buzz moved to the Mag Mile after the development of North Michigan Avenue in the 1970s. In the past decade, retailers have been trickling back. Block 37, named for one of the city’s original 58 city blocks in 1830, opened in 2009 in the Loop on State between Randolph and Washington streets.

Though many Block 37 retail spaces remain unoccupied, shoppers can easily while away an afternoon in the five-story atrium at Zara, Sephora, Eileen Fisher, Anthropologie, Steve Madden, the Disney Store, and other shops. (Block 37, 108 N. State St., 312-261-4738)

Across the street from Block 37 stands the original Marshall Field department store, now Macy’s (111 N. State St., 312-781-1000, www.macys.com). An architectural treasure, as well as State Street’s retail anchor with 10 selling floors, the building retains its Tiffany glass ceiling and iconic clocks hanging over the corners of State at Washington, and State at Randolph streets, a meeting spot for generations of shoppers. Other retailers giving new life to State Street include Nordstrom Rack, H&M, Urban Outfitters, and Forever 21.

Quirky and Virtual Shops

Any number of Chicago stores sell ladies handbags, but a store where you can create your own custom-made bag? That would be 1154 Lill Studio. (904 W. Armitage, 773-477-5455, www.1154Lill.com)

Founder Jennifer Velarde began making bags in her apartment at 1154 Lill St. and held “purse parties,” giving her designs the names of her girlfriends. Heading out to market the bags at a street fair, she grabbed her fabric swatches at the last minute in case anyone wanted a custom order. Her design-your-own-bag concept blossomed into this boutique in Chicago’s Lincoln Park, another in Boston, an online store and a national home party program.

The store showcases 35 handbag styles that buyers customize by picking fabrics, patterns and colors. Prices run from about \$26 to more than \$200. The Andi, a best seller, costs \$145. The Lexi, popular because it can be worn three ways, is \$155. All bags are made in Chicago and orders are filled in about three to four weeks.

A Chanel tweed jacket for \$2,855? An Hermes Birkin bag for \$4,500? Christian Louboutin heels for \$420? Those are all purchases made through eDrop-off, a virtual store, but one where you can stop in to try on real designer duds. (2117 N. Halsted St., 773-525-7467, 866-962-5550, www.shopedropoff.com)

Owner Corri McFadden came up with the concept in college and put it into practice upon graduation in 2004. Here’s how it works: You bring her your used designer fashions and luxury clothing and accessories, her staff authenticates them to eliminate knock-offs and puts them on eBay. She keeps 40 percent and you get the rest. She sells 1,000 pieces a week in a sell rate of more than 90 percent, much higher than most individual sellers. See something you like online? Stop in and try it on before you bid—just give her three hours notice to pull it for you.

Chicago’s influence on the world of fashion continues to grow, making it a stylish getaway for the Midwest and beyond.

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