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Travel



(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

Discover the city beneath the streets in Chicago's Pedway

Written by

Katherine Rodeghier, Special Contributor

We might have been Hansel and Gretel looking for breadcrumbs strewn at our feet or hikers following blazes on trees along the Appalachian Trail. But far from being out in the woods, we were below ground exploring a network of hallways and tunnels largely unknown to those navigating the city that hummed above our heads.

We were in the Chicago Pedway, a mostly below-street-level 40-block network of pedestrian corridors connecting buildings downtown, a place where even the most knowledgeable Chicagoans get lost. If you could stretch out this maze of passageways, it would extend 5 miles. But you can't. Even with official City of Chicago plaques pointing the way, you're easily confused in this maze of dead ends, stairways and bridges with more than 200 entrances and exits.

So do what my gal pal and I did: Take a guided tour.



Tour guide Richard Zieman points out Pedway markers used to navigate through the underground network in Chicago.
(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

Richard Zieman, a lifelong Chicagoan and guide for Chicago’s Finest Tours, steered us through what bills itself as “The Biggest Secret in Chicago.” Along the way, he regaled us with bits of trivia and stories from the city’s history. And we didn’t stay underground throughout the tour. Like a pair of prairie dogs, we popped our heads outside for a look at Instagram-worthy architecture.

That rotunda atop the Jeweler’s Building? It was a speakeasy during Prohibition, Zieman said. And that odd black box? It’s the world’s only fire station designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, made to match his “less is more” architecture of Illinois Center, one of 50 buildings connected by the Pedway.

We pass through the Carrara marble lobby of the Aon Center. When the skyscraper was built, the owner insisted the exterior be clad in the same marble panels. Chicago’s harsh weather sent them crashing to the street — big oops. A recladding with granite proved painfully costly.



On a Pedway tour, visitors step outside to admire noteworthy architecture, including the Aqua Tower by architect Jeanne Gang.
(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

We peered up at the wavy flanks of the Aqua Tower, designed by architect Jeanne Gang to house apartments and the Radisson Blu, one of several hotels in Pedway proximity, including the Fairmont and Swissotel. At another, the Hyatt Regency Chicago, guests can travel from O'Hare International Airport to their guest room without ever stepping outside by taking the Chicago Transit Authority subway and the Pedway.

A city within a city unfolds beneath Chicago streets: convenience stores, a shoeshine stand, a spa, a barber, a dentist, a gym, dry cleaners and restaurants from fast food to fine dining. The Block 37 mall has a movie theater as well as retailers Zara, Sephora, Banana Republic and a Disney store. At Macy's — still called Marshall Field's by die-hard Chicagoans — we stop to sample the signature Frango mints before staring up at the historic department store's Tiffany glass ceiling. Gorgeous, but it pales in comparison to the world's largest Tiffany glass dome, 38 feet in diameter, inside the Chicago Cultural Center just a few turns down the Pedway.



Artwork brightens a hallway used by Pedway visitors inside the Prudential Building in Chicago.
(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

With the Pedway connecting office buildings and residences, it's possible to live and work entirely indoors. You can even get married there. The Pedway Marriage Court lies under City Hall. Across the street — er, under the street — architect Helmut Jahn's James R. Thompson Center houses State of Illinois offices surrounding a soaring atrium with a weird echo chamber.

Zieman told us the Pedway began in 1939 when a tunnel connected what are now the Red Line and Blue Line subways. It spread like a spider web under Chicago's central business district, encompassing both public and private buildings — including one of the city's four railway stations with two train lines, one heading to the suburbs, the other to South Bend, Ind.

Because the Pedway isn't a public thoroughfare, office buildings and government buildings may lock their doors at night and on weekends, so it's best to go with a guide. Sure, you can grab a map from your hotel concierge and explore on your own, but remember this: No one will leave a trail of breadcrumbs for you to follow.

Details

Chicago's Finest Tours: Pedway Explorers Tour, 2.5 hours, \$25

Chicago Elevated: The Chicago Pedway Tour, 1.5 hours, \$23

Chicago Detours: Loop Interior Architecture Walking Tour with Pedway, two hours, \$26

Pedway

map:cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/cdot/pedestrian/Pedway/PedwayMap2013.pdf

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer from the Chicago area.

<https://www.dallasnews.com/life/travel/2018/08/21/discover-city-beneath-streets-chicagos-pedway>