

Chicago Tribune

Kids' -eye view of Chicago

Ditch the grown-ups and find out what's really fun

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The tour guide was all banana fudge mountains and blueberry rivers. "How is everyone doing?" Her excited voice hung in the air, met by the collective groan of the children in the back of her trolley, their voices all early-afternoon-waiting-for-lunch exhaustion: "Oookaaaayyy ..."

They'd seen the Sears Tower. Run through Navy Pier. Thrown ice into the frozen lake. Played paddle ball. Marveled at Millennium Park. Twirled. Skipped. Flipped. Insisted they weren't tired. "Dude, it's Saturday afternoon," one said, catching a yawn.

Besides, this was our idea, the kids assembled at our request. And that idea -- undertaken without guile or charity, as naive as it probably sounds -- was this: Find six local kids and ask them what they would do on a perfect day in Chicago. Then give them that day. Then stay close but not too close. And if all goes well, if the kids forget about the microscope we've fixed on them, we should see the city through their eyes and better understand what constitutes that most elusive childhood goal -- the perfect day.

Our mission, actually, was more complicated -- from a practical standpoint, these kids might remind us what's fun in the familiar, maybe even show enthusiasm for stuff their parents had written off as overdone, low-tech. In turn, they'd be unwittingly weighing in on our current national obsession with children and old-fashioned play -- a fixation that's made "The Dangerous Book for Boys" (with its instructions for stickball playing and knot tying) a phenomenon since its debut last spring. We'd provide a menu of activities. But the kids would set the agenda.

Which is how we ended up on this tour

trolley, locals among tourists, where we learned, among other things, that downtime happens to children -- even when they resist.

Our guide wasn't getting the hint. She soldiered on, not a sputter in her pep. "Where is everyone from?" The adults onboard, tourists all, ignoring the kids in back, clutching shopping bags, unzipping camera pouches, having climbed on at a busy Michigan Avenue corner, mumbled in their respective accents: London, Indianapolis, New York, Ohio, Australia.

"Antarctica!"
Gabriel Inserra-Mousin giggled.
"Pluto!"

Bryan Hernandez doubled over. They're 6th graders. The guide adopted a Cinderellaishgush -- "Oh my! Antarctica! That's a long wa--"

"Uranus!"

Allegra Harper-Coronado, 11, looked surprised at herself, her face flush with un-sanctioned fun. She was wedged beside Gabriel and Bryan, both 12, her classmates at The Helen C. Peirce School of International Studies, a public school in Edgewater. Then, to be certain everyone heard her excellent response, she repeated it. "Yes, I am from Uranus." Bryan, appreciating the innovation, shouted toward the driver: "Yeah, I'm from Uranus, too."

"Where're you really from?" the guide asked.

"Edgewater," Allegra said.
"Edgewater," Gabriel clarified.

Sitting in the back window, arranging themselves in a group portrait without being asked, it would have been easy to mistake them for the cast of a Disney Channel series: Gabriel and Bryan are the boys-will-be-boys, full of beans; Allegra is the free spirit, an independent; Kaitlyn Carro, 11, and Jennifer Domingo, 12, are the commentators, self-possessed, rolling their eyes; and Debra Inserra-Mousin, Gabriel's sister, 9 years old, a 3rd grader, is the wise-beyond-her-years comic relief, a vegetarian with a nasal voice, not above eating a chicken. "Then you're an

omnivore," Bryan said. "I don't want to be an omnivore," Debra whispered.

Central Casting couldn't have done better. Though we had no idea what we were getting until they arrived. Having voted on a list of activities (ESPN Zone, Shedd Aquarium, etc.), they did not show concern -- quelled manners! -- about the results, or even where they were headed. Instead, they made their own fun immediately, poking each other, softly clapping whenever a classmate used a vocabulary word in a sentence -- today's word was indubitably -- and reciting entire passages from textbooks, apropos of nothing. "The lake was a vast swath of marshy terrain," Gabriel intoned to no one. "Marshy isn't a word," Debra said. He went on: "The only lady Pharaoh declared her son was too young to reign."

"She was vanquished," Bryan said.
"First she reigned."
"Then she was vanquished."
OK, to the tour bus!

They climbed to the open-air second deck without a pause, on a 5-degree wind chill morning. But with sun! "I was going to bring my PSP but this is more fun," Bryan said. Most had never taken an organized tour of their hometown -- "My favorite thing about Chicago is going to California on vacation," Jennifer said, without irony. Immediately, however, they realized the scale was off: They felt high up. Cars were "bugs." They liked it. "This is really cold," Jennifer said. No one budged.

The bus swung toward Daley Plaza, and as it passed beneath the elevated train tracks, the children screamed, exhilarated -- "Oh my God that is scary," Bryan said. Gabriel pointed out the Picasso. "You see that? It's for climbing to the top, then sliding down." The guide explained the Chicago Cultural Center was once a library with no books. The girls scrunched their noses. On Michigan, their proximity to the facades fascinated. "It's beautiful," Kaitlyn said, craning her neck at the wall of concrete and stone and window. "That statue is crying," Bryan said of a stone mask. "There's the toilet bowl," Gabriel said, pointing to Soldier Field. They learned that, as Kaitlyn explained, Marshall Field was a man who gave a lot of money

to a museum so it's named after him. They liked the Sears Tower best because it's big, and the Hancock Building because it's made of triangles. But they rarely listened to the guide, quieting only at the headless "Agora" sculpture in Grant Park! and her explanation -- it's about connection, about people in a technology age.

Then they waved at it.

They waved at everyone, everything. They enjoyed waving. "Those are our people," Bryan shouted, looming over the side. "Wave to our people." They waved at drivers, men on cranes. Then, shivering, they went inside -- except Allegra, who sat beside the tour guide: "The view is worth the cold." Improvisation became the theme of the day. As much as they enjoyed waving, once they had bounded off the bus, they loved throwing ice into the Chicago River, and when we reached Navy Pier and Lake Michigan, they lifted hunks after hunks of ice, hurling them into the frozen waters. Gabriel's face was all strained focus, trying not to show how surprisingly heavy dirty snow can be. I should mention, the tour for six costs a little under \$90, but the ice tossing and waving was free.

Less free was Amazing Chicago's Fun-house Maze at Navy Pier -- \$50 for six kids and 20 minutes (or so) of fun. They loved it more than anything we did. Before you enter the maze, you wait in an elevator, which appears to plummet. Bryan pointed at the wall -- not all of the bricks in a nearby window were moving, which meant it was an illusion. We never left our floor. He ignored this and kept screaming. The doors opened and inside the maze, the kids bounced off each other like loose marbles; inside the maze tunnel, which seems to roll and rock beneath a field of stars, they sat on the floor. They went through five times, and stumbled out like zombies, arms forward. Back to the bus -- but first a stop at the man raking fudge behind thick glass, talking on a cell phone and ignoring the crowd gathered outside. They were hypnotized.

OK, what's next?

"Let's go swimming."

"Let's see the movie 'Jumper.'"

"Let's go to Shedd."

"We can do anything?"

You can request anything.

We had lunch. We gave them a choice of pizza, hot dogs, or Italian beef, and to our shock, they picked the Italian beef. So we went to Al's Beef -- "I like to try new things," Bryan explained. "We get pizza every day," Jennifer said. They liked the sheer volume of meat, but if they could eat anything in Chicago all the time they would eat Dunkin' Donuts and rice and macaroni and cheese and Chinese food. And then our day ended, earlier than planned: The kids insisted they were

up for more, but after five hours, the tone of the afternoon had slid from novelty to the stirrings of chaos, and they had proven a point: Play is alive. Buy a toy and they'll play with the box. They'll make fun. That's a good day. I asked what they do most Saturdays:

"Go to Target."

"Go to a movie."

"Go to stores, look at stuff we can't buy."

Debra leaned forward and, for the first time all day, stopped smiling. Speaking slowly, as if to ensure I got every word, she said: "I would stay home. I would eat lunch. I would go to sleep. I would breathe deep. This was better." Indubitably.

How the kids chose their day

Our Great Day in Chicago with six kids was relatively short and sweet -- in less than five hours we fit in a bus tour, a trip to a super-touristy spot and a classic Chicago lunch. Here's what we offered the kids, and what they picked. Our offer of a duck boat ride? "I thought it was going in a boat and looking at ducks," said Bryan Hernandez, 12. So much for that.

TOUR

They picked: Chicago Trolley Co./Chicago Double Decker Co. We took the Hop On Hop Off Tour, which has pickup (and dropoff) at spots around the Loop, Michigan Avenue and Navy Pier, among others. Daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (6:30 p.m., starting next week). Buses swing by stops every 20 minutes or so. \$25, \$15 for children under 12. 773-648-5000.

Why they picked this: "I wanted to ride on a double decker," said Kaitlyn Carro, 11.

What they nixed: The Untouchables/Chicago's Original Gangsters Tour (773-881-1195); an architecture tour (Chicago Architecture Foundation 312-922-3432); a duck boat tour (no longer operating).

ACTIVITY

They picked: Amazing Chicago's Fun-house Maze, inside Navy Pier. Takes about 20 minutes to get through (if you go through a few times). Open daily. \$9.95, \$7.95 children under 12. 600 E. Grand Ave.; 888-893-7300, www.amazingchicago.com.

Why they picked this: The general promise of fun. "Don't get to do this all the time," said Bryan.

What they nixed: American Girl Place (111 E. Chicago Ave.; 877-247-5223); Chicago Children's Museum (700 E. Grand Ave.; 312-527-1000); ESPN Zone (43 E. Ohio St.; 312-644-3776).

FOOD

They picked: Al's Beef (169 W. Ontario

St.; 312-943-3222, www.alsbeef.com)

Why they picked this: "It's different," Bryan said.

What they nixed: Pizzeria Uno (29 E. Ohio St.; 312-280-5120); Gold Coast Dogs (17 S. Wabash Ave.; 312-578-1133).

-- C.B.

Kids of Chicago have spoken*

FAVORITE SEASON

Summer 55.3%

Spring 17.6%

Fall 12.6%

Winter 14.5%

"Summer, because you get to throw water."

--Christopher, 10 "The Shedd Aquarium, because my sign is Pisces, and some people think I am a fish out of water." --Tatiana, 10

FAVORITE MUSEUM

Field 28.9%

Science and Industry 31.7%

Shedd Aquarium 21.8%

Art Institute 9.2%

Other 8.4%

"The Shedd Aquarium, because my sign is Pisces, and some people think I am a fish out of water." --Tatiana, 10

FAVORITE SKYSCRAPER

Sears Tower 71.7%

John Hancock Center 20%

Other 8.3%

"The John Hancock, because you can watch the water in the toilet sway from side to side." --Noah, 11

FAVORITE SPORTS TEAM

Bears 35.2%

Cubs 31.5%

White Sox 18.8%

Bulls 7.3%

Fire 4.8%

Blackhawks .6%

Other 1.8%

"I have gone to see a Bears game. I thought it was awesome. I wish I could rewind." --Sonia, 10

*Results based on responses from more than 150 kids in the Chicago area. cborrelli@tribune.com

IN THE WEB EDITION: Take a video tour of Chicago's sites with this group of kids at chicagotribune.com/kids
Photos for the Tribune by Anthony Robert La Penna Graphic (color): Illustration by Bryan Hernandez Memo: KIDS-ONLY ZONE Edition: Chicago Final Section: At Play Page: 1

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