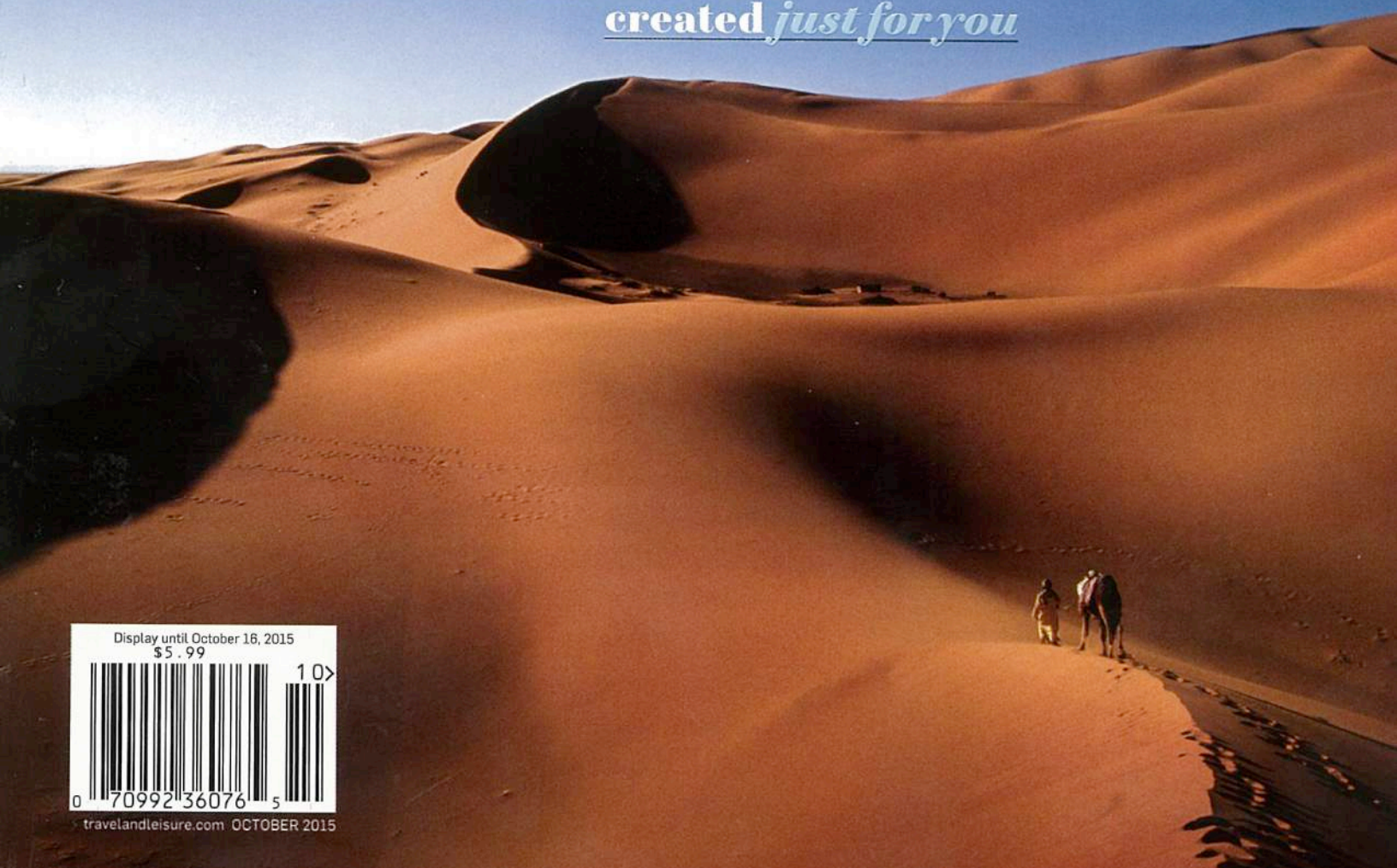


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Second City Showdown

A spate of head-turning hotels are putting Chicago in the spotlight. BY NIKKI EKSTEIN

A drawing room, with
woodwork dating to 1893,
at the Chicago Athletic
Association Hotel.

NEWS + TRENDS + DISCOVERIES



THERE'S A NEW CROSSTOWN CLASSIC playing out in the Windy City—but this one's among a crew of visionary hoteliers instead of between the White Sox and the Cubs. No fewer than nine stylish hotels are opening this year, almost all of them within a one-mile radius of each other downtown. Why the sudden surge? Affordable buildings with great bones are luring developers, and more and more flights to the city are drawing travelers. We checked in to a few of these newcomers to compare notes on everything from location and amenities to art and artisanal coffee.

**THE NEW GRANDE DAME
CHICAGO ATHLETIC
ASSOCIATION HOTEL**

Across from Millennium Park, in a 1893 building that served as one of America's first homes for organized sports, the CAA is the city's most talked-about opening. The painstakingly restored, Roman & Williams-designed hotel is filled with nods to its past: the ornate millwork in the lobby is original, and fencing-court floors are used as wall paneling in the elevator. There's a game room for bocce and foosball, the steak house now has a beloved local chef, Peter Coenen, and the old speakeasy serves Stumptown coffee. As for the 241 rooms, they're masculine with a modern edge (one has a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, repainted so he's wearing a flat-brimmed baseball cap). chicagoathlethotel.com; doubles from \$269.

**CLEVER CROWD-PLEASER
VIRGIN HOTELS**

Chicagoans take their coffee seriously—this is the origin of Intelligentsia and Sparrow Coffee Roasters—and so do the city's hoteliers. At this hotel, you'll find a DIY pour-over kit tucked into a cabinet beside the mini-bar, complete with a kettle, multiple filters, a glass cone dripper, and grounds from Bow Truss Coffee. It's one of many thoughtful details—like the reasonably priced room service and the inventive spa, with five moody, podlike rooms where you can get the trademark jet-lag-curing massage—that make this opening shine. virginhotels.com; doubles from \$329.

**AN ICON REBORN
THE PENINSULA**

The Chicago classic on the Magnificent Mile has unveiled a thorough makeover inspired



FROM TOP: Patterned travertine in the Loews lobby; coffee in bed at the Virgin hotel; the cozy first floor of the Freehand.



by the company's recent Paris opening. Like its palatial French sibling, the rooms bear every conceivable technological upgrade (the digital displays on the light switches can be translated into 11 languages with the push of a button). And the hotel's perks are in a class by themselves: take a free cooking lesson with Curtis Duffy at the Michelin three-starred Grace. peninsula.com; doubles from \$630.

**THE SURPRISING STUNNER
LOEWS CHICAGO HOTEL**

Across the street from the NBC Tower is this tall, glass-enclosed new building with 400 rooms, all spacious and monochromatic, many with views of Navy Pier. The real design triumph is in the lobby, where an installation made up of half-charred slats of wood memorializes the Great Chicago Fire of 1871; there's also a dramatic travertine fireplace. Next door is an excellent Jose Garces restaurant that channels Argentinean estancias with canvas tented ceilings and agricultural accoutrements. loewshotels.com; doubles from \$319.

**CHEAP AND CHIC
THE FREEHAND**

Almost half the rooms are shared quarters in this hostel-hotel hybrid, also designed by Roman & Williams. Like its Miami predecessor, the focus is on what goes on downstairs:

there's an outpost of the tiki-inspired Broken Shaker; a coffee bar churns out excellent Nicaraguan brews; and a kitchen serves comfort food like toast topped with berries, balsamic, and ricotta. thefreehand.com; doubles from \$259.



COMING SOON

The Chicago hotel boom is far from over. Before the end of 2016, the stylish Mexico-based Grupo Habita will open its second U.S. property in hip Wicker Park, and a Nobu Hotel will launch just steps from the West Loop's restaurant row.

