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TRAVEL

A Storied Chicago Hotel With a Modern Spirit of Play

Check In

By ELAINE GLUSAC AUG. 19, 2016



Founders Suite, Thomas Hart Shelby

Rates

Doubles start at \$289.

Basics

Built by its elite members to convince visitors to the 1893 [Chicago World's Fair](#) that this wasn't a hick town, the elegant Chicago Athletic Association languished in recent decades, notable for its Venetian Gothic facade on a landmarked stretch of Michigan Avenue. But in 2013, Commune Hotels & Resorts and the developers AJ Capital Partners began its resurrection, restoring the terrazzo floors, stained glass windows and carved stone fireplaces. In May 2015, the former men's club reopened as a 241-room hotel, so thronged with sightseers since then that the Chicago Architectural Foundation now offers tours there. Retro appointments like a library wall of thrift-shop-caliber art are from the interior design firm Roman and Williams.

The Room

Reminding guests of the establishment's original purpose as lodgings for members who were meant to spend their time in the grand public spaces, standard rooms are compact and interior facing. I had to whisk heavy drapes shut to avoid looking into a medical office just beyond the fire escape. Compensating for the lack of view, interiors channel another era, from a woven luggage rack above the desk and a Bluetooth speaker modeled on old radios to a Faribault Woolen Mill blanket draped across the bed and a headboard inspired by 19th-century brass beds. Minibars come generously stocked with local brands like Vosges chocolate and CH Vodka and include recipes for cocktails like the Moscow Mule.



Alan Shortall

The Bathroom

Open showers partly walled by glass, generous marble sinks and white tile with black accents make the most of the small space. Bathrobes in cozy sweatshirt material resemble boxers' warm-up robes and the 19th-century apothecary C.O. Bigelow supplies the soap and shampoo.

Dining

Guests will find little incentive to explore Chicago restaurants beyond the hotel, home to five options for food and drink. The conservatory-like Cindy's on the roof serves shellfish platters, cocktails and some of the best lakefront views. On the second floor, in a period-channeling room with tall privacy-ensuring booths, the Cherry Circle Room uses original club menus as inspiration for updated versions of steak tartare and roast lamb. Beyond it, the Game Room, with bocce and tabletop shuffleboard, serves playful fare like duck sausage corn dogs. The small Milk Room offers cocktails made from vintage spirits by night, coffee by day. On the ground floor, Shake Shack dishes burgers amid the grandeur.

Amenities

Besides the Game Room, the well-stocked gym and loaner Heritage Bicycles support the sporty theme. The heart of the hotel, the wood-paneled second-floor lobby called the Drawing Room, doubles as both a work space with a library table and book-filled shelves and a social setting with conversation areas around the enormous fireplaces.

Bottom Line

Gorgeously restored and imbued with a modern spirit of play, the Chicago Athletic Association captures many of the city's most compelling attractions — architecture, history and food — under one handsome roof.

Chicago Athletic Association, 12 South Michigan Avenue; 844-312-2221;
chicagoathletichotel.com

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