



THE HOTEL

CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION.

Words **Simon Gage**

Where is it?

At the frozen heart (or sweaty heart if it's summer) of downtown Chicago, right there on Millennium Park, the open space with the famous reflective bean sculpture by Anish Kapoor and the Frank Gehry-designed auditorium. The famous skyscrapers and river from My Best Friend's Wedding are two minutes that way and one of the classic over-your-head railways runs round the corner. So, you know, central.

Why so lovely?

It's the sheer masculinity of the place, which was once a strictly men-only club for sportsmen (can you feel a stirring just thinking about that?), and which retains not only its lack of frippery but an eccentricity dating back to the days when this was a place for men to come and hide out. The restaurant has no windows so it can't be overlooked and the coffee bar - The Milk Room - is an old speakeasy, where they used to serve up milk with a dash of something illegal. The old-school telephone booths are soundproofed so wives couldn't hear the party that was going on in the background when their husbands told them they were still at work. Then there's a ballroom with the huge chandeliers, a running track way up there, a tiled-over swimming pool, a gym with the double-height ceiling and everything is either marble or dark wood. There's not a pattern in the whole building.

First impressions?

Big and brown and quite dark with nothing really that speaks of today. The furniture is clunky and heavy, the lighting low, the fireplaces huge and there's even a massive windowless games room with its own bowling alley where you can have a game and a pint without anyone being any the wiser.

And the accommodations?

Carrying on the sportsman theme, the rooms are beefy with bits of old

gym equipment just, you now, there: a bench at the bottom of the bed made out of an old vaulting horse, pull-up rails where you can hang some clothes, you get the picture.

And the food?

We mentioned the lack of windows in the Cherry Circle Room and they keep the place so dark they literally give you a torch to read the menu with. The bar itself is new - though you'd never guess - but those domes in the ceiling are original and it's an all-booth situation with even the bar stools comfy enough for a long session. The food? Fine dining for men's men: oysters, beef, onion soup, simple greens. Up on the roof at Cindy's, named for a famous Chicago socialite, the views across Millennium Park are delicious and the food prettier: scallop and shrimp ceviche, chicken confit...

What is there to do?

The whole of Chicago is a top-of-the-heap adventure: high art, a legendary lakefront, some of the finest architecture in the whole of America from muscular modernism to contemporary madness, rivers to cruise, beaches to cruise...

And the gay bit?

Boystown along North Halsted Street is regularly voted one of the best gay areas in all of the Americas (we've tasted its wares and we're certainly not arguing) with everything from dance clubs through vegan diners to strip bars while other areas, like Andersonville, offer daytime brunching/lunching/shopping/drinking opportunities. What's not to die for?

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