

**HOT SPOTS**

Kit Bernardi

# Virgin Hotels Chicago

**Where and what is it?** British entrepreneur Richard Branson, known for his playful, innovative business style, professed his love for America's heartland while opening the first ever Virgin Hotels property, in Chicago, last year. The art-deco, 26-storey hotel is in the 1928 landmark Old Dearborn Bank Building and inside The Loop, named after the elevated train tracks lassoing the heart of Chicago's pulsing financial district. The 250-room boutique hotel is within walking distance of the Chicago River, Millennium Park, Lake Michigan, a number of museums and the State Street and Michigan Avenue shopping districts.

**What's the accommodation like?** Guests are greeted at their rooms by red doors warmed by subdued hallway lighting, giving the impression of a sophisticated residential condo building (porcelain dog statues indicate pet-friendly rooms). The "chambers" (below far right), as they are called, exude an urban vibe with contemporary furnishings and earth-toned textiles punctuated by arctic white and lipstick red accents, including a London Underground sign-themed rug and mini Smeg fridge. The patented Lounge bed-playpen features an ergonomic headboard and corner seat. Sound-proof, natural wood sliding doors open on to a "dressing" area of ample wardrobes and a spacious bathroom sporting a make-up vanity and rain shower.

**So, high touch service and hi tech make the stay highly memorable?** "Yes", as the sole button on the chamber phone says, conveying the staff's commitment to please. Speedy in-

room Wi-fi (100 Mbps) is free, as are rides in the cherry red Tesla courtesy car (within a 3km radius of the hotel). Lucy, a free mobile app, helps guests customise their stay by checking them in remotely; registering food preferences; adjusting their chamber's thermostat; requesting amenities; streaming music and movies; and even choosing mini bar contents (M&Ms just US\$1). Tucked among the treats is the Lover's Intimacy Kit (US\$20 for vibrator, lubricant and condoms). For more high-touch service, head to The Spa (below) or meet friends at the unisex manicure bar and detoxification Hammam steam room (US\$15 for day passes).

**Will we get a good feed, here?** Absolutely, and not just any old feed! Chef Rebecca LaMalfa, formerly of Chicago's Trenchermen restaurant and a *Top Chef* contestant, has just joined the hotel's culinary team, to revamp restaurant and room-service menus. Here to stay is Miss Ricky's (Branson's mum calls him Ricky), dishing classic American diner food with fanfare. A British red telephone booth, neon red lips and Branson's publicity stunt clothesline collage of circumcised neckties adorn the restaurant's entrance. LaMalfa recently introduced diner-style specials such as Meatloaf Monday, Taco Tuesday and Fish-fry Friday. Two Zero Three serves locally roasted Bow Truss Coffee and juice bar concoctions by day; global wines and locally sourced cheese-charcuterie boards by night.

**And the hard stuff?** Ascend the original, elegant marble



curved staircase to the second floor and the former bank lobby, which is now The Commons Club, a swank, mid-century-modern living room crowned by an ornate coffered plaster ceiling. Coiffed, couture-attired mixologists tend to patrons sitting at the chrome, oval-shape bar (below, far left), sipping crafted cocktails (free for hotel guests between 7pm and 8pm daily). Private parties gravitate to the velvet-curtained Shag Room's giant leather, circular couch. Nationally known music acts jam on the intimate stage at the hotel's compact Upstairs lounge (lately, Father John Misty and Vic Mensa), where free entertainment also includes movie nights, comedy hours and burlesque shows (public welcome). Rooftop Cerise (French for "cherry") and its seasonal, outdoor terrace (above) offer views of Chicago's skyscraper-studded skyline, small plate fare and vibrating DJ party music. Fireside cushy couches, whimsical curios (think gigantic jewelled insects and red balloon animals) and bar stools from bygone eras encased in two shadow-box bars make small talk easy among new friends. You'll probably want a coffee rather than a cocktail in The Funny Library, a playful workspace where a laptop can be plugged in amid Chicago-centric books, vintage toys and bowls of kiddy candy pacifiers and red wax lips.

**What's the bottom line?** Rates range from US\$225 to US\$275 a night for standard chambers, based on the season; suites go for US\$300. Canine guests of all sizes stay for free; bed provided. Visit [www.virginhotels.com](http://www.virginhotels.com) for details.



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