

DogTown USA® 2005

The Windy City tops the list of best places to be a dog in 2005.

Kyra Kirkwood

Open space. Good healthcare. Easy access to top medical professionals. Activities galore. These are all important aspects when choosing a place to live — even if you're a dog.

DOG FANCY surveyed reader-nominated locales across the nation to determine the dog-friendliest city in America — Dogtown USA. From distance to the nearest veterinary college to spay and neuter rates, dog-park amenities to animal-friendly cafes, various aspects of canine health and well-being were researched, ranked, and rated.

Don't fret if your town isn't listed. In many cases, you have the power to help make your city a better place for your canine companion. Because, as Dorothy reminded Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*, there's no place like home.

Our No. 1 pick? Chicago, home of the Bears, the White Sox, Sears Tower, Oprah, and more dog-friendly activities and resources than you can shake a stick at. As political commentator H.L. Mencken once said, Chicago "is alive from snout to tail." It may be a big city — population 2.88 million — but the down-to-earth Midwestern atmosphere lives on in this metropolis.

"Chicago, in some ways, is like a small town," says Steve Dale, host of WGN radio show *Pet Central* and author of *Doggone Chicago: Sniffing Out the Best Places to Take Your Best Friend* (McGraw-Hill, 2001, \$14.95). "And we're nice people. And we all know that nice people have nice dogs."

This municipality boasts of numerous dog-friendly cafes, bars, and restaurants, such as Brasserie Jo, that cater to patrons and their four-legged pals. A canine boat cruise, through Mercury Skyline Cruiseline, is another popular activity for Chicagoans. Pups can even partake in hot dogs and White Sox baseball one afternoon a year at U.S. Cellular Field's annual Dog Day.

Numerous dog parks, such as Wiggly Field, give the 600,000 dogs living in Chicago a chance to run free. Residents' best friends are also welcome on leash in the city's sprawling public parks, such as Grant Park, home to the famous Buckingham Fountain. This fall, to help keep diseases at bay, canines visiting dog parks will be required to wear identification that certifies they have been seen by a veterinarian and received their vaccinations.

Speaking of healthcare, the city estimates that up to 90 percent of owners participate in vaccination programs, and the majority of dogs are spayed or neutered. The city has proactively addressed overpopulation problems. Chicago reaches out to its residents with education, as well as a low-cost spay-neuter clinic — with pit bull-type dogs done for free.

"People have embraced the concept of having a shelter animal as saving a life," says Gene Mueller, DVM, president of the Anti-Cruelty Society, also known as the Illinois SPCA. He adds that only two percent of pets at shelters are turned in by their owners. "We're not interested in merely processing animals and putting them out on the street."

Scores of behaviorists and dog trainers populate the city, giving owners vast resources, such as the Anti-Cruelty Society's free behavior hotline. The vet-to-dog ratio is outstanding: 1 vet to every 368 dogs. The 100-plus specialists in Chicago handle everything from cardiology to radiology. Veterinary students even provide medical assistance at shelters and free or low-cost clinics. For those who need more advanced care, the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine is about two hours away, providing state-of-the-art medical treatment and equipment.

But what sets Chicago apart isn't just its amenities, but rather residents' attitudes.

"It's the diversity of people and their interest in having loving relationships with other living beings — that being dogs," Mueller says. "Being able to have an open, engaged relationship with your furry friend is one of the most amazing things. It's an expansion of the nuclear family."

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