

FT

FT WEEKEND SUPPLEMENT - LIFE & ARTS

Obama's kind of town; The deli where he buys cherry pie, the law firm where he met Michelle, the barber who cuts his hair . . . Hal Weitzman tours the president-elect's Chicago

By **Hal Weitzman**

1403 words

10 January 2009

Financial Times

FTFTA

London Ed1

08

English

(c) 2009 The Financial Times Limited. All rights reserved

"If you want to eat like a president, order the corned beef," advises Marsha Goldstein as 20 of us tramp off the tour bus and join an early lunchtime queue that is already out of the door of Manny's, near the corner of Roosevelt and Jefferson in central Chicago.

We are about a mile west of Hutchinson Field, where Barack Obama held his celebratory rally after winning the US presidential election. Whereas that November night was unseasonably balmy, this is a more conventional Illinois December day, with icy winds forcing us to shuffle around in oversized coats, scarves and hats.

The president-elect is the reason we are here. Manny's, a traditional Jewish-style deli long beloved by Chicagoans, has drawn international attention in recent weeks as one of Obama's favoured lunch spots. He popped in a few weeks after the election. Desperate for news, hordes of journalists swarmed outside. The media solemnly reported that the president-elect entered the lunch institution at 12.24pm, chatted with customers and staff, purchased two portions of cherry pie and three corned beef sandwiches, insisted on paying the \$48.34 bill himself, and exited at 12.45pm.

The level of detail indicates the febrile atmosphere surrounding Obama. As the base for his transition team, America's third largest city had the world's attention as Obama held daily press briefings in the city.

And the international interest has sparked an explosion in "Obama tourism". Marsha Goldstein, one of the city's most redoubtable and well-connected tour operators, has been quick off the mark - and Manny's is the first stop on her new "Obama's Chicago" tour.

Goldstein embodies Midwestern elegance: her hair a lioness mane, her coat a fur-and-velvet extravaganza, her accent unmistakably Chicago. When she tells you to order the corned beef, you probably should. I wait for her to turn away before asking for a whitefish sandwich.

Ken Raskin, Manny's owner, says business is up 50 per cent since Obama's recent visit, though he also reveals with refreshing honesty that "actually, he's only been here about a dozen times but [Obama adviser] David Axelrod's a regular."

The area around Manny's was at one time known for its street markets. "This used to be the place you came to buy back your stolen hubcaps," says Gail Guggenheim, a native Chicagoan who's also on the tour. Now, like other neighbourhoods near the downtown Loop [the city's business district], it is gentrifying: Manny's now offers valet parking.

Goldstein explains that the inclement weather will confine us to the bus for some of the tour. No one seems too bothered. As we drive through the heart of the city, she points out the Kluczynski Federal Building, where the Obama transition team is based, the Chase building, where Obama met his wife, Michelle, when the two were working for Sidley Austin, a local law firm, and Federal Center Plaza, where he gave his first speech opposing the US invasion of Iraq.

We head to the South Shore Cultural Center, an opulent building that was once an exclusive private club before being taken over by the city in the 1970s and is now a community centre. More importantly for our purposes, the Obamas held their wedding reception here in 1992.

As we arrive, workers are frantically painting the kickplates gold and gluing down a new carpet in preparation for the mayor's Christmas party the following day. The interior is impressive, though the overpowering smell of adhesive forces us out.

We drive to Hyde Park, the neighbourhood the Obamas call home. Goldstein points out 5429 South Harper, the block in which Obama rented an apartment as a community organiser in the 1980s. We also see the outside of the apartment in East View Park in which the Obamas lived for 13 years before the proceeds from Obama's two books enabled him to move to a \$1.7m house in Kenwood, an upmarket area within Hyde Park.

Since Obama is in town, security around his home is still extra-tight so the bus drives past without affording us even a glance. Instead, we drive around to get a flavour of the area while Goldstein points out the mansion owned by Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, and the former home of the boxer Muhammad Ali.

We drive to the campus of the University of Chicago - where Obama taught law, his wife worked in the hospital and his daughters went to school - before heading north, via Cellular Field - home of the president-elect's beloved Chicago White Sox baseball team - on to the O store, a retail shrine to Oprah Winfrey, listed in the tour details as "Obama's good friend and inspiration". That seems a flimsy reason for inclusion but questioning the cult of Oprah in her home town is not wise, so I keep my mouth shut and try to avoid smirking at the Oprah-quote memorabilia (tote bag with slogan "What you do today creates every tomorrow" for \$30; "Become more of yourself" mug, \$15).

The final stop on the tour is the boutique of Maria Pinto, whose dresses are a favourite of Michelle Obama. As the only man on the tour, I try to look as masculine as possible as the women ooh at the prices.

While the tour had offered a wide range of Obama experiences, I was left wanting more depth. A few weeks later, I join a "Chicago Greeter" tour of Hyde Park, a free service run by the city. Private tours offer transport, whereas greeter tours use public buses and are essentially walking tours of one neighbourhood.

Our guide is **Marshall Jacobson**, a jovial old-timer full of dates and facts. This tour is much more like a trip uptown with a favourite uncle. Marshall even gives us each a travel pass so we don't have to pay our own bus fares.

Since Obama is by now in Hawaii, we can walk right past his redbrick house, get a good look at his observatory and take a photo before we are moved on by the police.

Lunch is at Valois, a greasy spoon that is the president-elect's favourite breakfast joint, where, unlike Manny's, the clientele is mostly African-American and local. We pop in to a Hyde Park barbershop and have a quick word with Zariff, who's been cutting Obama's hair for 14 years and is now something of a celebrity himself (the Chicago Sun-Times recently ran a profile analysing his technique).

Zariff says Obama came in for a trim just before his December holiday in Hawaii but will not be drawn on whether he will be summoned to Washington to fulfil tonsorial duties. "I'm not allowed to talk about that but I am still his barber," he says enigmatically.

We continue on to the warren-like 57th Street Books, where Obama launched both his volumes and which still counts the president-elect as a member of the co-operative that runs the store.

Several Chicago tour operators offer personalised Obama tours, which may be a good bet when the cold makes walking for long an unpleasant prospect (which can happen at any time between November and April). But on a sunny day the greeter tour offers a more intimate experience, with the chance to get to know a bit more about the area where the next US president has spent much of his life.

The buzzy racial diversity of the Hyde Park neighbourhood is apt for a president with Obama's background. On the other hand, like him, it is also unusual. A survey last month by the Chicago Tribune found Chicago to be the most racially segregated big city in the US.

But if Obama's presidency helps race relations, it will not change the city that he calls home. Goldstein puts it best. "Chicago's not really a melting pot," she says, "more a series of ethnic experiences."

Hal Weitzman is the FT's Chicago and Midwest correspondent