

NewsBank Article Listing

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Montreal is magnifique

This cosmopolitan city north of the border brims with historic neighborhoods, shopping choices, nightspots and some of the best restaurants you'll find anywhere.

By CHRISTINE RICCELLI

SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

On our first day in Montreal, the tour guide dutifully pointed out the major attractions we should visit, from the venerable Notre Dame Basilica to the modern Olympic Stadium.

"And what's your favorite thing to do here?" I wanted to know.

"Why, we love three-hour lunches, we love to talk," she said. "You come to Montreal to enjoy life -for la joie de vivre."

We discovered she was right. The most memorable moments on our trip to this French-flavored city came from strolling idly through historic neighborhoods, browsing the astonishing range of art galleries and savoring sensational cuisine.

Despite its Gallic-inspired affection for beauty and pleasure, Montreal isn't Paris. It's a busy, modern North American metropolis just 45 miles from the U.S. border.

As one Quebecoise told me: "We are not French. We are North Americans who happen to speak French."

Quebecois are even more prickly about being lumped into the same cultural pool as English-speaking Canadians. Quebec's secessionist fever has cooled somewhat, but residents guard their cultural and linguistic heritage as fiercely today as they have since France ceded Canada to

England in 1763. Although nearly everyone is bilingual, French remains Quebec's official language.

Montreal's 2 million people live on a 28-mile-long, 10-mile-wide island bordering the St. Lawrence River and crowned by Mont-Royal, the 750-foot-high hill in the center of the city. Throughout Montreal, compact neighborhoods make the city perfect for exploring on foot.

Begin in Old Montreal, where French settlers founded the city in 1642. Bracketed between downtown and the port, the district's museums, boutique hotels, restaurants, shops and art galleries occupy 18th-and 19th-century buildings along narrow streets.

Notre Dame Basilica, built from 1824 to 1829 in Gothic Revival style, towers over the area. Inside, you'll see stained-glass windows that depict scenes from Montreal's history and a stunning altar made of hand-crafted linden wood.

Take time to linger at Place Jacques-Cartier, Old Montreal's lively central square. Preserved stone buildings from the 1700s, street performers, horse-drawn carriages, sidewalk cafes and flower vendors create an inviting scene. Locals may scoff that the square is touristy, but they seemed to enjoy ambling down the promenade just as much as visitors.

Art lovers can spend an entire trip on St. Paul Street, Old Montreal's winding central artery. More than two dozen art galleries cluster here and on nearby streets, carrying a wide selection of works by acclaimed artists.

What's more, you can get great deals on art; similar works in the United States would cost 30 to 50 percent higher. Montreal's competitive art environment -Quebec is home to 30 percent of Canada's population but 70 percent of its artists -and lower business costs account for the price difference.

Plateau Mont-Royal, northeast of downtown, is ideal for meandering. Away from the major tourist areas, Plateau Mont-Royal is one way to take the pulse of how locals live, from young professionals to working-class families.

On tightly packed residential lanes, the long, narrow apartments commonly found in Montreal occupy Victorian row houses with exterior staircases and flower-decked balconies. Two vibrant commercial arteries, St. Denis Street and St. Laurent Boulevard, run parallel through the district.

St. Laurent, often called "The Main," formerly divided the Francophone and Anglophone communities. As more immigrants settled, that line became blurred. Today, the street bustles with no-frills eateries, ethnic grocery stores, hip nightclubs, shops selling everything from African clothing to used records, and Schwartz's popular barbecue joint.

The heart of Francophone Montreal resides around St. Denis Street. Stop for a latte at one of the outdoor terraces to soak up the city's most European-like neighborhood. You'll also find offbeat boutiques and sleek home-decor stores. Just south, the Latin Quarter dates to 1823. University students and the Bohemian crowd congregate at casual cafes and inexpensive bars frequently housed in restored historic buildings.

To retreat from the city's buzz, head to the Botanical Garden, where 31 gardens and 10 exhibition greenhouses unfold over 185 acres. Don't miss the Chinese Garden, the largest outside Asia, where you can stroll among pavilions, inner courtyards and ponds that recall the grandeur of the Ming dynasty.

The peaceful Japanese garden, with its tea ceremonies and Zen garden, was another favorite spot. Free shuttle service connects the Botanical Garden with the nearby Biodome and Olympic Stadium.

Whatever attractions you visit, reserve time for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It would be easy -and exceedingly enjoyable -to plan an entire trip to Montreal around pleasing your palate.

The city brims with some 5,000 eateries, from five-star formal restaurants to inexpensive pizza joints. Montreal's chefs prepare specialties as varied as people's tastes, and even in moderately priced restaurants, top-notch professional service is the norm.

The arts thrive in Montreal. Home of the extraordinary performance company Cirque du Soleil, the city boasts some 100 English-and French-speaking theater companies, the renowned Montreal Symphony and an opera company. Montreal also is known for its film industry and as a hub of arts and cultural festivals, most notably the International Jazz Festival and the Just for Laughs Festival, both held in July.

Bars and nightclubs, concentrated downtown on Crescent Street and in the Plateau Mont-Royal area, feature everything from live jazz to throbbing techno.

IF YOU GO

FLIGHTS: Getting to Montreal is as easy as traveling to New York or San Francisco. United, American and Northwest airlines offer one-stop flights from Des Moines.

CURRENCY: While the U.S. dollar has lost about 30 percent of its value against the euro in the past three years, it has stayed strong against the Canadian dollar. Currently, one Canadian dollar costs about 80 U.S. cents.

LANGUAGE: French is the first language of 80 percent of Montreal residents, but most are fluent in English. Whatever their feelings about secession, they are gracious and accommodating hosts.

TRANSPORTATION: Taxis are plentiful, but the underground Metro is a quick, economical and easy way to get around. Single tickets cost about U.S. \$2; daily and weekly passes are available.

LODGING: Old Montreal has a great selection of boutique hotels housed in historic buildings. We stayed at Hotel Nelligan, which occupies an exquisitely restored 1850 building. Wood and exposed brick make the public spaces inviting, while goose-down duvets and other amenities provide exceptional comfort. Service was superb.

DINING: Our favorites, all in Old Montreal and all recommended: Chez L'Epicier, creative, contemporary French fusion with a casual chic atmosphere; AIX Cuisine, specializing in fresh, seasonal fare from the Quebec countryside, served in a sophisticated, yet inviting environment; Versus in the Hotel Nelligan, outstanding contemporary French cuisine in a comfortable, club-like atmosphere; Gandhi, fresh Indian fare with subtle flavors. The law requires restaurants to post their menus on their doors. Tipping is typically 15 percent of the check.

SHOPPING: Besides St. Paul Street and St. Denis Street, check out these downtown areas: St. Catherine Street for top department stores; Crescent Street for upscale boutiques; and Underground City, a 20-mile-long labyrinth below street level that contains more than 1,500 shops, 200 restaurants and 40 theaters and entertainment venues.

ATTRACTIONS: In addition to those described in the main story, other highlights include the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; the Biodome, a climate-controlled environment containing re-creations of four separate

American ecosystems; the Olympic Stadium and observation tower; Mont-Royal Park, a sprawling park in the center of the city; and Old Port, the old commercial wharf area that's now a park and promenade along the St. Lawrence River.

MORE INFORMATION: Greater Montreal Convention and Tourism Bureau, (877) 266-5687; www.tourism-montreal.org.

-Christine Riccelli

French spirit lives in Quebec City

Unlike Montreal, Quebec City feels European. Old churches, cobblestone squares and stone houses with steeply pitched roofs give the city a captivating storybook setting and evoke the spirit of a French village.

French settlers founded Quebec City in 1608 below palisades that rise above a grand sweep of the St. Lawrence River. The city remained the capital of New France until the British captured it in 1759. Under British rule, a 20-foot-thick, 2.8-mile-long rampart was built on the cliffs to protect the city against American attack.

Today, Quebec City, located about 168 miles north of Montreal, is the only walled city north of Mexico. The rampart divides the city into Upper Town and Lower Town. A funicular, staircase and steep streets connect Lower Town to the wall-enclosed Upper Town.

Explore both areas is on foot; if you drive the narrow streets, you may miss interesting finds you'll happen upon as a pedestrian.

In Lower Town, begin at Place Royale, the picturesque square that once was the heart of the French colony. Costumed interpreters recapture that era while roving street performers entertain. For a quiet moment, slip into the small but inviting Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, a stone church built in 1688 at one end of the square.

From Place Royale, meander along the pedestrian-only Petit-Champlain, a cobblestone lane packed with eclectic shops. Browse for art and antiques on nearby St. Paul Street.

In Upper Town, Chateau Frontenac, opened in 1893, reigns as the city's

most celebrated landmark. Adorned with elaborate turrets and towers, the 614-room hotel has hosted famous guests ranging from Queen Elizabeth II to Alfred Hitchcock. The nearby cliff-side boardwalk offers a majestic vista of the St. Lawrence River, the Laurentian Mountains and the port.

For more information, contact the Quebec City and Area Tourism and Convention Bureau, (877) 266-5687; www.quebecregion.com.

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