

Discovering Montreal

*Just North of the U.S. Border Lies One of the
World's Most Magical Cities*

by Emilie-Noelle Provost

From the soaring Gothic Revival towers of the Notre-Dame Basilica to the cutting-edge infrastructure built for the 1967 World's Fair and 1976 Summer Olympics, Montreal's Old World charm and uniquely North American eye for innovation and progress combine to create a city that makes visitors from around the world instantly fall in love.

If you asked me what I like best about Montreal, I'd have a hard time giving you a direct answer. Although I can name several things that I love — like the view of the city from the top of Mount Royal (the city's namesake), or Saint-Louis Square, a park with a romantic Victorian fountain at its center — what I like most about the city is difficult to put into words. More than any one place or thing, it's Montreal's sense of effortless sophistication and beauty, and its communal dedication to life's small pleasures that I find seductive and intoxicating. It's what lures me back to the city time and again, often several times a year.

Although largely French-speaking, Montrealers tend to be racially and ethnically diverse and forward-thinking, even as the city's 16th century French roots form the base of their identity and culture. They are friendly and generous, funny and quick-witted, and happy to speak English to well-mannered visitors, if only for the opportunity to practice their conversational skills. Montrealers possess an almost European appreciation for the finer things in life,

which informs their tastes in fashion, culture and cuisine, but their New World perspective keeps them grounded in a place that most Americans would recognize.

As a result, Montreal is an extremely approachable place. Almost anyone, regardless of native language, race or ethnicity, can find a comfortable niche there. This is true of both immigrants and visitors, and can be seen in the city's variety of ethnic neighborhoods and restaurants.

Though Montreal wasn't officially incorporated as a city until 1832, French explorer Jacques Cartier came upon the island in the St. Lawrence River where the city now stands in 1535, while searching for a route to Asia. It wasn't until 1611, though, that Samuel de Champlain, another French explorer, established a fur trading post called Place Royale on the island, which, in 1642, became Fort Ville-Marie, the city's predecessor.

The original part of Montreal, known as the Old City, is located on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. Its cobblestone streets and historic buildings possess a distinctly Old World feel. Some of the

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city's best and most popular attractions are located there, as well, including the Notre-Dame Basilica, Old Port, Place Jacques-Cartier, and the recently opened La Grande Roue de Montréal, a 60-meter high observation wheel in the style of the London Eye that overlooks the St. Lawrence and is open year-round.

One of my favorite places in the Old Montreal, one that tourists often skip, is the Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel. This small church, founded late in the 17th century by St. Marguerite Bourgeoys, a nun and teacher who was one of the first women in “New France,” houses a museum that details Montreal’s history. The modest admission price includes access to the church’s tower. If you



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can make it up the 60-plus stairs, you'll be treated to one of the best views in the city.

Old Montreal is also home to Restaurant Papillon, one my favorite places to eat, not just in Montreal but anywhere. Located on Rue Saint-Paul East, Papillon is family-owned and specializes in French and Italian classics. Everything served there is made on-site from scratch, the house wines are affordable and good, and any time we've visited at least half the diners have been locals. I'd suggest ordering one of their specials, especially the coq au vin.

Montreal's downtown is also full of things to do and see. If you want to shop, this is the place. The retail district, centered on Rue Sainte-Catherine, has just about any type of store you could

ask for on street level and below ground in what is known as the “Underground City.” These subterranean malls are connected to subway stations to allow shoppers to avoid the winter cold and are fun to explore.

Downtown is also home to several museums, including the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Grab a smoked meat sandwich at Reuben's Deli & Steakhouse on Rue Sainte-Catherine for lunch. It's a Montreal institution, usually busy, but the sandwiches are worth the wait in line.

The Plateau is another great neighborhood to check out. This funky district, anchored by Boulevard Saint-Laurent and Rue Saint-Denis, is full of shops and galleries, leafy parks and inexpensive but delicious restaurants, including many of the city's best Portuguese eateries. Au Pied du Couchon, a Quebec-themed restaurant owned by celebrity chef Martin Picard, and Moishes Steakhouse, famous for its "Montreal" steak, bagels and smoked meat sandwiches, are both on Boulevard Saint-Laurent.

I'd also recommend visiting the Montreal Botanical Garden. Located across from Olympic Park on Rue Sherbrooke, this 185-acre reserve has 10 greenhouses and is home to more than 20,000 plants and trees from around the world. The cultural gardens there are particularly lovely, especially the Chinese and Japanese exhibits.

When choosing a hotel, consider the attractions you'd like to have within walking distance. If you'll be driving, a hotel with on-site parking is important. Like most big cities, parking in Montreal is limited and expensive. Your best bet is to park at your hotel and spend your stay traveling on foot or by subway, taxi or ride-sharing service.

One of my favorite places to stay is the Delta Hotels by Marriott Montreal. Located downtown on Avenue du President Kennedy, this moderately upscale property is in an ideal location, within walking distance of museums, Rue Sainte-Catherine, McGill University and the subway. The staff is friendly, and if you don't feel like going out, the food in the on-site restaurant is very good. Rooms facing Rue Sherbrooke have nice views of Mount Royal, and most have balconies.

On the last night of a recent stay at the Delta, my husband, Rob, and I, both of us tired from walking most of the day, spent the evening sitting at the hotel bar and chatting with the bartender and restaurant manager. As we struggled back and forth over some English and French words, we learned about their families and friends, where they like to go when they have time off, and what it's like to live and work in Montreal. By the end of the night, I felt like we'd made new friends.

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Tourisme Montreal | MTL.org/en

Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel | MarqueriteBourgeoys.org/en

Restaurant Papillon | RestaurantPapillon.business.site

Montreal Botanical Garden | EspacePourLaVie.ca/en

Delta Hotels by Marriott Montreal | Marriott.com