

Charming Montreal

**THE DYNAMIC CITY WITH EUROPEAN FLAIR
BECKONS VISITORS FOR FESTIVALS, HISTORY,
SPORTS AND MORE**

By Greg Rienzi

Montreal is equal parts brash and sophisticated—and loves a party. The Canadian city on the St. Lawrence River is after all the city of festivals.

The world's second-largest French-speaking city after Paris, Montreal today has more than 3.4 million residents who live in its diverse collection of neighborhoods. In recent years, the city has witnessed a billion-dollar building boom that has filled up vacant lots and redrawn a sizable chunk of the city's skyline. The future for Montreal, in fact, has never looked brighter.



A tourist appreciates Montreal's European façades, top left. With the cobblestone streets lit up, Old Montreal welcomes tourists, top right. Named after the French navigator Jacques Cartier, the plaza housing Place Jacques-Cartier and City Hall is now a popular meeting spot filled with musicians, vendors and patrons, bottom left.

When touring the city, why not start at the top? Plateau Mont-Royal, also known as the Plateau, offers some of the city's best views and architecture, characterized by old-style stone masonry buildings topped with wrought-iron spires. The once working-class neighborhood now is home to students, artists and young families who take advantage of its many designer boutique shops, funky thrift stores, thriving arts scene and wealth of cafés, pubs and restaurants.

The hip neighborhood features some of Montreal's best streets for strolling. Boulevard St-Laurent, often referred to as "The Main," overflows with chic bistros and clubs where locals and visitors come to eat and play. Rue Prince-Arthur, named after Queen Victoria's third son and former governor-general of Canada, is a very pedestrian-friendly street where on a nice day you're likely to find throngs of people sipping wine or beer on restaurant terraces. Perhaps the city's trendiest area, Rue St-Denis has shops of all descriptions and some of the best restaurants in town.

After a day of shopping, walk over to Mount Royal Park, the city's largest green space and a popular destination for joggers and those who just want to lie on a blanket and relax. The 500-acre park—designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, who also designed New York's Central Park—offers an unmatched view of the city, spectacular both by day and night.

The city, originally named Ville-Marie, dates back to 1642, then a tiny French settlement on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, a tip of land now part of Old Montreal. In the 18th century, the town grew up and was fortified with a massive stone wall. The city first came under French control, then fell into British hands.

Montreal was incorporated as a Canadian city in 1832. The industrial revolution and the opening of the Lachine Canal spurred growth of the city's downtown area. Skyscrapers began to take root in the 1930s and modern-day Montreal was born.

The past, however, is alive and well in Old Montreal. Visitors can step back in time and walk along narrow cobblestone streets, flanked by 18th- and 19th-century grey-

MONTREAL FACTS



Culture and Language: Montreal has a strong European flavor and the first language of most residents is French. While English will take you anywhere you want to go, a little “bonjour” and “merci” goes a long way with a shop owner or hotel manager. The proudly open-minded city is also a mosaic of ethnic cultures and lifestyles, offering seemingly something for everyone’s tastes and attitude.

Getting there: Fly into Montreal-Trudeau Airport, which serves all the big airlines and offers many direct flights from major cities around the world. The downtown area is roughly a 20-minute (and \$35) cab ride from the airport.

Getting Around: There’s no need for a rental car. Montreal is a great walking city and nothing is spread too far apart. You can walk from Old Montreal to downtown, for example, in roughly 20 minutes. Montreal also has a vast network of cycle paths, with some 400 miles spanning the city. Bike rentals run about \$25 to \$30 a day.

The city’s public transportation system is excellent. Its clean and efficient subway system connects all the popular destinations. As a bonus, every Metro station in Montreal is aesthetically distinct and decorated with pieces of public art, including sculptures, frescoes and stained glass.

Weather: The temperatures roughly vary from 16 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit (-9 to 22 degrees Celsius), depending on the season. However, summer (June-August) highs can reach 80 degrees F (26C) and winter (December-February) can bring plenty of snow. It can get humid and rainy. Not Seattle rainy, but pack an umbrella.



When to go: The high season in Montreal runs from May to September. One can argue it’s worth the crowds and reservation hassles (hotels fill up quickly despite higher rates during this period) to take advantage of the warmer weather and full slate of festivals. Be warned, it can get very humid come summer.

What to do: Nature lovers should visit the Montreal Biodome, which houses fauna and flora from different ecosystems in the Americas. Once inside, you can explore a tropical forest or step onto polar shores. If tiny, creepy crawly creatures are your fancy, flutter over to the Montreal Insectarium and see all the wonders of the insect world. Complete the nature hat trick with a tour of the Botanical Garden, best visited in the summer.

The city is home to 30 museums. Two highlights are the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the oldest art museum in Canada, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, known for its vast, unique collections.

You should, of course, tour Old Montreal, and what better way to see the historic portion of town than by horse-drawn carriage down its cobblestone streets.

During hockey season, check out the Montreal Canadiens, one of the NHL’s original franchises and its most decorated. The Canadiens play their home games at the Bell Centre, the busiest arena in the country.

In the winter, drive 90 minutes to ski Mont Tremblant. The Mont Tremblant Resort offers some of the best skiing in Canada and is also a hot spot for shopping and night life.

For another adrenaline rush, raft the Lachine Rapids.

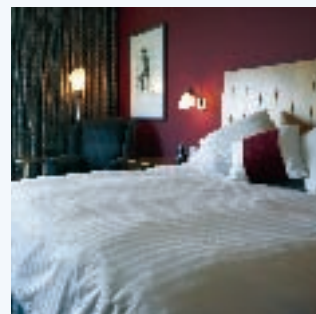


Where to eat: The city boasts many cuisines but is highly regarded for its French restaurants. L’Entrecôte Saint-Jean on Peel Street is an ideal place for a romantic dinner or business lunch. For even more adventurous and artistic French cuisine, Toque has been the place since 2004. Its renowned chef changes the menu daily, but the exceptional lamb entree has been a mainstay, ditto its lengthy wine list.

Many locals swear by Au Pied de Cochon in the Mont-Royal neighborhood. The menu features an array of game meats, pork, seafood and foie gras prepared every which way.

The trendiest restaurant street is the lower strip of Boulevard St. Laurent. If you’re in the neighborhood, you are obliged to stop by Schwartz’s Hebrew deli and sample some of the city’s famous smoked meat. There’s bound to be a line, but it goes quick.

With all apologies to New York, Montreal might also be the bagel capital of the world. The locals boil them in water and honey and then cook these delicacies in a wood-burning brick oven to leave them soft inside and crispy outside. Whether you want yours with cream cheese or smoked salmon, the place to go is St-Viateur Bagel & Cafe.



Where to stay: The past five years have witnessed a boutique hotel explosion in the city. The Opus Hotel blends modern design and Montreal’s chic style. The Opus, ideally located in the downtown area on the corner of Sherbrooke and St-Laurent, made both *Fortune* and *Wallpaper* magazine’s list of best business hotels in 2008. Another new boutique hotel that consistently gets top marks is the Hotel Gault, in the heart of Old Montreal. The innovative Gault’s 30 loft-style rooms feature a minimalist style with touches of old Europe. For a mammoth dose of gentlemen’s posh and pampering, the place is Hotel Le St-James. Just ask the Rolling Stones, who stay there when in town.

For a very unique bed and breakfast experience, try the Le Petit Prince, in downtown Montreal. Le Petit Prince, owned by an Italian with a wry sense of humor, sits on a quiet secluded street in the heart of the city and offers a variety of playfully, yet elegantly, designed rooms. Take your pick from ones that offer a fireplace, hot tub or private balcony. Some very affordable options in town are Auberge de la Fontaine, near Lafontaine Park, and Delta Montreal in the downtown area.



stone buildings and other architectural delights unique to North America. Stop for a coffee at any café and you'll feel transported to Europe.

In the summer, the historic city's streets fill with performers, artists and musicians. Many gather at the Place d'Armes, the popular square where you'll find the city's most famous landmark, the twin-towered Notre-Dame Basilica. Designed in 1824 by James O'Donnell, an Irish-American Protestant architect from New York, the Gothic Revival structure is renowned for the dazzling opulence of its interior.

Walk down to the banks of the St. Lawrence to the Old Port, an area brimming with activity. The Old Port, which draws more than 5 million people each year, is now a thriving arts and entertainment venue with a huge open-air skating

Since the city's humble beginnings as a trading post in 1642, the Old Port of Montreal has been transformed into a dynamic environment for tourists and locals alike, top left. The cobblestone streets of Montreal have been restored to give the tourists a taste of its European flair, bottom right. The Maisonneuve Monument and the Notre-Dame Basilica are juxtaposed showcasing the church's Gothic architecture in the heart of Montreal, bottom left.



rink, IMAX cinema and a Science and Technology Center. The port also offers a wide range of river excursions, such as trips to the islands of Parc Jean-Drapeau, home to the La Ronde amusement park and Casino de Montreal, which now features more than 3,200 slot machines and numerous gaming tables. Even if you don't gamble, the casino is worth the trip for its cabaret theater, martini bars and views of the city across the river.

Above all, Montreal is a shopper's and night life lover's paradise. For those looking for either, head to Crescent Street, the heart of downtown Montreal. This strip runs from Sherbrooke to Rene-Levesque and is lined with trendy restaurants, specialty shops, designer boutiques, cafés and the city's best nightclubs. When the sun sets, this part of town comes alive like no other.

Rue Sainte-Catherine is the primary artery of downtown Montreal and runs north to south. From June to September the street is often closed to vehicles, allowing visitors and Montrealers alike to stroll along the thoroughfare to shop and eat.

Below downtown's busy streets is the famous Underground Pedestrian Network or underground city, a shopper's dream-land and 19-mile-long network of passageways that connect more than 1,700 boutiques and businesses. On a cold day, the underground city offers the perfect escape.

The summer marks the high point in the city's annual festival schedule and if you're in town be sure to check out the Grand Prix of Canada, a popular stop on the Formula One circuit, and the International Jazz Festival, a 10-day event that draws over a million spectators.





An evening shot of the Montreal skyline and Lachine Canal captures the true essence of this multicultural city.

Bill Knapp, eastern Canada territory manager for Dixon Bayco Limited, has lived in and around Montreal for nearly 30 years. He loves the city's historic flavor, in particular Old Montreal and its Little Italy, but says his favorite element remains the summer festival season.

"We have it all: jazz, comedy, the Grand Prix. It's just one festival after another and there is always something going on downtown," Knapp says.

He compares the city's spirit to that of Madrid's; unique, laid back and vibrant. "You've probably heard of our 'joie de vivre' [joy of living]. Well, it's true. The people here are

relaxed and like to let their hair down," he says.

The atmosphere gets more subdued in the winter, he adds—except when it comes to hockey. "This town is ice hockey crazy," he says. "No question."

Pam Macdonald, who visited Montreal regularly the past 40 years and moved there permanently less than two years ago, says that Montreal is a city like no other.

"Montreal has a flavor that is unique and an energy that you feel wherever you go," said Macdonald, a hotel manager in the city's downtown area. "It's a city with a pulse that never stops beating." ■

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