

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

WITH A MYRIAD OF DIVERSIONS BOTH BELOW GROUND AND ABOVE, MONTREAL IS ESSENTIALLY TWO DESTINATIONS IN ONE.

BY BRENNA FISHER







Clockwise from top: view of the marina at the Old Port; "Lipstick Forest" art at the Montreal Convention Centre; an illuminated underground walkway; "Historie de la Musique a Montreal" mural.

To understand the respect that Montrealers have for their past, visitors need only look west to Mount Royal, a mountaintop park visible from anywhere in the city. By law, no building can be taller than the 760-foot peak, where the city was founded in 1642—a lasting tribute to the place where it all started.

That sense of pride is everywhere in Montreal, resounding in its architecture, art, cuisine and lifestyle. It's amazing that this French heritage has been preserved so well considering that the city is surrounded by the English-speaking world. But, perhaps that geography explains why Montreal residents guard their culture so fiercely.

Although bitter debates erupted in the late 1970s over Bill 101, which limited the use of English, later rulings have helped Quebec protect the French language without alienating its Anglophone residents. Today, public signs

LIKE THEIR DISTANT FRENCH BRETHREN IN EUROPE, MONTREALERS KNOW HOW TO DINE—AND DINE WELL. BUT WHAT SETS THE CUISINE IN MONTREAL APART IS ITS SLIGHTLY MORE COUNTRY ROOTS.

have both English and French words, but the French letters are more prominent.

In truth, that combination is the real identity of Montreal. The mixture of people and histories makes this the most exciting cultural hub in Canada. And whether or not travelers speak French, navigating the city is easy because roughly 80 percent of the population speaks both French and English. Essentially, Montreal is the Paris of North America, but without the Eiffel Tower, the jetlag, and the attitude. Plus, the city is so well planned—with underground pathways and transportation—that visitors can minimize their time in the cold and still watch as snow flurries make this city of lights sparkle.

the underground city

With the most extensive subterranean city in the world, Montreal is easy to enjoy during the winter months. The underground is a 20-mile system of walkways, parking garages, malls, metro tunnels and atriums, with nearly 180 entry points from the surface. So anyone can take in the best of downtown Montreal without ever putting on a coat.

Although the word "underground" may inspire thoughts of a dark, creepy space, Montreal's underground city is anything but. Whether inside a sprawling mall, a train station or just a connecting walkway, travelers will notice that the underground is not only brightly lit but filled with intriguing art.

Every metro station and most downtown buildings have some kind of sculpture or mural. The Percent for Art program requires that builders reserve 1 percent of any construction project for art. The "Histoire de la Musique a Montreal," an illuminated colorful glass mural in the Place des Arts station, depicts the founders of Montreal's modern music scene. There also are more whimsical works, like the "Lipstick Forest" at the Montreal Convention Centre, where pedestrians navigate through dozens of hot-pink tree trunk sculptures.

Beyond the metro stations, uniquely designed passages lead the way to other destinations. Many of these underground walkways are commissioned works by renowned architects. Some zigzag while others curve, and some feature golden tungsten lights while others use brilliant white fluorescent lights—but each walkway makes a trip through the underground more enticing.

Although many residents and tourists use the underground purely as transportation, many people stay there to work, play, shop and dine—especially during the coldest winter days. Indoor ice skating, festivals and concerts also take place underground.

The World Trade Centre Montreal is particularly interesting because this glass-enclosed plaza is between buildings. The old brick building facades line brick walkways, as do lampposts and a sidewalk café—all of which give visitors the feeling of strolling along an outdoor street, complete with temperature control.

Also, like most high-traffic areas, the underground city hosts a musician (or 10) trying to scrape a few bucks together by playing for passersby. But unlike other high-traffic areas, Montreal's underground has designated places for these people to perform, marked by small blue signs with harps. And rather than quibble over these coveted locations, the players actually have sign-up sheets so no two performers show up at the same time. So it feels like an open-mic night when strangers check the sheet to see who's going to be playing next.

topside treasures

Using the underground to get everywhere is great, but visitors shouldn't leave the city without venturing upstairs for some spectacular sites.

As one of Montreal's most popular tourist attractions, The Biodome is not just another zoo. This completely enclosed structure features working recreations of four distinct habitats. Visitors will walk from a tropical forest, filled with parrots, poison arrow frogs, anacondas and piranhas, to the laurentian (temperate) forest, complete with otters, lynx, porcupines and beavers working on their damn. In the St. Lawrence marine ecosystem, salmon, striped bass and trout make their way through a chilly saltwater tank to a re-created marina where the smell of salt lingers in the air and seabirds fly overhead. Last is the polar area, with both Arctic and Antarctic climates behind glass. There, playful penguins slide on their bellies and swim up to onlookers.

Another must-see is the Notre Dame Basilica, an architectural masterpiece not to be confused with Paris' famed Notre Dame. This cathedral was completed in the mid-1800s, and it remains the largest neo-gothic temple in North America. Deep reds and gold accents in the columns along the sides of the nave lead the way to an ornate altar that seems backed by a blue sky. It's difficult to imagine that much of the shining details and vivid colors of the arches, frescos, vaulted ceilings and columns come from wood materials that were painted













WORLD TRADE CENTRE PHOTOGRAGH (MIDDLE RIGHT) © MONTREAL WORLD TRADE CENTRE

Opposite, clockwise from top: downtown buildings; Montreal World Trade Centre; interior of the Notre Dame Basilica; one of many exotic birds at the Biodome; a curvy underground pedestrian walkway; the SAQ Selection store







FOODIE MUSTS IN MONTREAL

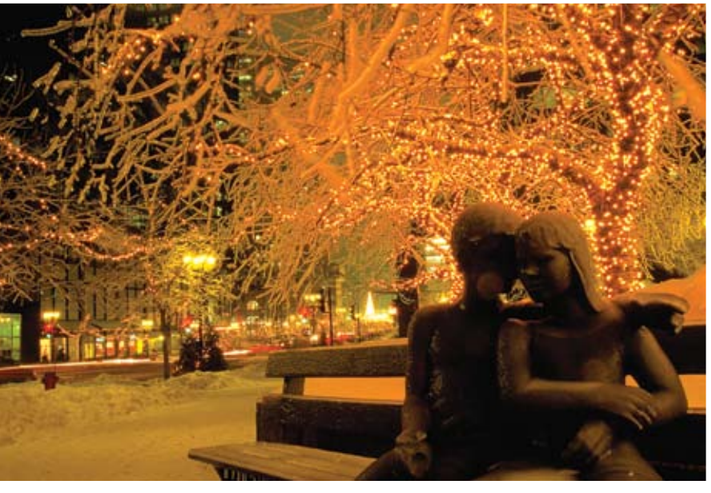
1. **Montreal bagels:** These have a larger hole in the middle than classic New York-style bagels and are slightly sweeter because they're boiled in honey-flavored water before being baked in a wood-fired oven. Try Boulangerie Première Moisson (multiple locations; visit premieremoisson.com) for bagels, specialty breads or a host of other French pastries.

2. **Poutine:** This guilty pleasure of french fries, hearty gravy and fresh cheddar cheese curds is incredibly messy but delicious. A great family restaurant to enjoy it, along with delicious rotisserie chicken, is Rôtisseries St-Hubert (1180 de La Gauchetière St. W., 514/866-0500).

3. **Creton:** Similar to a pork pâté, creton is a local delicacy that many Montrealers have at breakfast, served cold and spread over toast or French bread.

4. **Ice cider:** This is a sweet late-harvest cider made from ripe apples that aren't harvested until after the first frost, which concentrates the sweetness. The SAQ Sélection Store (1700 Metcalfe St., 514/282-1962), is accessible through the underground.





BENCH PHOTOGRAPH (BOTTOM LEFT) © TOURISME MONTRÉAL, STÉPHANI POULIN

and gilded to glow in the light that streams from stained glass windows.

On Rue Crescent, passersby will experience the best of two worlds. The north side of the street is lined with tall, narrow town houses and unique boutiques, while the southern portion is home to some lively restaurants, neighborhood hangouts and nightclubs. The laid-back crowd will want to visit Brutopia Brew Pub, which makes eight in-house ales, on lower Crescent. Cigar aficionados will appreciate Stogies Cigar Boutique and Lounge, where patrons can get hand-rolled Cuban cigars and a choice of 101 different martinis. Those who want to get their groove on should head to Club Vatican, where VIPs get down every Friday and Saturday night to R&B and hip hop beats.

Rue Sainte-Catherine, long the commercial center of Montreal, is a shopaholic's dream. Boutiques of every shape and size—from trendy high fashion to tiny funky shops—line this street in the heart of downtown. The biggest draw is the Eaton Center (Centre Eaton), which is five stories of shops, restaurants and movie theaters.

Art lovers will want to visit Rue Sherbrooke. Lined with art galleries such Klinkoff and Elca London, this street is also home to the fine art museums (Musée des Beaux Arts de Montreal), which face each other and are connected via a tunnel under the street. Many exhibits come through the museum, but the permanent collections have some of the most interesting works. The Ancient Cultures collection features everything from Islamic art to ancient textiles. The European collection highlights pieces from the Middle Ages to present day, including a stunning Picasso oil painting called "Embrace."

where to eat

Like their distant French brethren in Europe, Montrealers know how to dine—and dine well. But what sets the cuisine in Montreal apart is its slightly more country roots. Here, again, is that wonderful melding of French and Canadian cultures. Where else can you find croissants, tarts, cretons and meat pies all in one display case?

For cultural flair in the kitchen and on the walls, locals go to the contemporary art museum (Musee d'art Contemporain de Montreal), which is also accessible through the Underground. The museum's second-floor restaurant, La Rotonde, is a bright lunch spot that appeals to both the professional and the artsy crowds who enjoy the view of sleek green columns that accent the museum's lobby. Rotonde features savory soups (like carrot), fresh salmon and other catches from the St. Lawrence, hearty blood sausage and carefully chosen wines.

Another unique treat is the abundance of specialty food stores in Montreal, such as the fromageries (cheese shops), charcuteries (meat shops) and boulangeries (bakeries). Fromagerie du Marche Atwater stocks nearly 600 different cheeses, including local hard cheeses like oka. However, leave it to Montreal to go that extra mile and have a specialty shop dedicated solely to tomatoes. La Tomate has all tomato-based gourmet spreads, spices and other products.

For dinner options, there are many tempting choices, but only one sits 737 feet above downtown and offers 360-degree views of the city below. The aptly named Altitude 737, accessible from the underground, is in its 11th year and remains one of the city's most popular spots for both dining and nightlife. Arrive early to avoid the crowds and have a drink in the lounge while viewing the sun slowly set behind Mount Royal. When it comes to the menu at Altitude 737, pricey French fusion reigns. Lamb, seafood and steak entrées are all available, but the mushroom stuffed veal is a real treat. Look for a special prix fixe menu to get the most bang for your Canadian buck.

where to stay

The Marriott Chateau Champlain is an excellent choice for the first-time visitor. The hotel offers direct access to the underground, and its central location keeps metro trips short. Plus, the Marriott offers guests some amazing views of both the city and the St. Lawrence River.

The hotel is most easily identified by the half-moon-shaped windows that cover the building. But what makes the tallest hotel in Montreal really stand out is what's on the inside. Warm lighting, elegant vaulted ceilings, dark cherry wood furniture, plush carpets and impeccable service make the Chateau Champlain a rich, cozy retreat from the frosty weather.

But once guests experience the on-site spa, many don't want to venture outside the hotel. Le Spa is a full-service facility with a list of services that includes massages, facials, pedicures and body wrap treatments. And with such great hours—6 a.m. to 11 p.m.—even the busiest traveler can find time to indulge.

Staying on the concierge floor upgrades any visit because concierge guests get special amenities, nightly turn-down service and access to the concierge lounge, which provides Internet access, newspapers, happy hour treats, evening desserts and a deluxe continental breakfast. ✦

IF YOU GO

- **Altitude 737**
  1 Place Ville Marie, 514/397-0737
- **Notre Dame Basilica**
  110 Rue Notre-Dame, 514/842-2925
- **Biodome**
  4777 Pierre-De Coubertin Ave., 514/868-3000
- **Brutopia Brew Pub**
  1219 Rue Crescent, 514/393-9277
- **Club Vatican**
  1432 Rue Crescent, 514/845-3922
- **Fromagerie Atwater**
  134 Avenue Atwater, 514/932-4653
- **La Tomate**
  4347 Rue de LaRoche, 514/523-0222, tomateonline.com
- **Marriott Chateau Champlain**
  1 Place du Canada, 800/200-5909
- **Musée des Beaux Arts de Montreal**
  1380 and 1379 Rue Sherbrooke, 514/285-2000
- **Musée d'art Contemporain de Montreal**
  185 Rue Sainte-Catherine W., 514/847-6226
- **Stogies**
  2015 Rue Crescent, 514/848-0069

Opposite, clockwise from top left: the Marriott Chateau Champlain; a serving of poutine; a view of downtown buildings; sweet Montreal bagels with sesame seeds; "The Secret Bench" sculpture on McGill College Avenue