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Montreal: The City that Offers Visitors the Best of All Worlds

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Want to feel like you're in a sophisticated, multi-cultural European city without the time and expense of crossing the pond?

Simple. Get on a plane and in less than three hours you'll be in Montréal, a city of authentic French bistros, world-class museums, European-style outdoor markets and, in a nod to its English heritage, double-decker buses. Although many in Montréal say it is the only truly bi-lingual city in the world, it seems French is more the first language than English. In other words, people speak English with a French accent rather than French with an English accent. A case in point: Montréal is the second largest French-speaking city in the world, only behind Paris.

Montréal is one of those cities where not having a precise plan of action is a blessing. Every few blocks we would come across an outdoor market or festival. Neighborhoods of various ethnic origins blend into each other. Musicians are almost found on every block. You truly want to keep walking to see what the next block will offer.

Montrealers enjoy life or, as they would say, they have joie de vivre. Montréal residents drink half of the red wine consumed in Canada and spend more on food and entertainment than the rest of the country. As our guide said, "We do not have happy hours because we believe every hour is happy. But many of our restaurants say they have happy hours from five to seven, which really means four to eight."

Walk or Ride the Metro, it's easy to get around

Residents love to walk, often with ice cream cones in hand. Walking is a perfect way to see the sights. Another is the metro. For \$17 for three days or \$9 for one day, you can have unlimited rides on the metro, which will take you anywhere you want. It is easy to figure out and the tiny map the stationmaster passes out when you buy your ticket shows you some of the highlights close to each stop. The train arrives every six minutes (we timed it) and it is safe and full of people, even at night. We ran into a couple from Smyrna who were marveling over the differences between the Montréal metro and MARTA. Come to Montréal and it will convert you.

And don't let the weather deter you. Montréal has an entire city underground with restaurants, dry cleaners, doctors, and banks. You could literally go to work and shop without having to pop your head above ground. One stop, Bonaventure, had a fabulous food court, everything from cook-to-order Thai to Lebanese to pasta. My favorite part was the French deli where I had pâté, a baguette and an éclair for less than \$10.

Old Montréal

We anchored our recent stay in Old Montréal at a decidedly American hotel, the Marriott Springhill Suites Old Montréal on Saint-Jean Baptiste Street. Location-wise, it's perfect - a block from the heart of Old Montréal, two blocks from the beautiful Notre-Dame Basilica (where Celine Dion was married) and five blocks from the metro. The rooms were large, the business center was well supplied and continental breakfast was offered. But remember this is Montréal. Fresh, hot croissants were part of the breakfast as were a variety of homemade breads, muffins and pastries. Delicious.



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Lights, Camera, Action on a Georgia

The heart of Old Montréal is Notre-Dame Basilica, a magnificent Gothic Revival structure. Its interior is grand with the ceiling a deep blue color mixed with blues, azures, reds, purples, silver and gold and punctuated with stars. Designed by an Irish-American Protestant, the church has some decidedly unique features. For one, the stained glass windows, which usually portray religious themes, instead tell the history of Montréal. And, for some reason, there are Hebrew sayings throughout the church.



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From there, it's a short walk to a couple great museums, the Château Ramezay Museum, which was the governor's resident built in the 18th century, and the Pointe-à-Callière Museum of Archaeology and History. Built on the actual remains of early Montréal, the museum offers visitors a real archaeological tour where they can see the first public square, the vaulted canalization of the Saint-Pierre River and the first Catholic cemetery.

On to the metro where we visited the site of the Montréal Olympics where a ride up the Montréal Tower offers you a 360-degree view of Montréal and its surrounds. Nearby is the Biodome de Montréal, which since 1992 has shown some 15 million visitors "a house of life," where plants and animals live inside a recreated climate that apes the four principal ecosystems in the Americas. It's a great place to take kids and show them nature and science at its best.

A Day in the Park

After all that sightseeing, it was time to chill. A quick metro ride brought us to Mont Royal Park, Montréal's largest green space. It's Montréal's version of New York's Central Park, which is appropriate since both were designed by Frederick Law Olmstead, whose work is also found in Atlanta. Mont Royal is a great place for a picnic, bike riding, people watching, and of course in the winter, cross-country skiing and ice-skating. Every Sunday in the summer the park hosts the "Tam Tam Jam," where people gather and play hand drums (tam tams in French) while others dance. As they say... when in Montréal.

The downtown Montréal features great hi-end shopping along Saint-Denis Street. But the heart of Montréal is along Saint Catherine Street, where you will find the city's prominent department stores, including Ogilvy's, as well as Apple, Indigo Books and Music and an H&M flagship store. Nearby are McGill University and a couple of great museums, including the fine arts museum and the McCord Museum of Canadian History.

Funny thing. Montréal features an almost unimaginable array of fabulous restaurants and bistros with all types of cuisines. But sometimes you want something from home. So after a steady diet of escargot, croissants, steamed mussels and pâté, it was time for a burger with friends at the Hard Rock Café on Crescent Street. While the vibe was the familiar Hard Rock, we have to admit that sitting outside and people watching made us feel extra special - and somehow the cheeseburgers tasted even better.

Montréal and Canada are great places to visit and with the American dollar worth about 80 cents to a Canadian dollar, it remains a relatively inexpensive place to visit. No matter the season, consider Montréal for your next weekend getaway or one week-end de vacances magnifique!

For more information, visit: www.bonjoursquebec.com.

Mary Welch is an Atlanta-based freelance writer. A former editor in chief of Atlanta Woman magazine, Mary has written for a number of media outlets including Business to Business Magazine, Pink, South, Glamour and Georgia Trend.

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