

The Best of Toronto

When I was growing up in Toronto in the 1980s, there were three little words that I dreaded. I heard them on a regular basis, almost daily. And while it's true that plenty of things make an adolescent recoil, the phrase "World-Class City" was my personal horror. It was a mantra that was repeated by Toronto politicians ad nauseam, and it ended up on other people's lips (my friends from Montréal found it endlessly amusing). The fact that local boosters had to prop up Toronto with a meaningless moniker just made me cringe.

Looking back now, it's easier to understand where those three little words came from. Have you been to Toronto? Chances are that even if you've never set foot here, you've seen the city a hundred times over. Known for the past several years as "Hollywood North," Toronto has been a stand-in for international centers from European capitals to New York—but rarely does it play itself. Self-deprecating Torontonians embody a paradox: Proud of their city's architectural, cultural, and culinary charms, they are unsure whether it's all up to international snuff.

After spending a single afternoon wandering around Toronto, you might wonder why this is a question at all. The sprawling city boasts lush parks, renowned architecture, and excellent galleries. There's no shortage of skyscrapers, particularly in the downtown core. Still, many visitors marvel at the number of Torontonians who live in houses on tree-lined boulevards that are a walk or a bike ride away from work.

Out-of-towners can see the fun side of the place, but Torontonians aren't so sure. They recall the stuffiness of the city's past. Often called "Toronto the Good," it was a town where you could walk down any street in safety, but you couldn't get a drink on Sunday.

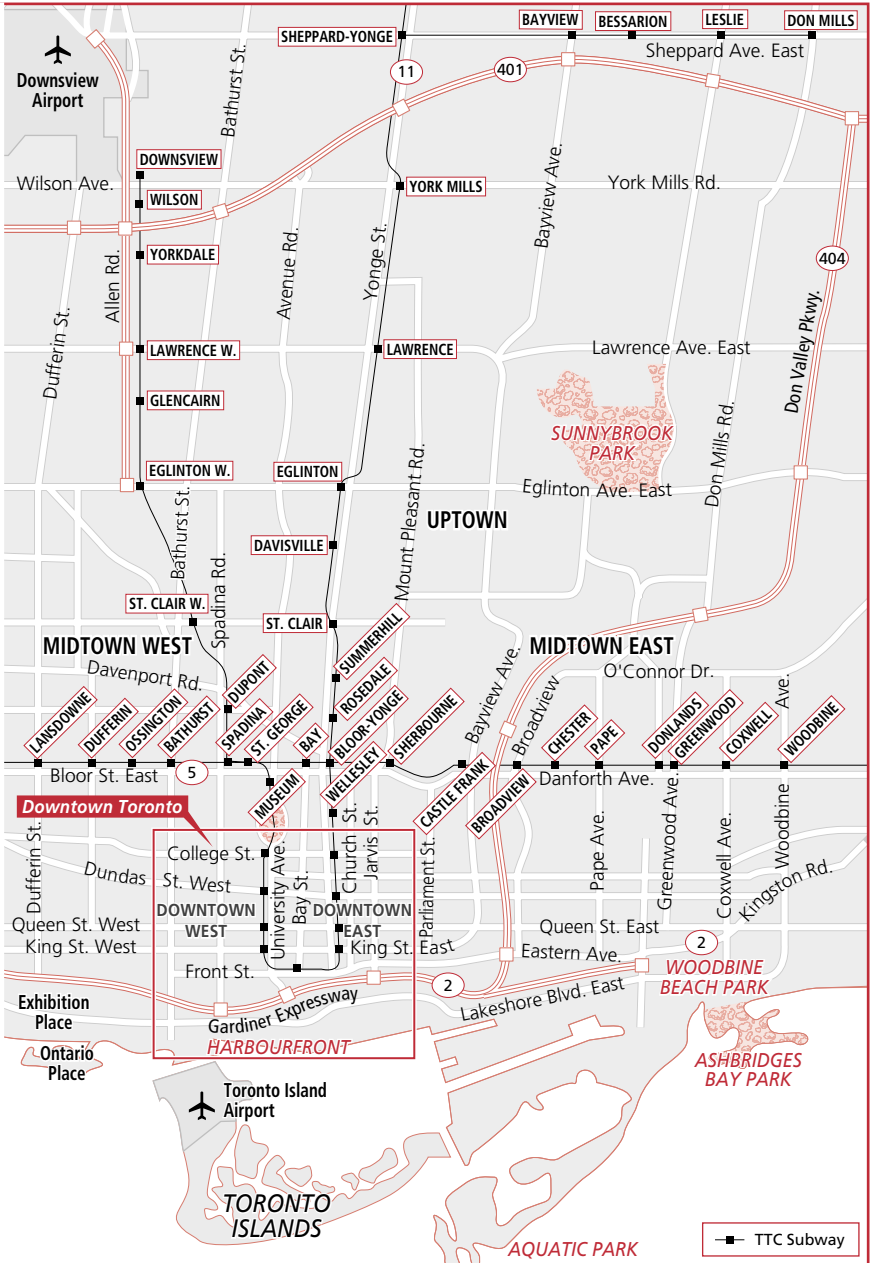
Then a funny thing happened on the way through the 1970s. Canada loosened its immigration policies and welcomed waves of Italians, Greeks, Chinese, Vietnamese, Jamaicans, Indians, Somalians, and others, many of whom settled in Toronto. Political unrest in Québec drove out Anglophones, many into the waiting arms of Toronto (that's how my Montréal friends arrived in Toronto in the first place). The city's economy flourished, which in turn gave its cultural side a boost.

Natives and visitors alike enjoy the benefits of this rich cultural mosaic. More than 7,000 restaurants are scattered across the city, serving everything from simple Greek souvlakia to Asian-accented fusion cuisine. Festivals such as Caribana and Caravan draw tremendous crowds to celebrate heritage through music and dance. Its newfound cosmopolitanism has made Toronto a key player on the arts scene, too. The Toronto International Film Festival in September and the International Festival of Authors in October draw top stars of the movie and publishing worlds. The theater scene rivals London's and New York's.

By any measure, Toronto is a great place to be. It has accomplished something rare, expanding and developing its daring side while holding on to its traditional strengths.

Metropolitan Toronto





The World-Class City campaign may have been a world-class flop, but maybe that lingering insecurity is exactly what propels Toronto forward. It's a great place to visit, but watch out: You might just end up wanting to live here.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Cafe Hopping at Trattorias in Little Italy:** Trendy, yes, but it's also a fun area for stopping by the many cafes and wine bars and for dining on outstanding food. See chapter 6.
- **Taking in the Art Galleries and Boutiques on West Queen West:** The stretch of Queen that runs west of Bathurst Avenue is also known as the "Art & Design District," with good reason. This is the new home of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art; it's also the neighborhood to visit for cutting-edge style. See chapter 7.
- **Exploring the Distillery Historic District:** Not only is this recently restored area a gorgeous example of 19th-century industrial architecture, but it's also a hive of activity. In addition to the art galleries, shops, and restaurants, you can hear live music or visit the farmer's market. See p. 125.
- **Checking Out Local Theater and Music:** Sure, Toronto likes its blockbuster shows. However, the offerings from the CanStage Company, Soulpepper, the Tarragon Theatre, and the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People are innovative and consistently excellent, too. And seeing the Canadian Opera Company onstage at the new Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is breathtaking. See "The Performing Arts" in chapter 10.
- **Viewing the City from the Roof Bar at the Park Hyatt:** Unfortunately, the famous CN Tower gives you a better view of Niagara Falls than it does of Toronto itself. To truly appreciate the city's dramatic architecture, there's no better spot than the Roof. See "Hotel Bars" on p. 74.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **SoHo Metropolitan Hotel**, 318 Wellington St. W. (☎ 800/668-6600): This boutique property makes the best use of technology I've ever seen at a hotel. From the comfort of your bed, you can open and close the drapes. The in-room safe will hold (and recharge) a laptop computer, and the bathroom floor heats up on command. See p. 64.
- **Park Hyatt Toronto**, 4 Avenue Rd. (☎ 800/233-1234): Talk about having it all—the Park Hyatt boasts a beautifully renovated Art Deco building, top-notch service, and one of the best views in the city from the rooftop terrace lounge. This is a place to relax and let yourself be pampered. See p. 74.
- **The Sutton Place Hotel**, 955 Bay St. (☎ 800/268-3790): It's not printed anywhere, but this hotel's motto appears to be "Ask, and you shall receive." The high staff-to-guest ratio means that there's always someone around to do your bidding. See p. 75.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Delta Chelsea**, 33 Gerrard St. W. (☎ 800/243-5732): This is a longtime favorite with budget-minded families. Greatest hits include a playroom with

live bunnies and fish, a video arcade, and a waterslide. It also offers children's programs, a day-care center, and kid-friendly restaurants. There are two pools—one for tykes and one for adults—and many rooms have refrigerators or kitchenettes. See p. 67.

- **The Drake Hotel**, 1150 Queen St. W. (☎ 416/531-5042): It's somewhat out of the way, but because the Drake is in a hot neighborhood, it's hard to complain. The hotel fosters a sense of community by hosting music events,

literary readings, and other festivities. If you hate feeling like a tourist, this place is for you. See p. 68.

- **Hotel Victoria**, 56 Yonge St. (☎ 800/363-8228): This property offers the best value in town. Double rooms start at C\$105 (US\$84) per night, and for this you get excellent service; a smallish but well-appointed room; and proximity to the Eaton Centre, Chinatown, and the Financial District. See p. 69.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Canoe Restaurant & Bar**, in the Toronto Dominion Tower, 66 Wellington St. W. (☎ 416/364-0054): Defining Canadian cuisine is a tricky task because the country has absorbed a wealth of cooking styles and techniques from around the world. Come to Canoe to see how these are blended with Canadian produce; it's a recipe for a perfect meal. See p. 88.
- **Susur**, 601 King St. W. (☎ 416/603-2205): Dining at this downtown fusion restaurant would be a highlight of any trip to Toronto. Simply put: Great chef plus great food plus great service equal one magical meal. See p. 89.
- **Perigee**, 55 Mill St., at the Distillery Historic District (☎ 416/364-1397): This is dinner as theater. The kitchen

is in the center of the dining room, and the chef's tasting menus are individually prepared, so no two diners will have the same dish. See p. 99.

- **Bistro 990**, 990 Bay St. (☎ 416/921-9990): This opulent French restaurant has a reputation as *the* place where visiting celebrities come to dine. Is it true? I have no idea—I'm too busy eating the remarkable meals. See p. 103.
- **Scaramouche**, 1 Benvenuto Place (☎ 416/961-8011): The food here is splendid and very rich, I promise, but what will take your breath away is the view. Scaramouche's floor-to-ceiling windows overlook the downtown skyline from an uptown perch, showing off glittering views of Toronto. See p. 113.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Picnicking on Centre Island**: Hop on the ferry and escape to the islands. From across the water, you'll see the city in a whole new light. See "The Toronto Islands" on p. 119.
- **Listening to a Concert at the Toronto Music Garden**: Cellist Yo-Yo Ma co-designed this serene space that's intended to evoke Bach's First

Suite for Unaccompanied Cello. It's easy on the eyes, but the best time to come here is for a summertime concert. Pure bliss. See p. 144.

- **Wandering through Riverdale Farm**: In case you need more proof that Toronto is a very green city, it has a working farm in its midst. Cows,

The Best of Toronto Online

How did anyone ever plan a trip without the help of the Internet? It's hard to imagine now, given the wealth of information available online. But not all sites are created equal, so before you get ensnared in the Web, point and click on these gems.

- **Toronto.com** (www.toronto.com) boasts articles on arts and culture, as well as a hotel directory, restaurant reviews, community news, and events listings. One of its best features is its extensive use of photographs.
- **City of Toronto** (www.city.toronto.on.ca) is the official municipal guide to Toronto, a straightforward source of practical information peppered with profiles of fun places to visit and announcements of festivals, free concerts, kids' events, and more.
- **Girl Talk Toronto: A Mini City Guide** (www.journeywoman.com/girltalk/toronto.html) runs the gamut from the serious (transit safety) to the frivolously fun (the best places to shop for shoes). This user-friendly site also highlights arty spots, off-the-beaten-path attractions, and the best places for brunch, all from a female perspective.
- **Green Tourism Association** (www.greentourism.on.ca) is an excellent resource for eco-friendly travelers. There's information about car-free transportation, outdoor activities and sports, and healthy dining.
- **Help! We've Got Kids** (www.helpwevegotkids.com) is just what parents of young children need: comprehensive listings of special events, attractions, and services that work for the small fry.
- **Toronto Arts & Culture** (www.livewithculture.ca) is a new initiative from local government to have all of the cultural events, festivals, and concerts that happen in Toronto listed in one place.
- **Toronto Life** (www.torontolife.com) has extensive restaurant listings, as well as links for events, activities, and nightlife.
- **Toronto Star** (www.thestar.com) includes everything from theater and concert reviews to local news and weather conditions.

sheep, pigs, goats, and other critters call it home. See p. 147.

- **Treasure Hunting for Vintage Clothing in Kensington Market:** How can one small area have a dozen vintage-clothing vendors? And how

do they keep prices low and quality good? Haphazard Kensington Market is a joy for bargain hunters. See "Walking Tour 1: Chinatown & Kensington Market" in chapter 8 and "Hunting for Vintage" in chapter 9.

6 The Best Museums

- **Harbourfront Centre**, 235 Queens Quay W. (☎ 416/973-4000): This isn't exactly a museum, but as a cultural institution, it's impossible to beat. In this waterfront complex

you'll find art exhibits, musical performances, cultural celebrations, outdoor Artists' Gardens, and many special events. The highlight of its

calendar is the International Festival of Authors. See p. 118.

- **Royal Ontario Museum**, 100 Queen's Park (☎ 416/586-8000): The ROM, as locals call it, is quite possibly that best museum in the country. It has almost completed a major renovation that dramatically expands its gallery space, which is filled with dinosaurs, Chinese temple art, Roman statues, and Middle Eastern mosaics. See p. 127.
- **Ontario Science Centre**, 770 Don Mills Rd. (☎ 416/696-3127): You don't have to be a tyke to appreciate the amazing interactive displays about biology, ecology, and technology here. See p. 128.
- **University of Toronto Art Centre**, 15 King's College Circle (☎ 416/978-1838): This intimate gallery is one of the city's secret treasures. Visit it for the special exhibits (which have ranged from Picasso ceramics to paintings by the Canadian Group of Seven artists) or for the stunning permanent collection of Byzantine art. See p. 134.
- **Casa Loma**, 1 Austin Terrace (☎ 416/923-1171): Toronto has its own castle, and it's a particularly smashing example of architecture. Perhaps the man who built it was a little obsessive, but how can you not admire the fact that it has both a Scottish and a Norman tower? See p. 137.

7 The Best Places to Hang with the Locals

- **The Rogers Centre or the Air Canada Centre**: The Rogers Centre is home base for the Toronto Blue Jays baseball team. The Air Canada Centre is where the Maple Leafs (hockey) and the Raptors (basketball) play. Torontonians love their teams and come out to support them in droves. See p. 142.
- **Day Spas**: For many Torontonians, taking care of their well-being involves a little indulgence. After all, Toronto is home to some of the best day spas in North America, including the Victoria Spa, the Stillwater Spa, and the Estée Lauder Spa. See "Spas & the City," p. 150.
- **Comedy Clubs**: Maybe it's something in the water: Toronto has produced more than its share of top-notch comedians, including the shagadelic Mike Myers, Jim Carrey, Dan Aykroyd, and the late John Candy. Checking out local talent or international stand-up stars at one of the many comedy clubs is a favorite pastime for Torontonians. See p. 211.