

The Best of Ottawa

As a native of this city, I've seen Ottawa evolve over 5 decades—from a sleepy civil service town to a national capital that can proudly hold its own with any city of comparable size.

The official population is more than 800,000, but the central core is compact and its skyline relatively short. Most Ottawans live in suburban, or even rural, communities. The buses are packed twice a day with government workers who live in communities like Kanata, Nepean, Gloucester, and Orleans, which were individually incorporated cities until municipal amalgamation in 2001. Although there are a number of residential neighborhoods close to downtown, you won't find the kind of towering condominiums that line the downtown streets of Toronto or Vancouver. As a result, Ottawa is not the kind of city where the downtown sidewalks are bustling with people after dark, with the exception of the ByWard Market and Elgin Street.

One could make the case that Ottawa would be very dull indeed were it not for Queen Victoria's decision to anoint it capital of the newly minted Dominion of Canada. Thanks to her choice, tourists flock to the Parliament Buildings, five major national museums, a handful of government-funded festivals, and the Rideau Canal. Increasingly, tourists are spreading out beyond the well-established attractions to discover the burgeoning urban neighborhoods like Wellington West and the Glebe, and venturing into the nearby countryside.

For visitors, Ottawa is an ideal walking city. Most of the major attractions—and since this is a national capital, there are many—are within easy walking distance of the major hotels.

Size also expresses itself in the way people treat each other here. Although there is a typically central Canadian reserve to human relations, it's balanced by an openness that's characteristic of small communities. Community is important; neighborhood activities are well attended.

Ottawa is also a city connected to nature. The glacial deposits known as the Gatineau Hills sit just across the border with Quebec to the north. To the south and west, farmers' fields begin long before you hit the city limits. Ottawa's European heritage shows itself in the large number of green spaces in the urban core. And the city's clean—you'll hear that from other visitors, and probably pass the remark yourself. Although the air quality can be poor on humid summer days, fall and winter bring crystalline air, and the streets are remarkably free of litter. Graffiti is frowned upon and quickly erased.

Ottawa's other bond with nature is its rivers. The city's roots as a community lie in its proximity to three—the Ottawa, Rideau, and Gatineau rivers—and they, along with the history that flows from them, define Ottawa. Geographically, the city streets curve to follow the rivers, and having to cross the rivers is a daily fact of life. The Rideau Canal, a distinguishing feature of the city, was built to make the Rideau River navigable. In the winter, when the canal is transformed into the world's largest skating rink, you can see Ottawans and visitors alike celebrating winter even as they defy its bitter sting.

Aside from its history, natural beauty, and cleanliness, Ottawa is known as a great place to raise a family. I'll attest to that, both as a son and as a father. It has been, and continues to be, a wonderful place to live. Enjoy my city!

1 FROMMER'S FAVORITE OTTAWA EXPERIENCES

- Celebrate Canada's Birthday:** Spend Canada Day (July 1) in the nation's capital—there's no experience quite like it. Head downtown and prepare for a full day of uniquely Canadian celebrations. Start the day with the ceremony of the Changing of the Guard. Watch the Canadian flag rise above the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill, chat with the friendly Mounties mingling with the crowds (don't forget to ask if they'll pose for a photo), and take in a free concert. Have your face painted or tattooed (temporarily) in red and white, wave a paper flag, and buy a hat or T-shirt with a Canadian symbol to blend in with the throngs wandering the streets. In the evening, cast your eyes skyward for the best fireworks display of the year. See "A Capital Is Born" in chapter 2.
- Skate on the Rideau Canal:** Even if you live in a part of the country where ice skating is a winter activity, it likely takes place at a community rink, where you end up skating around . . . and around . . . and around. An hour or two of that is enough to make anyone hang up their blades for good. But in Ottawa, you can experience the world's ultimate skating rink—the Rideau Canal—which offers almost 8km (5 miles) of wide-open space and ever-changing scenery. Warm-up huts are stationed along the way, where you can sip a hot chocolate or munch on a BeaverTail pastry. Skate and sled rentals are available. See p. 142.
- Enjoy the Waterways:** Ottawa's history and beauty are deeply tied to the waterways in the region, the scenic Ottawa River, Gatineau River, Rideau River, and Rideau Canal. You can watch the locks in operation; take a cruise on the Ottawa River or the Rideau Canal; rent a paddleboat, canoe, or kayak on Dow's Lake; picnic on the city's riverbanks; sizzle on a sandy beach; or ride the white water of the Ottawa River north-west of the city. See chapter 7.
- Marvel at the Museums:** At a minimum, set aside half a day to spend at the world-class **Canadian Museum of Civilization**. Life-size renderings of the social, cultural, and material history of Canada since the landing of the first Europeans in A.D. 1000 will captivate even the most reluctant museumgoer. The majestic Grand Hall displays more than 40 gigantic totem poles from the Pacific Northwest. A hands-on Children's Museum, which invites children to experience the fascinating cultural mosaic of the world we live in, is housed within the complex. See p. 119.
- Play in the Snow at Winterlude:** This annual winter festival, held during the first three weekends of February, is a celebration of snow, ice, and outdoor activity. Downtown Ottawa and Gatineau are transformed into winter wonderlands filled with gigantic snow sculptures, glittering ice sculptures, and a Snowflake Kingdom especially for kids. The Snowbowl, a new outdoor entertainment venue, features a variety of performances including music, skating demonstrations, and more. Winterlude activities are based at three main sites: the Rideau Canal Skateway (major access points are Rideau St. downtown, Fifth Ave. and Lansdowne Park in the Glebe, and Dow's Lake), Confederation Park, and Jacques-Cartier Park in Gatineau. See p. 29.
- View the Parliament Buildings and the Ottawa Skyline:** From the Alexandra Bridge, Jacques-Cartier Park in

Gatineau, and the pathways along the north shore of the Ottawa River, you'll get a breathtaking view of the Parliament Buildings and the Ottawa skyline. The view from the Capital Infocentre on Wellington Street facing toward the front of Parliament Hill is one of the most photographed in Ottawa, but the very best view of the Hill and its surroundings is from the little-used amphitheatre just behind the National Art Gallery. Watching the moon rise from the wooden benches can be spectacular—to say nothing of romantic.

- **Ride to the Top of the Peace Tower:** When you've taken in the grace and majesty of the exterior of the Parliament Buildings, hop in the elevator and ride up to the observation deck at the top of the Peace Tower. Built between 1919 and 1927, the 92m (302-ft.) tower is a memorial to the more than 60,000 Canadian soldiers who lost their lives during World War I. The glass-enclosed observation deck offers magnificent views in all directions. See p. 118.
- **Stroll the ByWard Market:** The ByWard Market district has something for everyone, from funky shops to upscale restaurants, outdoor cafes, and an authentic farmers' market with excellent-quality fresh produce and flowers. The place bustles with activity and bubbles with personality. See p. 133.
- **Shop in the Glebe:** This fashionable shopping district stretches along Bank Street between the Queensway and the Rideau Canal. Most retailers are independent and the merchandise is good quality. It's well worth spending a morning or afternoon strolling up one side of the street and down the other. See p. 168.
- **Tiptoe Through the Tulips:** Visit Ottawa in mid-May and you'll be dazzled by millions of tulips blooming throughout the capital region. Commissioners Park, alongside Dow's Lake, features an orchestrated display of tulip beds with more than 300,000 blooms. Many of the events of the Canadian Tulip Festival take place in Major's Hill Park, northeast of the Parliament Buildings and behind the Fairmont Château Laurier. Ottawa's festival of tulips began with a thank-you gift of several thousand bulbs from the Dutch royal family after World War II. Since then, the tulips of Ottawa have grown to represent international friendship and the arrival of spring in Canada. See p. 30.
- **Be Dazzled by the Autumn Leaves:** Gatineau Park, a wilderness area covering 361sq. km (139 sq. miles) in Quebec's Gatineau Hills, is a short drive from downtown Ottawa. It's beautiful in all seasons, but the abundance of deciduous trees makes it especially colorful in the fall. There are many hiking trails to suit a variety of ages and fitness levels. Maps are available. See p. 202.

2 BEST HOTEL BETS

- **Best Historic Hotel:** The elegant Edwardian **Fairmont Château Laurier**, 1 Rideau St. (☎ 800/441-1414 or 613/241-1414), is a most admirably preserved and maintained property, both inside and out. If you're looking for tradition, luxury, and attentive service, this is the place to stay. The extensive health club and pool area, added back in 1929, superbly demonstrate Art Deco design. See p. 80.
- **Best Business Hotel:** **Bostonian Executive Suites**, 341 MacLaren St. (☎ 866/320-4567 or 613/594-5757), has placed

a real emphasis on business travelers, creating a business-focused atmosphere with Wi-Fi, a 24-hour business center, ergonomic desk chairs, and concierge service. See p. 76.

- **Best for Families:** With so many Ottawa hotels competing for the family leisure market, family packages and facilities for children abound at many downtown properties, so it's not easy to choose a single property as the best of the bunch. For many years, the **Delta Ottawa Hotel and Suites**, 361 Queen St. (☎ 800/268-1133 or 613/238-6000) has unofficially earned the title of tops for children in Ottawa, due not least to the popularity of its two-story indoor waterslide. See p. 71.
- **Best Luxury Hotel:** The breathtaking splendor of the **Hilton Lac-Leamy**, adjacent to Casino du Lac-Leamy, 3 boul. du Casino, Gatineau (☎ 866/488-7888 or 819/790-6444), set a new standard of luxury in Canada's capital region when it opened in 2001. The main lobby features a spectacular blown-glass sculpture. Public areas are adorned with ceramic and marble. Views of Lac Leamy, Lac de la Carrière with its trademark fountain, and the Ottawa skyline are stunning. Guest facilities include spa, indoor/outdoor pool, tennis courts, fitness center, and adjacent performance hall and award-winning fine-dining restaurant. See p. 88.
- **Best Budget Accommodation:** Between May and August, head to the **University of Ottawa**, 90 rue Université, (☎ 613/564-5400). Its downtown, apartment-style residences are two-bedroom units with double beds, TV, kitchenette, and private bathroom. Up to four people can stay for a flat fee of C\$99 per night. See p. 83.
- **Best Suite Hotel:** There's an abundance of good suite hotels in the city, as you'll see if you browse through chapter 5,

"Where to Stay." Sharing the top spot by a whisker are the **Albert at Bay Suite Hotel**, 435 Albert St. (☎ 800/331-3131 or 613/231-2020), and **Minto Suite Hotel**, 433 Laurier Ave. W. (☎ 800/267-6644 or 613/238-8858). Both have beautifully appointed, spacious suites with well-equipped kitchens. Their convenient downtown locations, stylish design, and courteous, friendly staff earn them top marks. See p. 74 and 78.

- **Best Location: The Lord Elgin**, 100 Elgin St. (☎ 800/267-4298 or 613/235-3333), could not be better located as a base for visitors to Ottawa. Directly across the street is Confederation Park, a small but pretty city park that's a leafy respite in summer and a glittering ice palace in winter (during the Winterlude festival). The National Arts Centre is across the street; Parliament Hill, the Rideau Canal, ByWard Market, and Rideau Shopping Centre are a 5-minute stroll away. If you venture south along Elgin Street, you'll find plenty of pleasant eateries, lively pubs, and shops. See p. 78.
- **Best Health Club:** With its great views of Parliament Hill, outdoor lounge chairs, and barbecue area, it's tough to find a better place to work out than the Westin Workout Powered by Reebok gym at the **Westin Ottawa**, 11 Colonel By Dr. (☎ 888/625-5144 or 613/560-7000). The stationary bikes and treadmills face floor-to-ceiling windows, and there's also an indoor pool, whirlpool, and squash courts. See p. 80.
- **Best Resort:** Leisure and recreational activities are outstanding at the **Brookstreet** in Ottawa's west end, the heart of Silicon Valley North, 525 Legget Dr. (☎ 888/826-2220 or 613/271-1800). Their 18-hole golf course, the Marshes, was the final father-and-son Robert Trent Jones design collaboration. There's a state-of-the-art health club and spa

on-site. Guest rooms have a boutique-hotel feel. Perspectives restaurant features contemporary Canadian fine dining with an Asian influence. See p. 86. **Château Cartier Resort**, 1170 chemin Aylmer, Gatineau (☎ 800/807-1088 or 819/777-1088), just a short drive from Ottawa, features an 18-hole golf course. Activities abound here—guests can enjoy racquetball, squash, tennis, ice skating, cross-country skiing, and more. Relax in the luxurious spa. Most rooms here are junior suites, above average in amenities and decor. See p. 90.

- **Best B&B Period Decor:** You'll find many period details throughout the distinguished **Auberge "The King Edward" B&B**, 525 King Edward Ave. (☎ 800/841-8786 or 613/565-6700). The front parlor is a peaceful oasis of tropical plants, accented by a trickling fountain. Antiques are featured throughout the principal rooms. Original fireplaces, plaster moldings, pillars, and stained-glass windows complete the picture. During the Christmas season, a 3.6m (12-ft.) tall Christmas tree trimmed with Victorian decorations is a sight to behold. See p. 82.

3 BEST DINING BETS

- **Best Service:** For pure attentiveness and attention to detail, I'd put **Signatures**, 453 Laurier Ave. East (☎ 613/236-2499), on a par with any restaurant I've tried in North America. That much service comes with a price, of course; at Signatures, it's upwards of C\$300. See p. 99.
- **Best Wine List:** The name says it all at **Beckta Dining & Wine** (p. 95), 226 Nepean St. (☎ 613/238-7063). While most restaurants are chef driven, owner Stephen Beckta made his reputation as a sommelier, and he's proud enough of his establishment's wine list to tout it in the brand. The selection has a nice balance of Old and New World labels, but it's constantly in flux. Beckta's also one of the few Ottawa restaurateurs to take advantage of the liberalized provincial liquor laws that allow diners to bring their own vintages in exchange for a corkage fee. See p. 95.
- **Best Fusion:** A lot of restaurants throw the term *fusion* around as shorthand for saying that their chef's recipes combine different flavors or preparation styles, but no one in Ottawa does fusion more creatively—or naturally—than Phoebe and Warren Sutherland, the co-owner-chefs at **Sweetgrass**, 108 Murray St. (☎ 613/562-3683). The combination of her Cree heritage and his Jamaican roots (to say nothing of his time at a New York City kosher restaurant) is unique. See p. 101.
- **Best Canadian:** The freshest available regional, seasonal, and often organic products are employed to create uniquely Canadian dishes such as pan-roasted Quebec foie gras, grilled Ontario-raised buffalo striploin, and wild BC red spring salmon, on the constantly changing menu at **John Taylor at Domus Café**, 87 Murray St. (☎ 613/241-007). p. 100.
- **Best Asian:** **Kinki**, 41 York St. (☎ 613/789-7559) is one of those restaurants that changes the way people perceive a city's culinary scene. Its arrival created a buzz for months, and Kinki has continued to experiment with its menu, combining both traditional sushi with unusual hot dishes, like its spicy coconut sauce and gnocchi combination. See p. 103.
- **Best Italian:** Housed in a heritage stone building, **Mamma Grazzi's Kitchen**, 25 George St. (☎ 613/241-8656), is

especially pleasant in the summer, when you can dine alfresco in the cobblestone courtyard at the rear. I've been coming here for years and have never been disappointed with the food or the service. See p. 103.

- **Best Young Chef:** This is a tough call since Ottawa has more than its share of bold, young kitchen magicians just now, but the edge goes to **Chris Deraiche** at the **Wellington Gastropub**, 1325 Wellington St. (☎ 613/729-1315). From fragile fish dishes to hearty wild boar ragu, Deraiche does everything well, and his excitement about what he's preparing is palpable at the table. See p. 108.
- **Best Ice Cream:** There are several good gelato places in Ottawa, but you can't beat the authenticity of **Pasticceria Gelateria Italiana**, 200 Preston St. (☎ 613/233-6199). See p. 102. As with the old-fashioned baked goods here—represented in staggering amounts and variety—the gelato is served the same way it has been for decades, and you won't find wacky flavors like peanut butter crunch.
- **Best Pizza:** Pizzas almost fly from the oven onto tables and out the door at **Café Colonnade**, 280 Metcalfe St. (☎ 613/237-3179). Their famous pizza has a thick crust with a sprinkling of cheese around the edge, a generous smear of tangy tomato sauce, and gooey mozzarella to hold the toppings in place. On warm summer days and evenings you can hang out on the outdoor terrace. Takeout is also available. See p. 97.
- **Best Seafood:** The local owners of the **Whalesbone Oyster House**, 430 Bank St. (☎ 613/231-8569), have long supplied first-rate bivalves to several restaurants around town. In 2006, they opened their own place and proved they can do other types of seafood well too. See p. 96.
- **Best Bistro:** Another hard choice, given the number of new restaurants that are specializing in informal, bistro-style cuisine, but I found myself reflecting most rapturously on my first meal at the new **Murray Street Kitchen, Wine & Charcuterie**, 110 Murray St. (☎ 613/562-7244), which opened in the summer of 2008. The restaurant combines the rustic charm of wide-plank wooden floors and its charcuterie/cheese bar with some of the most over-the-top cooking you'll find in Canada. See p. 104.
- **Best Alfresco Dining:** All of the four restaurants that share historic, cobblestoned Clarendon Court provide a great outdoor setting, but **Social**, 537 Sussex Dr. (☎ 613/789-7355), has the best view of the square. See p. 101.
- **Best Hotel Dining:** **Brookstreet**, 525 Legget Dr. (☎ 613/271-1800), does a lot of things well, so it's no surprise that its restaurant, **Perspectives**, offers not only the best hotel dining in the city, but is in the running for best restaurant, period. The winner of several awards, it also finds ways of making dining a participatory event, with evenings that include preparation of part of the meal, and special seatings at the chef's table by invitation. See p. 86.
- **Best Casual Dining:** The **Elgin Street Diner**, 374 Elgin St. (☎ 613/237-9700), is a comfy, neighborhood kind of place where you can saunter in, flop into a chair, and hang out with a coffee while the kids slurp milk shakes and chomp peanut butter and jam sandwiches. There are plenty of satisfying old-fashioned dinners on the menu, including meat loaf, shepherd's pie, and liver and onions. See p. 98.

4 BEST ADVENTURES FOR KIDS

- **See Canadian History on the Hoof:** The **RCMP Musical Ride** is a uniquely Canadian experience that has been successfully exported around the world. The force's rehearsals let you get up close and personal with their mounts. See p. 126.
- **Get in Touch with Nature:** Ottawa's proximity to natural areas allows you get into the heart of a forest or natural bog in a matter of minutes from downtown. The best place to do this is the **Mer Bleue Conservation Area**, a favorite with school groups. See p. 137.
- **Burn Off Some Energy:** Okay, it's raining and your brood has had its fill of museums for the day. There's no better place to let them run wild than **Cosmic Adventures**, where kids 12 and under can explore a four-level play area.
- **Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid!:** A town with as much history as Ottawa has to have some ghosts, right? **Haunted Walks** offers several ghostly adventures, including a tour of the city's old jail, where Canada's last public hanging took place. See p. 144.
- **Roll On!:** Few cities in North America are as bike friendly as Ottawa, and the best way to see a lot of it is on Sunday in the summer, when 52km (32 miles) of paved parkways are restricted to bicycle—and skate—traffic, beginning at 6am. See p. 151 for details and p. 148 for bike rental information.
- **Winter Wonderland:** Ottawa is proud of its status as the world's second-colddest capital city. Snowbound activities aren't restricted to Winterlude, either; check out the tubing and snowboarding fun in the heart of the city at **Carlington Snowpark**. See p. 154.
- **Get Wet!:** In summer, the ski areas north of the city offer an alternative, wetter form of fun. With its vertical rise of 160m (525 ft.) **Mont Cascades'** water park offers a range of wet-and-wild fun, including tunnel slides, parallel racing, and splash areas for the younger ones. See p. 206.
- **Airborne Adventure:** The daredevils in your group can get it on by diving 60m (197 ft.) headfirst into a limestone quarry at **Great Canadian Bungee** or roaring down the 310m (1,017-ft.) **RIPRIDE** cable slide. See p. 207.
- **Go Up, or Down:** Located just a 30-minute drive from downtown, **LaFlèche Adventure** gives your kids a choice of aerial exploration—in the park's 82 suspension bridges—or going underground in a series of white marble caves. See p. 207.
- **Hit the White Water:** Rafting is immensely popular on the upper reaches of the Ottawa River, and **Owl Rafting** offers a half-day family float trip that will give you and yours a terrific overview of the mighty river that defines the city. See p. 214.