

The Best of Montréal & Québec City

Just 10 years ago, something of a bleak mood prevailed in Québec province. It was driven by lingering recession and uncertainty over the future; it seemed possible that the province would choose to fling itself into independence from the rest of Canada.

Lately, though, something else is going on. Ripples of optimism have become waves. The Canadian dollar, as every traveler will discover, has strengthened against its U.S. counterpart. In Montréal, a billion-dollar building boom has been filling up vacant lots all over downtown. Montréal has become a modern city in every regard, with skyscrapers in unexpected shapes and bright, noncorporate colors; a historic district that has been beautifully preserved; and a large area of artists' lofts, boutiques, cafés, and miles of restaurants. Québec City, more traditional and more French, is replacing its former conservatism with an ever-expanding aura of sophistication.

American and European travelers will likely find Montréal an urban near-paradise. The subway system, called the Métro, is modern and swift. Streets are safe. Montréal's best restaurants are the equals of their south-of-the-border compatriots in every way, but 20% cheaper. Québec City, meanwhile, with its impressive location above the St. Lawrence River and its virtually unblemished Old Town of 18th- and 19th-century houses, looks French and is almost impossibly romantic and Continental-feeling—it's unlike any city in North America.

1 Unforgettable Travel Experiences in Québec

MONTREAL

- **Listen to Jazz:** Downtown, Old Town, the Latin Quarter, all over, this is a favorite pastime of locals and visitors alike, especially in late June and early July during the renowned Montréal Jazz Festival. See p. 15.
- **Savor Top-Notch Cuisine at Affordable Prices:** Experience all of French cuisine's permutations—traditional, haute, bistro, original Québécois—along with the city's fusion hybrids and ethnic restaurants the way the locals do: by ordering the table d'hôte specials. You'll get to indulge in three or more courses for a fixed price that is only slightly more than the cost of an à la carte main course alone. Most full-service restaurants offer the option, if only at midday. See chapter 6.
- **Explore Vieux-Montréal:** The old quarter has an overwhelmingly European flavor. Wander Place Jacques-Cartier, the most engaging of the district's squares; explore museums and the stunning architecture of the churches; stroll or meander on a bike along the revitalized waterfront. See chapter 7, and the walking tour of Vieux-Montréal in chapter 8.

- **Shop:** Browse the shops of world-class domestic designers, from the up-and-coming to the well established; search for Inuit (Eskimo) sculptures of the highest order (with prices to match); and take in the scores of eclectic antiques shops along rue Notre-Dame between rue Guy and avenue Atwater. See chapter 9.

QUEBEC CITY

- **Admire the Skyline from the Lévis Ferry:** Approaching the city by car from the south, the ferry provides a grand view for little money. Passengers already in the city can start at the Vieux-Port side, and then stay onboard and come right back without disembarking.
- **Linger at an Outdoor Café:** Tables are set out at Place d'Armes in Upper Town, in the Quartier du Petit-Champlain in Lower Town, and along

the Grande-Allée—a quality-of-life invention the French and their Québécois brethren have perfected. See chapter 14.

- **Soak Up the Blossoming Lower Town:** Once all but abandoned to shipping and grimy industry, the old riverside neighborhood of Basse-Ville/Vieux-Port has been reborn, with antiques shops, bistros, and boutique hotels filling its rehabilitated 18th- and 19th-century buildings. See chapter 15, and the walking tour of the Lower Town in chapter 16.
- **Relax in Battlefields Park (Parc des Champs-de-Bataille):** This park is beautifully situated, overlooking the St. Lawrence River, and is particularly lively on weekends, when families and lovers come to picnic and play. See p. 240.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

MONTREAL

- **Hôtel Le St-James** (355 rue St-Jacques ouest; ☎ 866/841-3111): Setting the standard against which any boutique hotel in town must measure itself, this former 19th-century bank in Vieux-Montréal lets no luxurious detail escape its attention. From its opulent main hall to the sybaritic subterranean spa to its immaculately trained staff, this is an experience that may well be the highlight of your visit. See p. 75.
- **W Montréal** (901 rue Square Victoria; ☎ 888/627-7081): If you qualify as hip, aware, and on the fast track to somewhere good (or like to think you do), waste no time booking a suite at this local entry in the spreading chain. It won't hurt if your platinum card is paid up and you don't need much sleep, either. There are three bars and

lounges, a hyper-chic restaurant, and a clientele composed of knockouts of both sexes. Also in Vieux-Montréal. See p. 76.

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- **Auberge Saint-Antoine** (8 rue St-Antoine; ☎ 888/692-2211): Sure, there's the Château Frontenac, looming up above, the very symbol of the city. But for a more intimate, less overwhelming visit, take the funicular down to the Basse-Ville. The auberge started as a stylish but largely unexceptional B&B and has grown in calculated phases into the most desirable lodging in town, now with a chic lounge and a top restaurant. See p. 219.
- **Dominion 1912** (126 rue Saint-Pierre; ☎ 888/833-5253): Also a key player in the redevelopment of the once dreary Basse-Ville/Vieux-Port,

Moments Romantic Québec City

“Romance” is Québec City’s middle name. Every narrow street, leafy plaza, sidewalk café, horse-drawn *calèche*, pitched roof, and church spire breathes recollections of the provincial cities of the mother country. But to get the full Québec City treatment, amble those streets on a night of the full moon and find a bench on the **Terrasse Dufferin**. The river below will be the color of liquid mercury in the moon’s glow, and there will be more stars than you can ever remember seeing. Streaks of comets and music faintly heard from the *boîtes* in Lower Town are possibilities. Romance is a certainty.

the Dominion has rooms so large and beds and bedding so cozily enveloping that you may not want to go out.

Do, though, at least for the fireplace, croissants, and café au lait in the lobby. See p. 220.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

MONTREAL

- **Auberge Bonaparte** (447 rue St-François-Xavier; ☎ 514/844-1448): The long-established restaurant on the ground floor was accorded a massive rehab and expansion a few years back, and now includes the comely inn upstairs. Rooms are simply furnished, but four out of the eight on each floor have whirlpool tubs and the rooftop terrace overlooks Vieux-Montréal’s Basilique Notre-Dame. See p. 79.
- **Auberge Les Passants du Sans Soucy** (171 rue St-Paul ouest; ☎ 514/842-2634): Just around the corner from Bonaparte, this charming little B&B helped pioneer the recovery of Vieux-Montréal to its current status as the must-see quarter of the city. The lobby is an art gallery with changing exhibits. Fireplaces and jet

tubs have been added to the nine bedrooms. See p. 80.

QUEBEC CITY

- **Hôtel Sainte-Anne** (32 rue Ste-Anne; ☎ 877/222-9422): Practically in the shadow of the Château Frontenac, this Euro-design hotel occupies a row house in the middle of the most touristy district of the Upper Town. Rooms are stripped to the minimum, but as equipped as can be reasonably expected with this location at these relatively gentle prices. See p. 216.
- **Château Laurier** (1220 Place Georges V ouest; ☎ 800/463-4453): There are now nine categories of rooms and suites in this Parliament Hill property, thanks to nearly continual expansion in recent years. The hotel is close to the Battlefields Park and Musée des Beaux-Arts. See p. 218.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

MONTREAL

- **Nuances** (1 av. du Casino, in the Casino de Montréal; ☎ 514/392-2708): This gourmet resto at the top of the city’s casino got an impressive face-lift in early 2007 that made the

decor as contemporary and elegant as the food—all creamy walls, white linen, and pale-green leather banquettes. A room with real star power. See p. 106.

- **Toqué!** (900 Place Jean-Paul-Riopelle; ☎ 514/499-2084): Superstar chef/owner Norman Laprise has been thrilling Montréal gourmands for years. In dishes of startling innovation, he brings together diverse ingredients that have rarely appeared before on restaurant plates. There's little point in describing individual dishes, for he moves on before any of his food achieves signature status. See p. 91.

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- **Initiale** (54 rue St-Pierre; ☎ 418/694-1818): From its gracious tone

and subdued lighting to its carefully paced multi-course menus, Initiale exudes silky polish from greeting to adieu. You will dine gloriously. See p. 230.

- **Laurie Raphaël** (117 rue Dalhousie; ☎ 418/692-4555): Dazzling. Given the growing local competition, the owners have utterly transformed their setting and shaken up the menu. Service is spot-on and the food creative and artfully presented. See p. 230.

5 The Best Museums

MONTREAL

- **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (1379–1380 rue Sherbrooke ouest; ☎ 514/285-2000): Canada's first museum devoted exclusively to the arts started out in 1912 in a neoclassical space on the north side of Sherbrooke. A newer pavilion on the opposite side is connected by an underground series of galleries. Temporary exhibits are strong, and the permanent collection is largely devoted to international contemporary art and Canadian works. See p. 109.
- **Pointe-à-Callière/Montréal Museum of Archaeology and History** (350 Place Royale; ☎ 514/872-9150): A first visit to Montréal might best begin here. This strikingly modernistic structure at the edge of Vieux-Montréal marks the spot where the

first European settlement put down roots. It stands atop extensive excavations that unearthed not only remains of the French newcomers, but also the native bands that preceded them. Wind your way on the self-guided tour through the subterranean complex. See p. 114.

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- **Musée de la Civilisation** (85 rue Dalhousie; ☎ 418/643-2158): Here is that rarity among museums: a collection of cleverly mounted temporary and permanent exhibitions that both children and adults find engrossing, without talking down or metaphorical maunderings. Make sure to make time for *Mémoires*, which charts the evolution of Québec from the first encounters between Native peoples and Europeans. See p. 235.

6 The Best Outdoor Activities

MONTREAL

- **Traverse the Lachine Canal:** The abandoned canal was first constructed to detour around the rapids of the same name. Falling into disuse after construction of the St. Lawrence

Seaway, it was renovated in the last few years to serve as a recreational resource. Connecting the Vieux-Port with Atwater Market, a little over a mile away, it can be traveled by guided boat tour, on foot, or with

bicycles or in-line skates rented at the Vieux-Port (p. 125).

- **Bike the City:** Montréalers' enthusiasm for bicycling has provided the impetus for the ongoing development of a network of bike-specific paths that wind through downtown areas and out to the countryside. Cyclists are allowed to take their bikes onto designated Métro cars and some taxis have special racks. Rentals can be arranged right at the waterfront park. See p. 128.

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- **Take a Walking Tour:** Combine immersion in Québec's rich history with a good stretch of the legs among

the battlements and along the cobblestoned streets of the ancient city. Use the walking tours in chapter 16 or go on a group tour; information on meeting points, times, and routes is at the information kiosk on the Terrace Dufferin, opposite the Château Frontenac.

- **Visit Montmorency Falls:** Located a 15-minute ride by car or bus north of the city is this spectacular iron-tinged cascade—higher than Niagara Falls, as you will frequently be reminded. There are stairs and a cable car up and a footbridge directly over the plunging water. In summer, this is the site of an international fireworks festival. See chapter 19.

7 The Best Activities for Families

MONTREAL

- **Visit the Biodôme de Montréal:** Perhaps the most engaging attraction in the city for children—of any age. The Biodôme houses replications of four ecosystems: a Laurentian forest, the St. Lawrence marine system, a polar environment, and, most engagingly, a tropical rainforest. See p. 115.
- **Explore the Jardin Botanique and Insectarium:** Montréal's Botanical Garden has Chinese and Japanese gardens and greenhouses open all year long, while the Insectarium next door features praying mantises, tarantulas, a Butterfly House, and a gift shop that sells lollipops with scorpions inside. See p. 116.

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- **Watch the Changing of the Guard:** La Citadelle is the fortress built by the British to repel an American invasion that never came. It's still an active military post, and the ceremonial changing of the guard and beating the retreat are colorful and not too long. See p. 238.
- **Thrill to the Canyon Ste-Anne:** About a half-hour drive from the city, the massive canyon and its thundering Ste-Anne waterfalls feature three footbridges that go directly across the water. See chapter 19.

8 The Best of Montréal & Québec City Online

There's lots of information on Montréal and Québec City on the Internet. Here are a few of our favorite planning and general information sites.

- **Bonjour Québec** (www.tourisme.gouv.qc.ca): The official site of the government of the Province of

Québec endeavors to be a comprehensive information bank about all things Québec, and nearly succeeds. You'll find information on upcoming events and ongoing attractions, and you can search for hotels and reserve online.

- **A la Montréal** (www.tourismemontreal.org): Another official tourism site, this one provides in-depth information on selected highlights. Check the “Traveler” section for feature stories, food highlights, “Sweet Deals” on lodging, and a “Montréal Gay to Z” section.
- **Hour** (www.hour.ca): *Hour* is a Montréal culture magazine that highlights local happenings, including entertainingly grumpy and often profane takes on current events, and regularly updated restaurant and arts reviews.
- **Québec** (www.quebecregion.com): Sponsored by the Québec City Tourism bureau, this site is full of detailed information about area accommodations, attractions, sports, shopping, dining, history, and culture.