

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 can make adolescents 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. 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. Chances are that even if you've never set foot here, you've seen the city a hundred times over. 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.

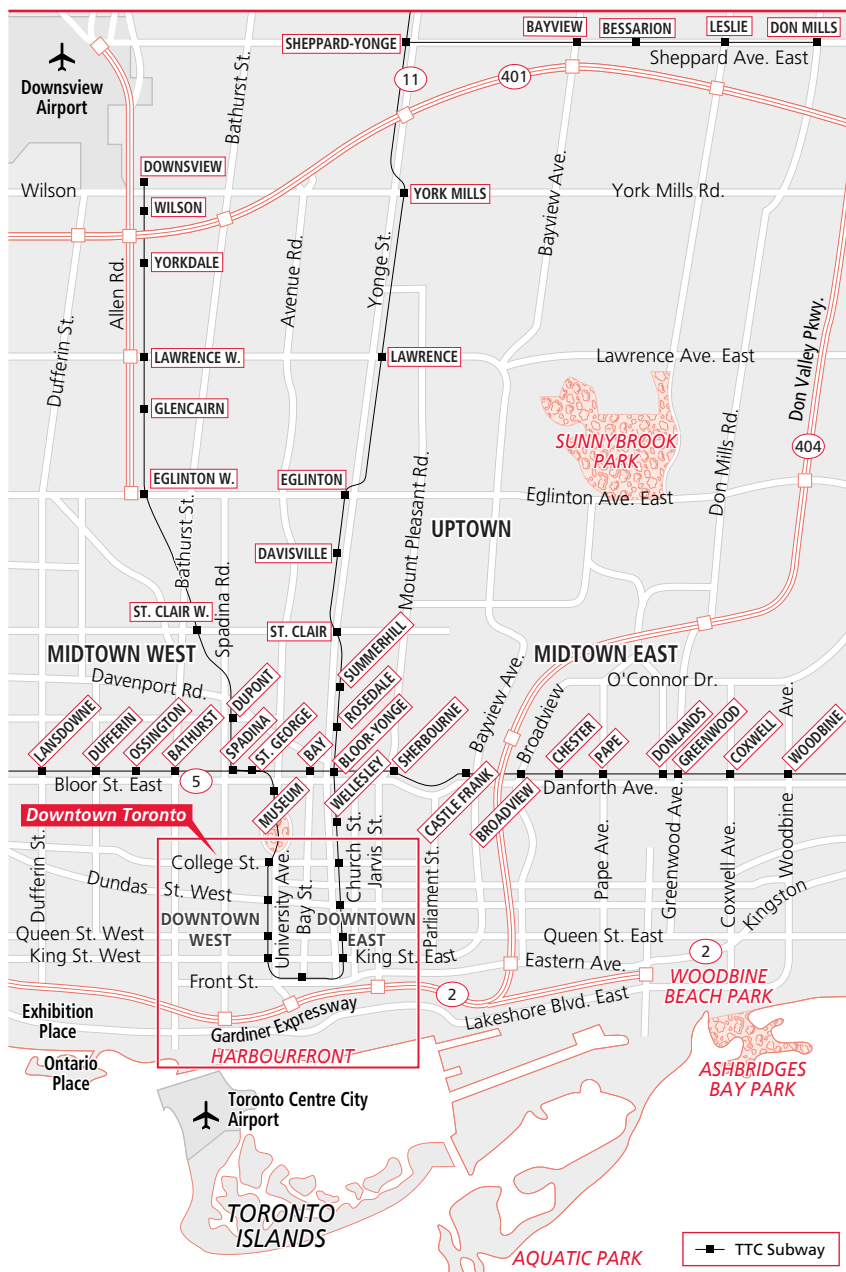
Out-of-towners can see the fun side of the place, but Torontonians aren't so sure. They recall the stuffiness of the city's past. Often called "Toronto the Good," it was a town where you could walk down any street in safety, but you couldn't get a drink on Sunday.

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 *souvlaki* 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.





1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Taking in the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario:** Locals have been thrilled with local boy Frank Gehry's renovation of the AGO. His design has brilliantly revised (and expanded) the space, but the very best thing about the newly reopened AGO is the 2,000 works of art (great paintings, miniature sculptures, model ships) donated by Ken R. Thomson. See chapter 7.
- **Checking Out Local Theater and Music:** Sure, Toronto likes its blockbuster shows. However, the offerings from the Canadian Stage Company, Soulpepper, Opera Atelier, Tafelmusik, and the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People are innovative and consistently excellent, too. And seeing the Canadian Opera Company onstage at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is breathtaking. See "The Performing Arts," in chapter 10.
- **Exploring the Distillery 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 farmers' market. See p. 128.
- **Bar Hopping along Ossington Avenue:** As the march of downtown gentrification continues, formerly low-key Ossington Avenue has become the go-to spot for watering holes, from retro lounges to cool dives. See chapter 10.
- **Viewing the City from the Toronto Islands:** Toronto is blessed with a gorgeous harbor and some tiny islands that are just a brief ferry ride away. From the islands, you'll have a perfect view of Toronto's stunning skyline, and a respite—in a green oasis—from the hectic downtown core.

2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **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. 83.
- **The Gladstone Hotel**, 1214 Queen St. W. (☎ 416/531-4635): This hotel is moderately priced overall, but its double-decker "Rock Star Suite," located in the hotel's Gothic tower, is a unique splurge—and its view makes the downtown Toronto core look like a faraway metropolis. See p. 75.
- **Hôtel Le Germain**, 30 Mercer St. (☎ 866/345-9501): Edgy yet elegant, this is one of Toronto's most beautifully designed hotels. Attention is paid to the smallest details—even the elevators are wrapped in words of poetry. See p. 74.

3 THE BEST MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Delta Chelsea**, 33 Gerrard St. W. (☎ 800/243-5732): This is a longtime favorite with budget-minded families. Perks 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. Many rooms have fridges or kitchenettes. See p. 75.

- **Hotel Victoria**, 56 Yonge St. (☎ 800/363-8228): This property offers the best value in town. Double rooms start at C\$120 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. 77.

- **Fairmont Royal York**, 100 Front St. (☎ 800/441-1414): This historic grande dame is an expensive hotel, to be sure, but it's also a place where great deals are often available (it's possible to score a room for as low as C\$119, if you keep an eye on the special deals on its website). See p. 72.

4 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Madeline's**, 601 King St. W. (☎ 416/603-2205): Star chef Susur Lee broke foodie hearts when he closed Susur in 2008, but he's more than made up for that by opening this stunning spot. The food is divine, the setting grand, and yet the prices are half what they were at his old spot. See p. 102.
- **Amuse-Bouche**, 96 Tecumseth St. (☎ 416/913-5830): Dining at this downtown restaurant, located on a quiet, mostly residential street, 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. 97.
- **C5**, in the Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park (☎ 416/586-7928): 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 C5's glorious crystal-walled dining room to see how these are blended with Canadian produce; it's a recipe for a perfect meal. See p. 108.

- **Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar**, 9 Church St. (☎ 416/362-1957): My favorite wine bar is always one of the best bets in Toronto. All of the plates are delicious and moderately priced. See p. 106.
- **Edward Levesque's Kitchen**, 1290 Queen St. E. (☎ 416/465-3600): Located in Leslieville, an up-and-coming neighborhood, this small, unpretentious bistro offers cooking so sophisticated and service so smooth that it caught the attention of the *New York Times*. See p. 106.

5 THE BEST THINGS TO DO FOR FREE (OR ALMOST)

- **Seeing Great Museums when They're Discounted—or Free:** Admissions to the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario have jumped since their massive renovations. However, you can pay less—or nothing—if you know when to go. See “The High Cost of Admission,” on p. 131.
- **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. 147.

- **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, sheep, pigs, goats, and other critters call it home. See p. 151.
- **Visiting Ireland Park:** This memorial to the Irish Famine features the “Arrival” figures created by Rowan Gillespie (they’re related to his “Departure” series in Dublin). See p. 146.
- **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

- **Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen’s Park (☎ 416/586-8000):** After you’ve visited my very favorite museum, the **Art Gallery of Ontario** (mentioned already on p. 4), you need to see the ROM. The entire family can admire its dinosaurs, Chinese temple art, Roman statues, and Middle Eastern mosaics. See p. 130.
- **Harbourfront Centre, 235 Queens Quay W. (☎ 416/973-4000):** While it isn’t exactly a museum, this waterfront complex has 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. 128.
- **Ontario Science Centre, 770 Don Mills Rd. (☎ 416/696-3127):** You don’t have to be a tyke to appreciate the amazing interactive displays here about biology, ecology, and technology. See p. 129.
- **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 or for the stunning permanent collection of Byzantine art. See p. 136.
- **Casa Loma, 1 Austin Terrace (☎ 416/923-1171):** Toronto has its own castle, and it’s a 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. 139.

7 THE BEST PLACES TO HANG WITH THE LOCALS

- **The Drake Hotel, 1150 Queen St. W. (☎ 416/531-5042):** Set in the middle of the Art & Design District, this 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. 72.
- **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 come out to support them in droves. See p. 145.

- **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 HealthWinds Spa and the Stillwater Spa. See “Spas & the City,” p. 155.
- **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. 217.