

MONTREAL:

City of a Hundred Bell Towers



Sainte-Cecile church

Text and photos by Joycelyn Soo Mun Peng

The city of Montreal is sited in the province of Quebec, Canada, set on an island in the Saint Lawrence River. I took a two-hour domestic flight to Montreal, and the lack of in-flight entertainment greatly facilitated conversations with my friendly neighbour – an elderly French-Canadian gentleman. Amusingly, my greeting of *bonjour* was first responded to with a string of French sentences. My neighbour had mistaken my accent for that of a local (well done Google!). I later explained that I could not speak French and he allayed my worries, telling me that most people in Montreal are bilingual and that tourists get by just fine without speaking a hint of French. He then warmly introduced Montreal as the city of a hundred bell towers.

The city of a hundred bell towers

Montreal is densely populated with hundreds of churches boasting intricate interior furnishing and breathtaking exteriors, coming together as structures of both spiritual and historical significance.

As per my flight neighbour's introduction, I paid attention to the architecture as I roamed the city. I visited the iconic Notre-Dame Basilica of Montreal, which was the first Gothic Revival style church and is a designated National Historic Site.

It is a popular tourist attraction, requiring a fee to sightsee within the church and to catch the "AURA Experience", a multimedia light show. During Mass or worship sessions, however, attendance is free. Around the church, the streets are welcoming, with many boutiques, dining sites and a nearby port, Promenade du Vieux-Port (or Old Port), overlooking the Saint Lawrence River. To get a panoramic view of the river and city, one can consider going on the La Grande Roue de Montreal observation wheel sited at the port.

Travelling around Montreal is easy as there is a well-connected metro system. The weekly ticket costs 35 CAD (approximately 35 SGD) and also gives access to bus rides, but bus routes can be less predictable and may change

around new construction sites. From the Montreal-Trudeau International Airport (YUL), there is a 24-hour bus service to the downtown area which is a cheaper alternative to taking Uber.

Here is a tip: if you find yourself on a bus in Montreal waiting to alight, the doors are not controlled by the bus conductors as it is in Singapore; those doors have to be gently pushed open.

I found myself, however, walking most of the time to enjoy the mixed ancient and contemporary styles of architecture, the bustling streets, and of course the snow or rain, whichever might find its way that day. As I ventured down streets, I was greeted by the freezing wind unfamiliar to a Singaporean girl. Spring in Montreal averages temperatures of about 1 degree Celsius. Winds can still be bone-chilling and I would recommend first-time travellers like myself to bring along waterproof windbreakers – they are shields against the cold more powerful than heat packs or trench coats.

Spring festivities

When travelling within Montreal in the spring, one can look out for carnivals or maple fairs where they celebrate the maple harvest. One of the biggest maple and wood parties less known to tourists would be the Cabane Panache (or the Maple Music Festival). Over the course of four days, there will be live music by swinging bands; various free camp activities, such as tug of war and hockey; and booths selling local maple products ranging from steaming hot soup to a maple-inspired poutine to *tire sur la neige* (maple taffy). The maple taffy is part of the traditional Quebec culture and is simply made by pouring reduced maple syrup over snow and holding the frozen syrup on a stick to enjoy. A familiar dish that you might see everywhere, offered by fast food chains, restaurants and cafes, is poutine, a quintessential item of Quebec cuisine. Poutine is a dish of French fries covered with cheese curds and a homemade thick brown gravy. The savoury and salty dish was enjoyable (although every mouthful did scream hypertension!).

During my time at the Cabane Panache, I found myself sitting down at the long wooden tables with a steaming plate of maple mac and cheese, soaking up the festive accordion music, watching fellow carnival goers huddle on wooden seats by the outdoor fireplace or dancing to the music and at the end even forming a conga line, parading around the small yard that we were in. For those looking for a snack while exploring, bagels are a popular option. Montreal bagels are typically handmade, baked over

a wood fire and usually boiled before baking, giving them a denser and harder consistency. Colleagues and friends who are vegetarians like myself need not worry as Montreal is very much a vegetarian- and vegan-friendly place, with most eateries having a “veggie” version of dishes on the menu.

Hiking and beyond

Another attraction is Mount Royal, a mountain situated in the middle of the city, sitting 764 feet (233 m) above sea level. As my hotel was just 30 to 40 minutes away from Mount Royal, I went on foot and toured the nearby McGill University campus. The student population seemed to be quite diverse at McGill, with many international students in attendance. I found myself chatting with an international student from London studying history and we agreed that the Canadian winter can be too cold even for UK residents.

One thing you should definitely check prior to starting any outdoor activities is the weather, as precipitation is common in spring. To get to the foot of Mount Royal, it is necessary to track up a steep slope on Peel Street. Astonishingly, a part of the university campus and some residences sit on this slope and I wondered if students walked these slopes every day to get to their classes. The trail took me about 30 minutes and involved climbing wooden stairs and trekking on short segments of the snow-covered path. At the peak, we found hikers birdwatching, enjoying the view or simply having a nice afternoon tea break in the Mount Royal chalet.



Rue Sainte-Catherine

If you have time to spare, I would also recommend booking a train ticket to Quebec City, which is about three hours away. Overall, Montreal is a lovely island with picturesque streets and architecture, a nice touch of wildlife on an urbanised island, and a good variety of attractions and activities. ◆

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View from the peak at Mount Royal