

Bienvenue à Montréal

Québec's largest city offers a striking mix of old and new along with public artworks, stunning landscapes and an amazing range of cuisines

WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

A sea of blue and white flags wave in time to the beat at the Place des Festivals in Montréal. While it was my first evening in the city, it would be far too vain to assume that the welcome party was designed for me. My visit coincided with the start of La Fête nationale on June 23, Québec's national holiday, observed across the city with parades, bonfires, fireworks and street parties.

My trip to Québec's largest city had been long overdue; initially booked and planned for May 2020 and cancelled due to the ensuing pandemic. What followed were some of the strictest Covid-19 restrictions in North America, with a state of emergency renewed more than 100 times over the course of the pandemic. The Québec government officially lifted restrictions in May, and I finally made it overseas a month later, so I too felt I had something to celebrate amid the crowd of proud Québécois.

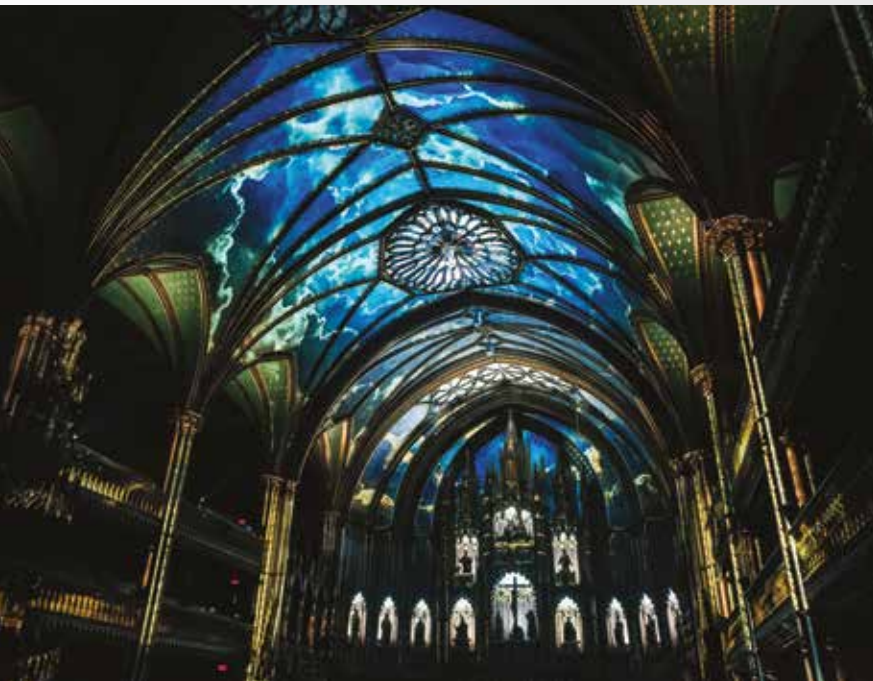
While the city is certainly looking forward to leaving the difficult years of the pandemic behind, it's striking how the old and the new tend to coalesce in Montréal – particularly in its art scene.

MONTREAL MULTIMEDIA

You don't need to be in the city for long to notice that the city itself is a canvas for creativity – from murals emblazoned across buildings to digital projections in underground walkways.

My accommodation provided an introduction to the city's art scene, with my suite at the Four Seasons Hotel Montréal offering floor-to-ceiling views of the 929 sqm Leonard Cohen mural on a high-rise façade on Crescent Street, while the brutalist façade of the Hotel Le Germain Montréal is covered in the 52m high *Dazzle My Heart* mural by Canadian artist Michelle Hoogveld, with 80 different colours in a gradient-like pattern. Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth takes an equally modern

ABOVE:
The Leonard
Cohen mural on
Crescent Street
in downtown
Montréal



approach, this time in the digital arena, with its two projection-focused art installations. *The Interactive River*, located in the hotel's underground passage leading to Place Ville-Marie, features images of the sea, clouds and forest on all surfaces, accompanied by calming music. *The Bed In*, located in the Agora multipurpose space in the main lobby, depicts John Lennon and Yoko Ono's famous stay at the hotel.

The projections are part of Cité Mémoire, a project by non-profit organisation Montréal en Histoires, which includes more than 25 *tableaux* (or scenes) projected on walls, streets, buildings and trees throughout Old Montréal, the port area and downtown. Created by Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon, in collaboration with playwright Michel Marc Bouchard, the scenes highlight milestones in Montréal's history – from social revolution in the post-war years to the commemoration of The Great Peace of Montréal treaty, signed in 1701 by the governor of New France and 39 First Nations communities. Visitors can download the free Montréal en Histoires mobile app to find out more about the historical context for each projection.

The use of multimedia to enhance a city's infrastructure is a philosophy also shared by Montréal-based company, Moment Factory. Set up

in 2001, the multimedia studio has created more than 500 experiences worldwide under its motto "We do it in public", with international offices in Paris, New York, Singapore and Tokyo. During my stay I paid a visit to one of its home-produced projects, *Aura* at Montréal's Notre-Dame Basilica. The Fabrique de la Paroisse Notre-Dame, the church committee, approached the team in 2017 to create an experience that would attract new kinds of visitors to the Basilica – not just those interested in religion. The result is a captivating light show whereby projections enhance the Basilica's historic artworks and neo-Gothic architecture, accompanied by original orchestral scores (including sounds from the Basilica's very own organ).

"We now have a lot of young people visit because we use multimedia, new technology and amazing music. People who are not normally inclined to visit churches [come]," says Marie-Pier Veilleux, director of public affairs and international relations at Moment Factory. As one of those not-so-typical churchgoers, I can personally vouch for its appeal to the secular community. While the show might not be religious, the experience certainly feels spiritual and you quickly forget that you

Projections enhance the Basilica's neo-Gothic architecture, accompanied by orchestral scores

are sharing the space with 690 people, all of whom are a mix of ages and backgrounds. I vividly remember the illumination of icons at the altar, coinciding with choral voices to give the impression that they were serenading the congregation.

"We wanted the experience to be universal. The story isn't about Catholic history or [a means to] showcase the religion. It's really to embrace the beautiful site... We want to wow people," says Veilleux. Without giving too much away, an example of this 'wow' factor is the use of laser beams halfway through the show; a feature usually associated with raves rather than sacred spaces. Nonetheless, the team have remained respectful of the patrimonial site, and you won't see wires or any paraphernalia during the day.

TOP LEFT:
A projection on the ceiling at Notre-Dame Basilica; part of the *Aura* project
TOP RIGHT:
Dazzle My Heart mural by artist Michelle Hoogveld

The multimedia trend has also infiltrated Canada's oldest art museum, The Museum of Fine Arts, founded in 1860. Sabrina Ratté's *Contre-Espace 4K* video is currently projected onto the façade of the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion nightly until November 27. Inside, however, the galleries showcase early, modern and contemporary art across five interconnecting pavilions, offering something for everyone.

URBAN OASIS

Much like the public art, Montréal's natural landscape features vestiges of the city's past. This is most apparent at Lachine Canal, a 14.5km channel passing through the south-western part of the city from Old Montréal to Lake Saint-Louis, with five waterway locks, urban parks, restored red-brick factories and dilapidated structures along the way – including the glowing Farine Five Roses sign erected above the Ogilvie flour mill in 1948, which became a protected architectural feature in 2020.

The canal opened in 1825 to provide a route for ships to pass into the Atlantic Ocean, bypassing the Lachine Rapids on the St Lawrence River, increasing maritime traffic in the port and attracting manufacturers to the area. The creation of the St Lawrence Seaway led to the demise

of the canal's commercial use in 1970 but its significance has not been forgotten, with the area designated a National Historic Site of Canada. The canal reopened for recreational use in 2002 and is well-loved by locals and internationals alike. During my visit, small boats navigated along the smooth waters, cyclists shared the canal path with pedestrians and,

ABOVE:
Mount Royal Park and downtown Montréal
BELOW:
Farine Five Roses sign – a protected architectural feature on Lachine Canal



closer to the old port, sportier types challenged themselves to a triathlon in 30°C heat.

On the other side of the city lies the more well-known natural attraction Mount Royal, from which the city takes its name. The lush 'mountain' provides a welcome escape from the urban setting with 200 hectares of biodiversity and natural flora and fauna. Skyscrapers are forbidden from exceeding the height of Mount Royal (233m above sea level), making for an incredible panoramic vista at the Belvédère Kondiaronk lookout – I promise it's worth the steep climb, particularly before the fiery red, yellow and orange canopy of trees disappears as winter arrives.

MARKET CRAWL

Montréal offers Canadian staples throughout the city, with poutine – a dish of french fries and cheese curds topped with a brown gravy – featuring on many menus. There's a Tim Hortons coffee shop in every neighbourhood, but its food scene has many cultural influences owing to its history of immigration.

The city is incredibly proud of its hand-rolled bagels, introduced in the early 1900s by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Poached in honey water before being baked in →

CULTURAL EVENTS TO KEEP ON YOUR RADAR

CINEMANIA, NOVEMBER 2-13

Francophone films are on show across the city's screens in the 28th edition of this cinematic festival, but fret not, there are English subtitles. The event includes films across a range of genres, including a preview of the France/Québec co-production *L'Origine du mal*, plus masterclasses and special events.

MTLÀTABLE, NOVEMBER 3-13

Montréal's famous restaurant week celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, with an 11-day celebration of its gastronomy across 100 participating restaurants – from French and Indian to Japanese cuisine. Each venue will offer a three- or four-course set-price evening menu, with prices from CAD\$35 to CAD\$75.

SEEING LOUD: BASQUIAT AND MUSIC, UNTIL FEBRUARY 19, 2023

The Montréal Museum of Fine Arts hosts the first large-scale multimedia exhibition dedicated to the role of music in the work of renowned artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. The museum provides an augmented reality app (pictured below) so visitors can explore interactive content.



Jean-Talon Market is filled with fruit, vegetable and flower stalls along with Québec specialties

TOP: Jean-Talon Market in Little Italy
ABOVE RIGHT: Atwater Market on the bank of Lachine Canal

a wood-fired oven, the chewy golden bagels are found throughout Montréal. You'll find the best ones in the multicultural Mile End neighbourhood, home to St-Viateur Bagel and Fairmount Bagel.

There are also plenty of food halls for those who want to combine cuisines. Time Out Market Montréal, located on the second floor of the Eaton Centre shopping mall on Rue Sainte-Catherine Ouest, has 14 food stands, a cookery school and four bars across over 3,700 sqm. I found it to be an ideal spot for solo travellers, offering the opportunity to strike up conversation with other like-minded souls over a packed Poke bowl from outlet Le Blossom.

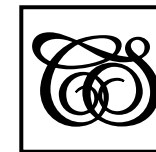
It's the city's old markets, however, that give you the chance to feel like a local. Founded in 1933, the year-round Jean-Talon Market in Little Italy is one of the city's oldest public markets and one of the largest open-air markets in North America. It is filled with fruit, vegetable and flower stalls along with Québec specialties, fishmongers and butchers. Walls are put up around the central section of the market in winter to shelter visitors from the cold weather.

My favourite spot, however, is the expansive Atwater Market, located within an Art Deco-style building on the bank of the aforementioned Lachine Canal. Merchants' stalls



overflow with fresh produce inside, while the alfresco Pôle des Saveurs area is a must-visit in the summer months, populated by picnic benches and Vietnamese and Réunion-style cuisine. The peach-coloured Le Petit Sao stand is recommended, selling Banh Mi and Vietnamese salad bowls, alongside Québec-brewed beer and refreshing homemade lemonade.

Full of Banh Mi and camera at the ready, I joined Montréalers at the Old Port for the 36th edition of the Loto-Québec International Fireworks, an annual event that had been suspended for the past two years because of the pandemic. The 2022 season began with a spectacular display above the Jacques Cartier Bridge under the theme 'Je me souviens' – I remember. And so my trip ended much as it began, with a celebration marking the start of the city's post-pandemic era. Merci Montréal and à bientôt. **BT**



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