



photo: Stephan Poulin

Unmistakeably **Montreal**



HUGO O'DOHERTY
TAKES A SPRINGTIME
JAUNT THROUGH A
FRANCOPHONE CITY
QUITE UNLIKE
ANY OTHER

PHOTOS COURTESY
OF TOURISME MONTREAL

The first Frenchman who ever came to what is now Montreal was on the hunt for China. So convinced was he that what lay downriver was the Far East, he named the rapids that blocked his way Lachine.

But it wasn't anywhere near China. Instead, and almost by accident, he began one of the most enduring and unlikely relationships of all time – a pocket of French culture in North America.

Jacques Cartier, a Breton, was the archetypal explorer – conscientious, talented, driven and loyal. In 1535, he and a few dozen countrymen navigated the great St. Lawrence

River, entering its colossal mouth in mid-summer before sailing upriver to the village of Hochelaga, an Iroquoian settlement on an island at the confluence of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers.

After exchanging a few trinkets with the locals and learning some vague snatches of information about the rivers and lakes that lay to the west, he climbed the small mountain that dominated the island, naming it in honour of his patron, King François I. *Nous nommasmes icelle montaigne le mont Royal.* Montreal was born, with a twist of Middle French.

LA FRANCOPHONIE



photo: Linda Turgeon



“A TYPICAL CLASSROOM MAY HAVE CHILDREN OF HAITIAN, NORTH AFRICAN, ITALIAN AND LEBANESE BACKGROUNDS BEING TAUGHT BY A TEACHER FROM THE JEWISH COMMUNITY, ALL SPEAKING FRENCH”

A TRUE COSMOPOLITAN

In the 478 years since Cartier first landed on the island, Montreal has grown into a major North American city of three and a half million people, many of whom effectively hibernate for the long, bitterly cold winter.

But it's spring now, and that means classic Parisian-style *terrace* dining has returned to Place Jacques-Cartier, the pedestrianised square in classy, historic Old Montreal named for the man who claimed Canada for France. You can feel the confidence around the place. The snow boots have been put away and the gloves are off, literally. And, just like in the motherland, it's time for an *aperitif*.

"There's a lot of similarities," says Kim Castlemain, a 25-year-old from Perth who moved to Montreal with her boyfriend, Joel Adams, 31, last year.

"Just in the way they have the *table d'hôte* menu and a lot of people do little traditional French things like not having much to drink while you're eating. You have something before or maybe wine later. Then they go to the markets and get all the fresh stuff, and it's a slower process. In that respect, it's very 'France French'."

France French? Yes, Montreal is one place where 'French from France' is not a tautology.

"You know that it's a French province and you know that it's really French, but when you get here, you notice it's not just little gimmicks and they're so passionate," says Kim.

But French speakers here, who constitute a majority within a multilingual fusion, came from all over. More than 40 per cent of Quebecers, for example, can trace Irish ancestry on at least one side of their family. A typical classroom may have children of Haitian, North African, Italian and Lebanese backgrounds being taught by a teacher from the Jewish community, all speaking French. It is one of the most diverse cities in the Francophone world.

"For someone who grew up in a very cosmopolitan part of Sydney or Melbourne, it might not have the same appeal and they might not

have the same attraction to Montreal that we do," says Joel, who, after a brief visit to see a friend here in 2010, took a pay cut to move to the other side of the world and work as an IT manager at a company that writes radiology software.

"But I had been thinking I wanted to get out of Perth for a while. I just turned up here and it was the last place I expected to even think about. But I thought, 'Wow, this is a really nice mix of cosmopolitan, friendly people, European flair and European languages'. It's kind of a melting pot of the things I like."



photo: Stephan Poulin

“THERE IS A JOYOUS FEELING ON THE MOUNTAIN IN SPRING. YOU HEAR IT AND FEEL IT AMONG MONTREALERS AND TOURISTS ALIKE. **LES PRINTEMPS SONT ARRIVÉES**”

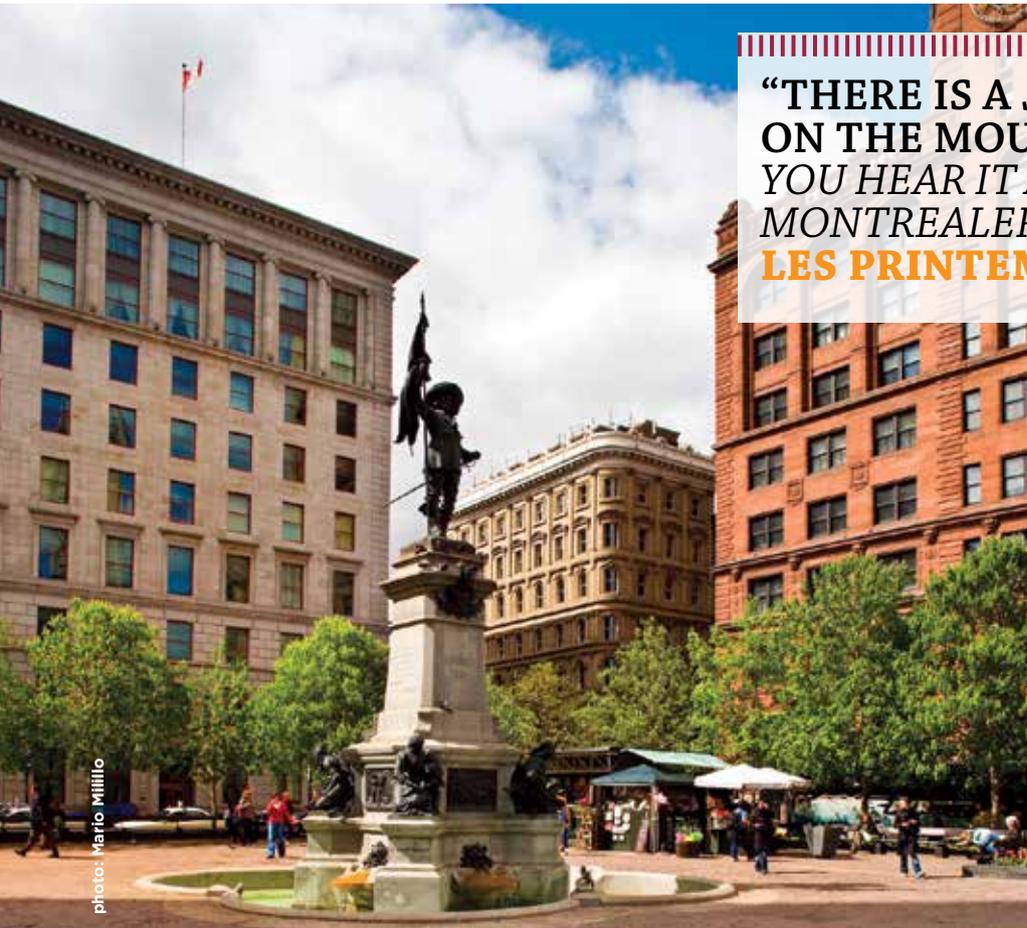


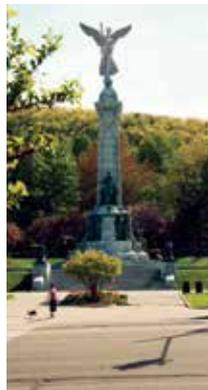
photo: Mario Millilo



TAKIN' IT EASY

Being French and yet utterly North American at the same time is what gives the city its unique flavour and unparalleled energy. All the same, it is the relaxed, homegrown Quebec *joie de vivre* that makes it an enjoyable place to be. Once a getaway for American revelers looking to find alcohol during the prohibition era, Montreal has retained the fun, convivial air that made it famous.

That atmosphere extends even to the workplace. On his way to the mountain, Cartier would have walked from Old Montreal up to what is now St-Catherine Street, the main commercial drag that bisects the downtown core. There are few suits and ties, and nobody out walking has Bluetooth



earpieces. Instead, there are smoked meat joints and sprawling café and bar patios that take over the streets every May. This is where people gather for the ubiquitous *cinq-à-sept* post-work drinks specials.

“It’s casual, but in all the good ways,” states Kim, who earlier this year was hired by one of the fastest growing retail companies in Canada. “You can just go in and wear whatever you want. Everyone is comfortable. Everyone loves their job, deserves to be there and is intelligent.”

Joel acknowledges that maybe they’re just a fortunate couple that landed on their feet, but for now he’s basking in a culture diametrically opposed to the one he experienced in Perth.

“From what I’ve seen of people going to work in the morning, people dress casually here unless they really need to be in a suit or tie. I don’t know if we’re lucky or whether it’s a reflection on Canadian corporate society, but we both work in really cool jobs in really cool companies. Casual, but get the job done professionally. They’re open and they get smart people.”

A LANGUAGE OF ITS OWN

Cartier’s route from river to mountain gets a little steeper just after you cross St-Catherine. Going through the charming campus of McGill University, an elite research university founded during the British colonial era of 1783 to 1867, Mount Royal sits gloriously behind the city, cradling it as a mother to her child.

It is an immense playground that punctures an otherwise flat landscape. Winter – when all the trees on the mountain line up like a million wedding dresses, dripping with snow – brings cross-country skiers and tobogganing, while the rest of the year sees joggers and cyclists competing with



photo: Mario Millilo

LA FRANCOPHONIE



photo: Christiane Hamelin



photo: Linda Turgeon



photo: Susan Moss

pedestrians for space. A chalet with a look-out overlooks downtown and, on a clear day, beyond toward New York State and Vermont in the US.

There is a joyous feeling on the mountain in spring. You hear it and feel it among Montrealers and tourists alike. *Les printemps sont arrivées.*

Standing at the chalet, one catches words, phrases and mannerisms that are uniquely Montreal. Language is sort of like a game here, but one its players don't even realise they're playing. The area's proximity to English-speaking culture has led to a distorted system of communication that often blends the two.

"The first thing I noticed when I got here the first time was how different it is. When we went to France last October, we understood [the language] a lot better there. I find here there's certain words that are hard for me to pronounce," says Joel. "When I think quintessential Canadian, I don't think of Montreal. It's like its own little enclave."

This is a truly idiosyncratic place when it comes to language. Nothing can prepare you for a city where your girlfriend is *ta blonde* and your man is *ton chum*, where you drive *un char* and sign off your *courriels* with a *gros bec*. We can't even blame Cartier for that, as the chances



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are he didn't send the King an email from the top of Mount Royal to let him know that a French flag had been planted in the New World.

DEFINITELY NOT CHINA

Ever since 1535, France has had something of a tumultuous affinity with this part of North America.

The 18th-century writer Voltaire dismissed it as *quelques arpents de neige* – “a few acres of snow” not worthy of the empire's attention. Charles de Gaulle, on the other hand, famously declared, “*Vive Montreal; vive le Québec libre!*” during a speech at the height of Francophone Quebec nationalism.

Today's Franco-Montreal relationship is more nuanced, but it remains distinctly apparent and exceptional. The bond is constantly changing from each generation to the next, but it's still in place. There is every sign that it will

continue for decades and centuries to come.

“Right now we're having a good time,” says Kim. This is certainly one Australian couple grabbing their chance to make the most of their young professional lives.

And with summer coming, bringing with it the largest jazz and comedy festivals in the world, as well as the FrancoFolies, the largest festival of French culture and music, life is only going to get better.

For a couple of months, the city will put on its best outfit and show itself off to the world, as well it should. Then, one day, it will suddenly end, the trees will explode into yellow, orange and brown before finally shedding whatever is left as the first snow covers the land in a thick, fluffy white blanket.

Then the cycle will begin again, a cycle that is unmistakably Montreal. 