



Travel | Old Montreal, PQ



# Finding bliss in Old Montreal

By Anne Bokma

Everybody knows Old Montreal is romantic. But we're a long married pair who has just spent many hours driving through winter sleet to get here, our coupledness sorely tested along the way.

To top it off, our teenage daughters are with us for our two-day getaway and their idea of fun leans more to shopping and fast food than cathedrals and cobblestone streets. Arriving in this historic section of Montreal, I practically roll my eyes when I catch sight of a caleche clip clopping along with a fresh-faced young couple snuggled under a fur blanket.

But as we'll soon discover, even the crustiest of couples are likely to soften under the charming spell of Old Montreal.

Arriving in the evening, we book into L Hotel, owned by multimillionaire Georges Marciano, co-founder of the Guess jeans label, who resides in the penthouse apartment. The 1870 building has an impressive art gallery displaying his private collection, including works by Roy Lichtenstein and Frank Stella.

A 1986 Andy Warhol portrait of Marciano hangs prominently in the lobby. We turn in for the night in our Parisian-inspired room with its high ceilings, Oriental carpets, long narrow windows framed by brocade drapes and elaborately puffed-up beds that promise — and deliver — a great night's sleep.

## DAY 1

After simple but elegant continental breakfast of croissants, St. Viateur bagels, cheese and pâté in L Ho-

tel's art inspired main-floor dining room, we set out to explore Old Montreal on foot. Even in the deep of winter it's an easy feat since the area measures no more than about one square kilometre. Its streets are lined with plenty to please the eye, from galleries and museums to bistros and boutiques.

Download a walking tour map at the website [tourisme-montreal.org](http://tourisme-montreal.org) to get your bearings.

If winter's chill drives you indoors, you can spend an hour or two at the nearby Montreal Science Museum or the Museum of Archeology and History (a current exhibition devoted to the Queen of Crime, author Agatha Christie, celebrates her life and the role archaeology played in it).

For lunch we pop into the sophisticated Maison Christian Faure,

a Parisian pastry shop located in a 300 year-old building, that's run by Christian Faure, once the personal pastry chef to Prince Rainier of Monaco and who has been named the best pastry chef in the world by the American Academy of Hospitality Services. Faure also runs the onsite pastry school, the first international school devoted to French pastry in Canada, where students spend \$23,000 for the six-month program.

After all that sugar we're ready for a nap, but attempt to revive ourselves with a few rounds around the outdoor Old Port Skating Rink before heading back to the hotel for some downtime, an absolute must for sleepy adults as well as teens who are perfectly prepared to play tourist as long as they can be hooked up to the feeding tube of a Wi-Fi connection every few hours.



Old Port of Montréal ice skating rink  
 Photo © MTTQ, Pictures Canada

Later we grab a quick dinner of Asian noodles at *Sésame*, located just a couple of blocks from our hotel and then take an evening stroll through Place Jacques-Cartier, a public square where small groups are huddled, warming their hands over several communal fires. A light dusting of snow blesses our heads as we make our way to the Notre Dame Basilica, a majestic 180 year-old Neo-Gothic church so wondrous it's reputed to have caused its protestant architect to convert to Catholicism. You certainly don't have to be Catholic — or religious for that matter — to revel in the theatrical decor of the sanctuary where Pierre-Elliott Trudeau had his funeral and Celine Dion got married. Even our usually cynical teens spend a few quiet moments in contemplation seated in its wooden pews.

**DAY 2**

The next day we hop on a subway for the short ride to the Montreal

Museum of Fine Arts where we start the day with ambitious plans to see as many of the 40,000-plus artworks that are spread across four pavilions. A current hit is Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's "from here to ear" exhibit (until March 27), made up of 70 zebra finches which flit about on the strings of a dozen amplified electric guitars that play prerecorded chords in an enclosed room. The museum's Pompeii exhibit runs until September and features some 200 archaeological artifacts offering a glimpse into the life of a once-thriving ancient Roman town.aaa

The nearby McCord Museum, dedicated to Canadian culture, features the whimsical Mister Rabbit's Circus exhibit (until April 17), which explores the history of life under the big top and allows you to follow a circus-themed adventure that features some 200 toys and objects from the museum's permanent collection. You can also get a valuable lesson in aboriginal his-

tory by viewing the museum's permanent *Wearing Our Identity: The First Peoples Collection*, an exploration of how First Nations' clothing helped define their culture and identity.

Back at the hotel, my husband and I indulge in a martini at the bar while the kids get their Wi-Fi fix. Then it's off to a long-anticipated dinner at *Helena* on McGill Street, where the namesake owner Helena Loureiro has a reputation as likely the finest Portuguese chef in the city. The elegant restaurant was simmering with convivial energy on a late weekday evening and, since it was our last night in Old Montreal, we dined as if we might never come back, savouring everything from seared scallops to veal tenderloin stuffed with figs, seafood stew and Alaskan cod, then a plate of perfect Portuguese custard tarts.

We were due for an early start back to Ontario the next day but my husband and I took advantage of the fact that our kids wanted to

sleep in and headed to the floating Bota Bota spa fashioned on an old ferryboat docked in the St. Lawrence.

The spa specializes in Scandinavian-inspired water circuit therapy, which involves 15 minutes in a hot sauna or eucalyptus steam room to dilate the pores and flush out toxins, followed by a heart-pounding 10-second plunge into a frigid cold bath or shower to jack up the circulation and then 20-minutes of relaxation before repeating the process a couple more times to achieve total stress reduction. The water remedy worked.

During the final relaxation phase, my husband and I reach out to hold hands like newlyweds, as we lay side by side on comfy loungers while taking in the sublime views of the city.

Soon, we'll be battling traffic and winter weather to make the long journey home. But from where we're sitting, something tells me we'd manage it all just fine.