

Travel

The Most Romantic French Vacation Doesn't Require a Transatlantic Flight



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALI INAY
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Skip the expensive flight and head to Montreal, which is the perfect place to spend a long weekend with your beloved—particularly in the summertime.

If you're thinking “romantic vacation,” maybe you're thinking “Paris.” And you're not wrong! But there's another Francophone city you should consider that may be a little closer (and a little more affordable), and thereby make your life a little easier.

With its pretty rowhouses, green alleyways, and truly incredible food, Montreal is a particularly romantic destination in the summer, when winter coats are in storage and the terraces are teeming with flaneurs. (Also, they speak French!) Plan a chill, staycation-style getaway to take it all in, and you'll win major points. It's easy to get here—a one-hour flight from New York and five hours from L.A.

To do as the locals do, rent an Airbnb in a laid-back neighborhood like the Plateau, Outremont, Mile End, Villeray, or Little Italy (a.k.a. Petite Italie). If you prefer the formality of a hotel, try [Casa Bianca](#), a chic bed-and-breakfast in a French Renaissance revival mansion that faces Mount Royal Park. Or if you feel the need to impress with a newer, fancier spot, check into [Le Mount Stephen Hotel](#), located in a landmarked 19th-century neo-Renaissance building that was once an exclusive social club and is now a posh hotel. It's downtown (read: outside the hipster zone), but you can always bike or Uber to the cooler parts of town.



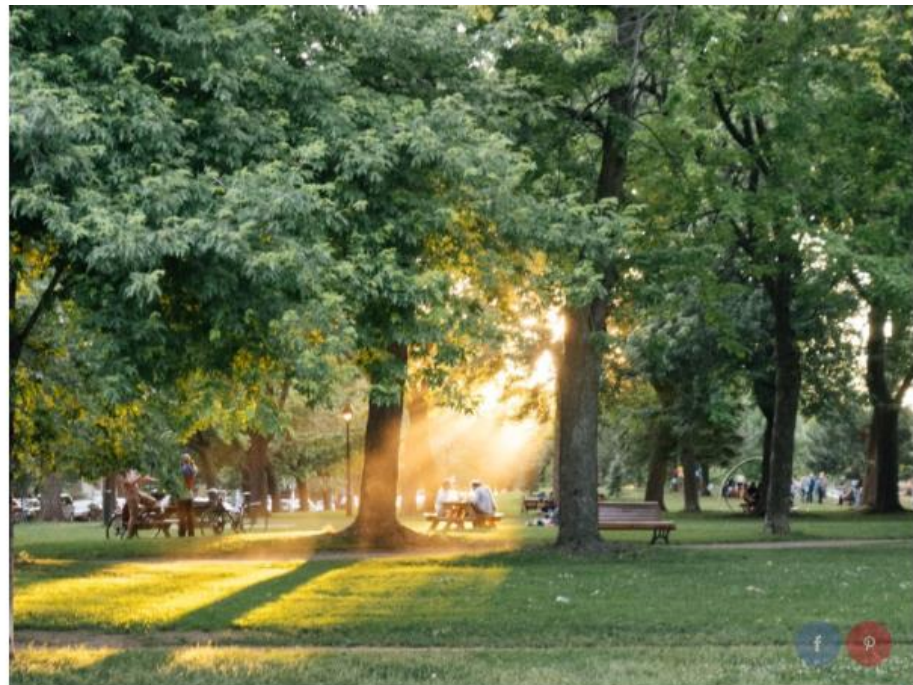
Since Montreal is a city of great cafés, you're going to need to start your day in one. **Le Butterblume**, a sun-soaked, 'gram-worthy space between Mile End and Little Italy, makes a mean fancy toast (think rhubarb butter, strawberries, mint, and flaky salt). If you're one of those I-don't-eat-breakfast people, try **Café Myriade**, which serves espresso drinks made from Vancouver's 49th Parallel Roasters and prides itself on making third-wave-quality coffee without the third-wave 'tude.



For your next adventure, hop on some Bixi bikes. Montreal's urban bike-share system is easy to use, even for English-speaking tourists, and the streets have a robust system of bike paths. When you're riding in and around the relentlessly pretty Plateau, the roads are mercifully flat (hence the name), i.e., no unsexy sweating or panting for you. Research the route and impress your date with sweet spots she'll think you discovered. Take her along the Ruelle Vertes, a network of 250 blocks of beautified back alleys that are a quirky expression of the city, and usually decorated with plants, murals, and gardens. (This app is a cheat sheet to them all—*en français*, but with plenty of helpful maps and photos that are useful to anyone.)



Once you've cruised under the umpteenth picturesque clothesline, it may be time for a pique-nique. If your ride takes you by [Marché Jean Talon](#) in Little Italy, stop and shop for provisions. The sprawling market is open year-round but is at its most bountiful in the summer, when farmers from the Quebec countryside hawk corn, berries, tomatoes, and everything else that makes the season great. If you don't make it to the market, another choice spot to stock up is at [Le Fromentier](#), a revered artisan bread baker on Rue Laurier Est, where you can get sandwiches made to order with their fresh-baked bread.



Montreal is peppered with beautiful parks large and small, but not all of them have outdoor swimming pools. If you're in the mood, pack a swimsuit, park your Bixi on the periphery of Sir Wilfrid Laurier Park, then spread out your bounty on a picnic table or in the grass and dig in. Post-lunch, take a quick dip—the words “public pool” may not inspire confidence, but it's Canada, so it's clean, egalitarian, and inexpensive.



Once you've paddled around enough to work up an appetite, dry off and stroll east on Laurier to **Patisserie Rhubarbe**. It's safe to say that Montreal has the best pastry culture in North America, and Rhubarbe, which recently moved to this new, larger location, is a prime example. This time of year, you'd do best to order a pastry made with seasonal fruit, like the rhubarbe éclair or the wild blueberry shortcake. If you're looking for something more substantial, there's a prix fixe brunch menu on the weekends and tea service from 2 to 5 P.M. on Fridays.

Since it's summer, you'll need some ice cream, and if you're lucky, the line won't be too long at **Kem Coba**, a cult vendor of glace on Avenue Fairmount in the heart of Mile End. Go for the salted butter—their signature, and legitimately unforgettable—then take your cone for a stroll through the neighborhood. There are plenty of shops to browse in, like **L'Atelier Épure**, an artist-owned jewelry store where you can score original pieces of arm (or ear, or neck, or finger) candy for your lady in the \$100-or-less zone. Nearby, **Lowell**, an outfitter for men and women on Boulevard St. Laurent, has a great selection of house-label bags and housewares you'll want to take home with you, like copper cocktail shakers and fancy stoneware bowls.



As evening approaches, stop by the wine bar [Buvette Chez Simone](#). The warmly-lit, bustling room is an ideal spot to plant yourself pre-dinner—grab a glass of natural wine and some charcuterie. You'll be tempted to stay for dinner, which is a fine choice, but if you prefer to splurge a little, check out [Montréal Plaza](#), one of the city's most talked-about restaurants. The sprawling, sophisticated spot has a fun, quirky menu, with dishes like baloney cannelloni and fried Brussels sprouts with mayonnaise and Parmesan cheese.



Since Montreal is a city that parties into the wee hours, there's always another place to hit. For a post-dinner drink, head to [Bar Kabinet](#), an intimate, vaguely Russian-themed cocktail bar that has boudoir lighting and is more artsy than it is Russki. Order a Moscow Mule, served in the proper copper mug. If you're in the mood for live music, check out [La Sala Rossa](#) and [Casa del Popolo](#), sister venues on Boulevard St. Laurent where you can stumble upon a good show with low cover most nights of the week, and dance until you can't dance anymore.