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An Honest Guide to Montreal for First Time Visitors

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PHOTO: A bustling Montreal street. (photo by Michelle Rae Uy)

It's an easy hike, a tour guide promised me the day before I set off to climb the 400 wooden steps that lead up to Chalet du Mont Royal. Yet at 200 steps, it's already taking all of my strength just to stay upright. At 300, I'm convinced that I had taken the wrong trail. By step 375, I am begging for the sweet release of death.

Is this Montreal? A place where people patiently smile at you for attempting, very badly, to pronounce French words and call a 400-step climb to the top of a hill an "easy hike"? Yes. Yes, it is.

Put your preconceived notions of the city aside. The real Montreal is unexpected, not unlike the idea you have in your head and yet so much more. If you've never been, prepare for revelations you wouldn't think to find.

Skip Old Montreal...

...and explore its neighborhoods instead.

Old Montreal may be one of the city's most famous sights, and admittedly, it's worth seeing once if only to see the historic buildings that line its cobblestone streets. However, it's also paved with souvenir shops, galleries and sightseers—all the elements that make up a very touristy spot.

To truly experience Montreal, you must spend time in its melting pot of neighborhoods. There's foodie-haven Little Italy, hip Mile End, colorful Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, quiet Villeray and the vibrant Gay Village, to name a few. It isn't called "The City of Neighborhoods" for nothing.

Poutine isn't THAT amazing...

...unless you go to the right places.

Truth be told, while the idea of cheese curds-and-gravy smothered French fries sounds divine, it must be executed well to be worth feasting on. The fries have to be the right thickness and they must be cooked to crispy perfection; the gravy must have the right consistency and not be overly salty. And the cheese curds MUST squeak.

This means that while many places in the city serve the legendary dish, you must go to the right ones to appreciate it. While very touristy, La Banquise is still an ever-reliable spot.

Rue Sainte-Catherine is touristy

...but the shopping opportunities are endless.

As La Banquise proves, not all touristy spots should be avoided at all costs. Rue Saint-Catherine may receive heavy foot traffic daily, but it's also a great area if you'd like to get some big name brand shopping done. Think of it as Montreal's Oxford Street, if on a smaller scale.

Skip the restaurants though. For an unforgettable dining experience, walk a few blocks to Ritz-Carlton Montreal. The 5-star hotel is home to [Maison Boulud](#), brainchild of 3-Michelin star Chef Daniel Boulud.

Sorry, New York. Their bagels ARE better.

Well, all right, maybe not better. But Montreal's bagels are an experience in their own right. They're not the typical bagels you'd have in the United States. They're sweeter, denser on the inside, and already toasted on the outside. And they're often made with a coat of sesame seed.

Two competing spots for the best bagel in the city title are [St. Viateur Bagel](#) and [Fairmount](#), both in Mile End.

Mile End is super hipster...

...but you cannot deny its charm.

Independent boutique shops, hip cafes, artsy performance venues, cute outdoor installations and bearded denizens make Mile End essentially Montreal's Williamsburg. But it's got that less pretentious, friendlier vibe that makes you want to stay and explore its streets.

So don't be put off. Carve out some time and pop into its many establishments. And have a chat with people—they won't judge you for being mainstream.

Plateau Mont-Royal has many photo ops...

...but it does feel a little stalker-ish taking pictures of people's homes.

It's ok though. The residents might look at you, but they won't chase you away with pitchforks. One or two might even smile at you. They're used to it. The façades of the houses, quirky and colorful, are legendary so they're used to having strangers pointing and clicking their SLRs about.

It's the best place to practice your French.

They might even give you an impromptu lesson.

In Paris, people might snicker at you for pronouncing the words wrong or wave you off irritably and switch to English instead. In Montreal, however, the warm and welcoming Montréalais are more likely to smile patiently at you while you try your hand at French. They'll even admire your attempts and respond to you in kind, as if to encourage you.

Walk everywhere...

...but do wear comfy shoes.

Though hilly, Montreal is much like New York City or London in walkability. Its sidewalks are wide and well-kept, its drivers are polite, and its streets are very safe even at night. In fact, most of the locals either walk or bike everywhere. So pack a pair of comfy shoes and give those leg muscles a good workout. There's never been a better city for it.

Eat, a lot...

...because you'll never have this much good food in North America again.

From Italian fare to Chinese dishes, from bagels to roast beef sandwiches and everything in between, the gastronomy scene in Montreal is an explosion of many cultures and palates. There are so many excellent seafood, fresh vegetables and fruits, hearty meats and delicious desserts to be had, you might feel a tad overwhelmed.

Come with a healthy appetite, take a deep breath and start at these great joints: [Café Larue & Fils](#) for morning coffee and croissant, [être Avec Toi](#) for great fish and pickled veggie dishes, [La Cabane de Danny](#) for Instagram-worthy deserts, and [Maison Boulud](#) for life-changing French fare.

Explore the art scene...

...because if there's one thing that this city does well, it's art.

Visit the [Montreal Fine Arts Museum](#), and be sure to see the groovy and immersive *REVOLUTION* exhibit. Learn about the city's history through projected images and music in a dreamlike, outdoor setting with [Cit   M  moire](#). Stop by the Notre-Dame Basilica at night for an awe-inspiring, mind-blowing viewing of [AURA](#). And take to the streets to see the city's many incredible graffiti art.

Everything's cheap...

...so do splurge on a really swanky hotel.

For a cosmopolitan city, Montreal is unbelievably cheap. Treat yourself during your visit and stay at a swanky hotel. There are a few to consider in the downtown area, which puts you in the center of everything.

Those who appreciate quirky décor and a boutique-y feel will adore newcomer [Renaissance Montreal Downtown](#), whose hip vibe and design seem a better fit for the Mile End neighborhood. Those with a more elegant and classy taste will love the [Ritz-Carlton Montreal's](#) exquisite décor, upscale atmosphere, and extra, carefully thought-out flourishes.

The winters are brutal...

...but Montreal's summer's are pure bliss.

Make like a Montréalais, and get a nourishing dose of Vitamin D. Summer festivals, [food tours](#) and bike rides await.

The view at Parc du Mont-Royal is terrific...

...but we're not sure if it's worth the long, uphill hike.

At least bring lots of water with you, and take your sweet time. Otherwise, there's a small chance you might black out from dehydration and possibly hypoxia. Not because it's so high up—it's only a hill, after all—but because 400 steps uphill is not to be taken lightly.

And whatever you do, don't let Montréalais hear you call Mont-Royal a hill. As far as they're concerned; the darn thing is a proper mountain!