



6 things to know before going to Canada



Bonsecours Market, Marche Bonsecours and Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel seen from the Bonsecours Basin, Montreal, Canada (Rolf Hicker / Getty Images/All Canada Photos)

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O Canada, land of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's equally gendered cabinet, health care for the masses and plenty of plaid. As far as travel goes, you're unlikely to experience culture shock visiting the country - but knowing a few things can make your trip go more smoothly.

Think metric (but not always)

In theory, Canadians use the metric system. In practice, it's a mishmash of metric and imperial. For example, distance and speed are posted in kilometers. To convert to miles, divide by 1.6. However, ask how tall a Canadian is and he'll answer in feet and inches, and if you're cheeky enough to ask about weight, you'll get that in pounds.

Canadians are equally inconsistent about temperature. The morning forecast of 25 degrees may make you reach for a parka, but it's Celsius shorts weather - 77 degrees Fahrenheit, to be precise. For a ballpark conversion, double the temperature in Celsius and add 30. That is, unless you happen to be using an oven: Canadians bake in Fahrenheit.

If fuel prices look exorbitant, they may be. (There's a reason Canadians head south for gas.) To figure out how much you're paying, multiply by four to go from liters to gallons, and then convert from Canadian to U.S. dollars.

Funny money

While many merchants accept American cash, it's worth repeating that Canada is, in fact, a separate country with its own currency and quirks. First, there are no pennies. Cash purchases are rounded to the nearest nickel, while credit cards are charged the exact amount. Second, if someone asks for a loonie, don't be concerned - they're referring to the \$1 coin, which has a bird on one side. By extension, the \$2 coin is called a toonie. Finally, at \$5 and above, Canadian money comes in identical denominations to the American kind, but the bills have a rainbow of colors, are made of plastic and smell faintly of maple.

Parlez-vous?

Canada has two official languages: English and French. French is the dominant language in the province of Quebec. There, you're welcome to practice but in major cities, you'll probably get "Englished" to speed things up. What's more, the Quebecois twang and slang is an ocean away from the Parisian French you may have learned in school. To practice reading French, head to the grocery store - packaged goods must have bilingual labels.

Canadians learn French in school but the farther they are from Quebec, the less likely they are to speak it. For many adults, French immersion consists of the back of a cereal box. In fact, in Toronto you're more likely to hear Italian or Punjabi; Chinese or Tagalog in Vancouver.

Beyond poutine

Canada's food identity is forged from regional specialties that meld immigrant foods with local ingredients. Poutine, consisting of fries smothered in cheese curds and gravy, originates in Quebec and often is consumed as a salve for too many drinks. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Ukrainian settlers make some of the best pirogi outside Eastern Europe, and in coastal British Columbia, a sizable Asian population means some of the best Chinese food in the world. Across the country, you'll also find opportunities to sample cuisine from the First Nations - Canada's original inhabitants - who make use of local seafood or game meats, herbs and berries.

Canadians either love or hate Tim Hortons, the northern equivalent of *Dunkin' Donuts*. Named after a hockey player, the coffee chain comes with its own vernacular. Step up to the counter for a box of Timbits (doughnut holes) and a double double (coffee with two creams and two sugars). When you're done, roll up the rim to win - that is, unfurl the edge of the coffee cup in pursuit of a prize.

Belly up

Canadian border cities are popular with young Americans because of their lower drinking age, which is as young as 18 in some provinces. But beyond hosting many first hangovers, Canada also boasts two major wine regions, located in Ontario and British Columbia. Look for the VQA (Vintners Quality Assurance) label identifying wine that was made in Canada from Canadian-grown grapes; the "Cellared in Canada" label is not equivalent.

Canada's drinking culture is as patchy as its liquor laws, which vary by province. In Quebec, it's easy to find a preprandial drink at a *cinq à sept* (literally, five to seven) or buy alcohol at a corner store. Meanwhile, in British Columbia, alcohol sales are mostly restricted to liquor stores and happy hour is a relatively new thing - as is the purchase of wine at grocery stores. The latter is still the exception rather than the rule, especially in Vancouver, where the city council prohibits such sales.

Speaking of liquor control: Order spirits in a bar and you'll get precisely one shot of booze. If you want more, you have to ask for a double. While you're at it, order the Canadian hangover cure of choice, the Caesar. It's basically a Bloody Mary with clam juice in it. Don't knock it till you try it.

Sorry, we're Canadian

One major difference between the two countries is that Canada has much stricter gun laws. Furthermore, Canadians do not have a constitutional right to be armed, and carrying concealed weapons generally is not permitted.

These policies are in keeping with Canadians' reputation for being polite. Other common descriptors? Reserved. Nice. But don't confuse either of these with friendly: Canadians prefer to smile and nod rather than openly disagree, which creates a certain emotional distance. It makes sense if you consider that Canada's unofficial values are tolerance and nonconfrontation. The exception is hockey, which is one of the few things that gets Canadians upset enough to riot - in Vancouver, when the home team loses; in Montreal, when it wins.

Finally, Canadians have a litany of uses for the word sorry, which is rarely used as an actual apology. Consider the absent-minded sorry used to squeeze past someone in a grocery store aisle, or the passive-aggressive sorry directed at the jerk who just bumped into you. (Never mind the absurdity of the injured party apologizing). If it seems obtuse, well, sorry.

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