

A sentimental journey to Montreal

Retirees return to sites of honeymoon 55 years ago

By Si Liberman

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The leaves had not yet slipped into their colorful fall suits, but my hair had turned into a barren silvery forest. Once wide-eyed, newlywed college graduates of yesteryear, here we are now retired, adventurous grandparents embarking on a sentimental journey.

As our honeymoon wound down 55 years ago, Dorothy, my wife, and I vowed we'd return to Montreal and Quebec City. Finally, the promise was about to be fulfilled.

A similar route through New York state again landed us in Lake George for an overnight stay. This time, though, we had our own car. Didn't have to borrow my father-in-law's station wagon.

Could this be the T-shirt capital of America? A walk along Lake George's main drag, Canada Street (Route 9), gives that impression. The years have

overnight Lake George visit had cost.

The drive north on Route 87 through the Adirondack Mountains was a welcome alternative to the old, two-lane Route 9 zig-zagging its way into Montreal.

Instead of settling in for a few days with my wife's five-star Canadian cousins as we did more than half a century ago, we checked into the four-star Queen Elizabeth Hotel for three nights (\$180 a night, including parking and taxes).

The city, quintessentially French with more than half of its 1.7 million with ancestral ties to France, has traded some of its Old World charm for glistening skyscrapers, underground shopping hubs, condominiums and a highly efficient transit system. Most directional signs are now in French.

Gone is the gimmicky steakhouse restaurant built on a tree branch platform that we so enjoyed in those bygone days.

Montreal's determination to gain worldwide recognition as progressive, clean, safe destination while hosting the Expo '67 World's Fair and 1976 summer Olympic Games obviously had paid off. Population Action International, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, had singled out the city as a worldwide leader in improving its residents' quality of life.

Window and comparison shopping in a subterranean mall adjacent to our hotel was a learning experience — but not much as a buying experience. Prices appeared no cheaper than those in U.S. department stores, even allowing for the weak Canadian dollar (worth about 75 U.S. cents) and the promise of a 7 percent government tax rebate on foreign visitors' short-term hotel bills and goods.

A Paris-like Bateau Mouche riverboat ride on the St. Lawrence (\$11) offered a close-up, updated view of Habitat, Expo '67's futuristic, concrete building-block looking condominium complex on the Ile Notre Dame. Some of its three-bedroom apartments have sold for \$1 million-plus, the riverboat guide said.

Quebec City was a smooth 100-mile, two-hour ride away on High-

not been kind to what had impressed us as a virginal mountain Shangri-La.

Only the 32-mile-long lake a block from the main thoroughfare looked familiar. The mass of T-shirt and souvenir shops and undistinguished downtown hotels and restaurants gave meaning to honky-tonk. The \$90 senior Holiday Inn rate for a double room was more than twice as much as what the last

Also, the Miss Montreal restaurant with its signature crispy Southern fried chicken was no more.

Instead, we feasted at Moish's steakhouse, a pricey baronial-styled eatery observing 70-plus years in business; and the Atlantic, a recommended downtown seafood house. Both were very satisfying.

Massive redevelopment in the '60s and '70s inspired by

way 20. We had no trouble making our way into the quaint, old walled section and checking into the landmark, copper-turreted, castlelike Le Chateau Frontenac Hotel.

Our 16th floor room (\$172 a night, parking and taxes included) was a huge, Victorian-styled accommodation with patterned

green wallpaper and a circular dining area. It overlooked a St. Lawrence River marina and a Japanese-owned paper plant.

The five-star, 618-room hotel sits on a bluff within walking distance of most old city attractions. This is where Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt secretly met in 1943 to hasten the defeat of Germany and Japan.

Quite a difference from the nondescript small pension room this budget-minded couple shared decades ago.

In a moment of extravagance then, we dined in the Chateau Frontenac hotel's gourmet Le Champlain room, but we were too intimidated by the price, posh trappings and formal service to feel comfortable. This time, though, our dining experiences were in nearby moderate-priced restaurants (Café de la Paix, Echaude and Auberge du Tresor) where salmon and lobster prevailed as house specialties and were thoroughly enjoyed.

We melted into crowds of post-Labor Day tourists exploring the old cliffside fortress founded in 1608 by French explorer Samuel Champlain. The center

of the lower town, reachable via a funicular or, if you have enough stamina, via 100 steps, has more 17th and 18th century buildings than anywhere else in North America.

Careful maintenance of this area has earned Quebec City the distinction of sharing a place on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites, which includes the historic center of Rome, the pyramids of Egypt and the San Antonio Missions.

Beyond the old city's walls, modern shopping centers and high-rise buildings abound, catering to the city's 500,000 residents. Within its walls, time has been encapsulated in a European mold and insulated by three miles of well-preserved walls built by the British during the War of 1812 to ward off an invading American army.

Rather than go for the half-hour, \$50 caleche ride to view the narrow cobblestone streets, as we did on our honeymoon (\$10 then), we took the AAA Tourist Book's advice and hoofed it.

The walk offered snapshot views of the city's administrative, military, religious and cultural

landmarks amidst prevailing odors of horse droppings, which we had also managed to dodge 55 years ago.

What could have made the visit even more satisfying and complete this time would have been revisiting the fenced-in B&B-type dwelling we occupied as honeymooners years ago, but we couldn't find it.

Even if the motherly female proprietor were still around, it's unlikely she'd remember us. But we'll never forget her. So taken by the ability of my wife, a French major, to communicate with her in French, she offered to host us off-season in the future at no charge.

The years flew by as my wife pursued a teaching and college supervisory career and I busied myself on a newspaper. We never did take up that surprising offer by the gracious proprietor. The gesture, however, left us with a kindred feeling about Quebec City.

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Quebec City Tourism Bureau

The tall, Victorian-style building in the background is Quebec City's historic Le Chateau Frontenac Hotel as viewed from a section of the St. Lawrence River.