

Dispatch, Montreal: The light fantastic

By Hector Fadrage | Jul 12, 2018

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The altar at the end of the "Aura" immersive audio-visual experience at Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal. Photo Credit: Hector Fadrage

MONTREAL – Before entering the Notre-Dame Basilica for "Aura," patrons are told to refrain from shooting photos and videos during the second part of the experience. They probably need not bother with the prohibition. During the approximately 20-minute, light-and-sound show, you tend to forget you have a camera – or anything else – around you.

The jaw-dropping "Aura" is a modern-day illuminated manuscript or tapestry, sharing the Good News with the masses through the play of light on monumental architecture and soaring art in lieu of the written word. But you don't have to count yourself among the faithful to enjoy the show.



Light highlights the gold on devotional art at Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal during the first part of the "Aura" experience. Photo Credit: Hector Fadruga

During the first part of the show, patrons are free to explore the aisles and altar of the 19th-century church as soothing music plays. The artwork and intricate carvings in the darkened basilica are shot through with lights that guide the eye and seem to transmute the works.

For the second part of the show, guests are invited to settle into pews in the nave and again are asked to refrain from taking photos and video. As the aisles darken and lights focus on the majestic altarpiece, the already hushed audience falls somehow more silent.

The vaulted ceiling of the basilica, normally a lovely blue implying a starry sky, seems to disappear, replaced by trees swaying in a breeze and changing with the seasons.

After the virtual winter snows, a mighty downpour begins, followed by thunder and lightning. The rain intensifies, sending torrents down the sides of the domed roof. Soon, waves from a flood of biblical proportions begin to batter the "prow" of the basilica behind the altar. Finally, in a crescendo of jubilant music, light washes over the altar and the audience is delivered into the dawn after the storm.

The combination of darkness and loud music was too much for my 4-year-old daughter, who demanded to leave during the worst of the flood scene. Indeed, the experience seemed to have a powerful effect even on the adults, who remained seated and silent even after the show ended.

"Aura" runs Tuesdays through Saturdays at Notre-Dame Basilica on Place d'Armes in Old Montreal. Tickets are \$24.50 for adults and \$14.80 for children ages 6-16. Children under 5 are admitted free.