

# Houston Chronicle

## Goodwill AND butterflies

By Francine Prose

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To loosely paraphrase Tennessee Williams' Blanche Dubois: When you travel with a family, that's when you *really* depend on the kindness of strangers. The thought occurred to me, any number of times, during a three-day weekend late in April that I spent in Montreal with my husband, Howie; our son and daughter-in-law; and three young grandchildren.

I was struck not only by how much planning and work it requires just to get from place to place and deal with jackets, the stroller, seating arrangements, food preferences, the occasional meltdown — but also how your whole day (indeed your whole trip) can be made or ruined by the way others react: the eye roll of impatience versus the generosity and thoughtfulness that signify a genuine desire to help.

The good news is that in Montreal we experienced nothing but kindness. Everyone we met — at our hotel, in restaurants, in museums and on the street — seemed so eager to make our lives easier that at moments I was shocked. Why were these people *so nice*? The kids picked up on the considerate responses and (as kids do) responded accordingly — they were on their best behavior. Meanwhile the older ones were thrilled to discover that we could drive four hours from our home in the Hudson Valley and wind up in

another country — a country where people spoke French!

Montreal feels almost like a European city — sophisticated, cosmopolitan, multilingual — a place that has been influenced by its French and English heritage, and by the generations of im-

**Montreal continues on Z6** migrants from all over the world who have come to live there.

Not only because French is so widely spoken — though everyone we met spoke English — but because of how the city looks, Montreal feels more Old World than other Canadian cities, such as Toronto and Vancouver. Walking around this supremely walkable city (which is, however, large enough to require a car or public transportation — there is a good metro system — as you get farther from the center) you feel as if you are moving through centuries of history. Near the Port of Montreal, Old Montreal — with its cobblestone streets, old stone buildings, majestic basilica and small, leafy squares and parks — you almost feel as if you could be in France. (In fact, films have been shot here, using the neighborhood as a stand-in for French cities.)

The downtown is more modern, bustling and vibrant, offering excellent museums, great shopping and sleek modern architecture. Each of the many disparate neighborhoods has its own particular character, at least partly reflecting the immigrant populations who first settled there. You can find cafes serving

espresso and cannoli in Little Italy, and Portuguese restaurants and bakeries in the city's Little Portugal.

St. Lawrence Boulevard, once the center of Montreal's large Jewish community, is the place to try the city's famous "smoked meats" — known elsewhere as pastrami and corned beef.

Among this area's most famous residents were Leonard Cohen and writers Saul Bellow and Mordecai Richler.

And while it's true that the weather can be daunting in the winter — the city gets a lot of snow, and the stones in the Old City seem to exhale cold and damp — the spring is lovely, and the summer, according to everyone I spoke to, is glorious.

Here's an example of what I mean about the goodwill that went beyond anything I'd expected — or experienced. Let me be honest: I had kind of forgotten to tell the restaurant Le Club Chasse et Pêche, in Old Montreal, about my 18-month-old grandson, Pablo. I'm not proud of it, but I had committed my little lie of omission because I had wanted, for so long, to try the well-known and justly celebrated chef Claude Pelletier's elegant and original take on what one might find at a Quebecois hunting and fishing lodge; because there were seven of us and the website said the restaurant could accommodate only six at a table; and because I thought we'd deal with the baby one way or another, rotating laps, if need be. I was prepared to be gracious when the restaurant refused to seat us — it wouldn't be their fault. I braced myself for the punitive reproof masquerading as an apology that usually begins, "We're sorry but ..."

That was not what happened. The receptionist hid his consternation beautifully, conferred with a few co-workers, then returned, smiling, to say: "My colleague is smarter than I am,

and has figured out how we can make this work." They showed us to a table against a long banquette at which we could sit Pablo between his sisters, Emilia, 11, and Malena, 7, comfortably and with enough room so that he wouldn't feel hemmed in. Before we had even ordered, they offered to bring out plates of pasta with butter and cheese for the kids.

Later, when the younger kids did get restless, a host brought over a toy animal she'd improvised, using a few wine corks and some sticks, a creature with which Pablo and Malena played happily while their parents and grandparents dined on exquisite braised piglet risotto with foie gras shavings, perfect seared scallops with fennel puree and lemon confit, halibut with chorizo and almonds, and, for dessert, maple syrup parfait with red berry sauce.

The staff was similarly resourceful and accommodating at the legendary and marvelous restaurant Joe Beef in the Little Burgundy neighborhood, widely known for its dedication to excellent, lavish portions and gourmet excess; and at Le Pied de Cochon, one of my Montreal favorites and a 10-minute drive from the old port, where, though we were by then slightly woozy from two days of feasting, I insisted that at least one of us try one of the restaurant's specialties: duck in a can. It's an ultrarich dish that — as a waiter with a can opener releases it from the can — arrives with an especially dramatic presentation, as the food and sauce and delicious aroma spill out.

All three of these restaurants are admittedly high-end, but we were treated just as nicely in simpler establishments — for example, the popular breakfast spot, Olive et Gourmando, a few blocks from our hotel in Old Montreal, where the tempting pastries vie with the menu items made with fresh fruit and eggs.

In Montreal's small but engaging Chinatown, a short walk from the Old Harbor, at the noodle shop Nouilles de Lan Zhou, we waited to be seated, as the kids watched, with enraptured fascination, the man twirling, stretching, spinning and cutting hand-pulled noodles in the restaurant window.

They also enjoyed eating on the fly as we walked through the huge Marché Jean-Talon, a covered market in what is officially the Little Italy neighborhood, but whose main streets are now lined with Vietnamese restaurants, and where one gets a powerful sense of the city's ethnic diversity. One can lunch on tacos, samosas, enchiladas and baklava, on oysters and poutine (Montreal's signature dish of french fries, gravy and cheese curd).

And the displays of artisanal cheeses and freshly caught fish are so enticing that the market is the sort of place that makes the visitor think: Really, I could live here.

Eating not only well but wonderfully is one good reason to go to Montreal, but it was only one of the reasons — and not even the principal one — that we went. The trip was, at least in the planning stages, all about the butterflies.

Several years ago, in Montreal for a few days, in the dead of winter, I asked a woman working in the gift shop at Montreal's excellent Museum of Fine Arts: What would she do if she had extra time to kill in Montreal in the winter? She replied without hesitation: I'd go see the butterflies. And she couldn't have been more right.

Every winter, from late February through April, which can still be fairly cold, though it was temperate and pleasant when we were there, Montreal's Botanical Garden turns one of its greenhouses into a butterfly jungle. The result, entitled *Butterflies Go Free*, is awe-inspiring. At any

one time, 2,000 butterflies — iridescent, brilliantly colored, elaborately patterned, are flying through the air, alighting on the lush vegetation and occasionally on a visitor. It feels a bit like walking into a scene from the Gabriel García Márquez novel, "One Hundred Years of Solitude," when one of the characters, Mauricio Babilonia, is followed constantly by swarms of yellow butterflies.

A winding path leads visitors past thickly planted borders and through open areas where knowledgeable docents stand ready to talk about butterflies and their habits. Ever since that first time I'd gone, I'd been planning to go back again with the kids.

The children (and their parents and grandparents) were appropriately mind-blown as we called each other over to see some particularly outrageous specimen. A bright blue butterfly landed on baby Pablo, who made his noise of wild enthusiasm, somewhere between a bird's caw and an adolescent wow. His sisters borrowed our phones to photograph the insects that seem to pose obligingly on banana leaves, fluttering their wings only slightly.

In fact, the kids liked all the half dozen or so greenhouses in the botanical garden's extensive complex. One of them has an Asian theme, with extraordinary bonsai, while another is planted with the cactuses and spiny plants of the American Southwestern desert.

A walk of a few minutes from the greenhouses — through one of Montreal's many pleasant parks — is the Insectarium, also part of the garden complex. Unlike the butterfly house, the insect museum operates year round. A large vitrine filled with rows of improbably shiny, garishly colored beetles provoked almost the same awe-struck response as the butterflies had.

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And the impressive array of imposing creatures — a tarantula, a scorpion — behind glass but obviously quite alive, inspired squeals of horror and excitement.

There was a lot that the kids enjoyed: walking through the Old City of **Montreal**, especially in the early mornings and on a Friday evening, when the streets were less crowded than they were on weekend afternoons, and when you could imagine you were in a different country in an earlier era; strolling through two of the most interesting neighborhoods, Westmount and the Plateau; stopping in clothing, toy and gift shops that seemed so much more various, quirky and individual — less corporate — than stores in American cities.

But for my grandchildren, the standout of the weekend, by far — even more impressive than the butterflies — was the Montreal Science Centre, also in the Old Harbor neighborhood. As a parent and grandparent, I've had plenty of experience with interactive museums designed mostly for kids, but Montreal's version is far and away the best I've ever seen.

We'd planned on spending an hour or so there, but we wound up passing a good part of the day, as Emilia and Malena ran from exhibit to exhibit, calling each other over to see the latest won-

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der they'd discovered, and Pablo ran behind, eager to see what had gotten his sisters so enthusiastic.

The science center occupies a vast space enlivened by bright colors and inventive graphics explaining what each of the dozens of displays means and what it has to teach them. A grouping of large, bright red foam building blocks demonstrates the way in which the arch is a surprisingly strong and stable architectural form; the text accompanying a ball and net (almost like something one might find in a carnival midway) describes the enormous

amount of coordination and judgment required for a child — whose nervous system is not yet fully developed — to catch a ball. "So let's be patient on the playing field" was the helpful conclusion offered.

A permanent exhibition, titled "Human," invites kids to appreciate the wonders of the body — the eyes, the ears, the mysteries of the brain. Emilia and Malena were amazed — even shocked — to learn that humans share certain genetic similarities to the banana! A robot with pincers that can be manipulated to pick up blocks teaches kids about the ingeniousness (and the challenges) of prosthetic limbs.

Other exhibits, equipped with screens — rather like video games — challenge players to stop a fictive epidemic threatening Quebec, or to catch an antelope (like the cave people did) to feed their families. An animal skeleton half buried in sand that visitors can remove with brushes allows pretend archaeologists to unearth thrilling discoveries. The feature that most excited all three of the grandchildren — so much so that we could hardly persuade them to leave — was a pad on which they could stand in the midst of a kind of moat of soapy water. By raising a circular bar immersed in the water, they could encase themselves, head to toe, in a bubble; the children's excitement was such that everyone lost sight of what scientific principle this was intended to illustrate.

What extended our stay for another hour was a free workshop in which kids and their parents were given a wide assortment of wheels, pulleys, rods and decorative feathers — material from which they could construct imaginative vehicles capable of sliding down a long piece of string. Everyone in the family becomes involved, even in the required cleanup after the construction — a brilliant aspect of the workshop, in their parents'

and grandparents' opinion.

Partly because we'd spent so much time in the science museum, there was a lot we didn't have time to do in one weekend. The kids wanted to ride the Ferris wheel, formally known as the Montreal Observation Wheel, in the Old Port of Montreal, from which you can, apparently, see the entire city; they wanted to ride the boats that tour the Old Port harbor on the St. Lawrence River; they wanted to climb the trails in Mount Royal Park in central Montreal.

Meanwhile the grown-ups were thinking, with regret, of all the excellent restaurants we hadn't had time to try.

And when the desk clerk at our wonderfully comfortable hotel, Le Saint Sulpice, who had proved marvelously accommodating and thoughtful during our stay, suggested we return at the height of summer, when the streets are full of performers and music, when — he said — the city becomes a perpetual open-air (and free!) party. All of us, children and adults, agreed: We'd be back.



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS  
A monarch butterfly is perched on the shoulder of a woman at the Montreal Science Centre in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, on Friday, July 10, 2015.



Neal Hobbs / New York Times

**Montreal** offers excellent museums, such as the Montreal Science Centre, great shopping and restaurants and neighborhoods with their own particular character.





Alain HUBER / New York Times

The Jean Talon Market, a huge market in the Little Italy neighborhood of Montreal, now also is home to many Vietnamese restaurants. The city's ethnic diversity is vast. One can lunch on tacos, samosas, oysters and poutine (french fries, gravy and cheese curd.)



Alain HUBER / New York Times