

Choose Montreal for the art, cuisine and history

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MONTREAL

In recent years, I have made it something of a habit to celebrate my birthday in some far-flung corner of the world. I've gotten a year older in Munich, Germany; Lausanne, Switzerland; New Zealand and Hong Kong among other places.

This year found me in Montreal. As birthdays go, it wasn't one of my best, weather-wise. Steel-gray skies opened up to release fat droplets of rain as I stared dispiritedly from my hotel window.

But if travel writers are supposed to possess one quality, it's resilience. After all, what could a little rain hurt?

With that in mind, I grabbed my umbrella and headed off to explore Old Montreal with its collection of ornate buildings that look as if they were transported from a Grimms' fairy tale. In actuality, they were erected by the French settlers who came here in 1642 (Montreal celebrated its 375th anniversary last year).

My first stop was at Notre Dame Basilica for a look at its impressive stained glass art before heading to Place Jacques Cartier, the gateway to the Old Port and named for the explorer who first claimed Canada for France more than a century before the founding of Montreal.

This makes it all the more baffling that the square's oldest public monument (1809) doesn't celebrate the intrepid Jacques, or even a Frenchman, but rather Britain's Admiral Horatio Nelson.

Over the years, it has been the

subject of controversy, as one might expect from a statue honoring the architect of a British victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Trafalgar.

I asked several Montrealers why this statue, but none of them seemed to know either. One did tell me that there was an unsuccessful plot in the late 19th century to blow up the column. However, it still stands in this militantly Francophone city, predating its London counterpart in Trafalgar Square by 34 years.

By now the steady rain had lessened to a drizzle, which brought out an assortment of street entertainers, from mimes and jugglers to minstrels and troubadours.

As I listened to a guitarist strum the haunting melody of "Are You Going to Scarborough Fair?" it occurred to me just how deeply this city's creative juices flow.

I have been to its wonderful jazz festival, and I have seen several performances of its famous Cirque de Soleil, however I had never heard of Moment Factory, a Montreal-based multimedia studio that has produced some 500 unique "sound and light" shows worldwide.

I was determined to rectify that, and that night, I made my way back to Notre Dame for Moment Factory's stunning show *Aura*. Entering the cathedral, I could see the stained glass panels I had marveled at earlier illuminated by thousands of flickering candles.

Taking my seat, I wasn't sure what to expect, but it definitely wasn't the laser show, coupled with orchestral music, that kept the audience mesmerized for

the next 25 minutes. Silver and gold streaks of light bounced around the nave, highlighting the cathedral's interior, while the visuals – again in multi-colored light formations – exploded in celestial starbursts. It might have been the best birthday celebration I've ever had.

I had a chance to see more of Moment Factory's work the next day at Pointe-a-Calliere, Montreal's Archaeology and History Complex. Situated on the exact spot where the city was founded, Pointe-a-Calliere combines archaeological remains with innovative exhibits to tell Montreal's story.

Descending to an underground tunnel, I arrived at what may be Moment Factory's most unusual production – a dazzling sound and light show in an even more unusual setting – the city's first sewer. Constructed over a period of six years (1832-38), there was nothing comparable in the New World at that time.

Over the course of the next few days, I was to discover that creativity was the common link that bound together Montreal's diverse neighborhoods. In the Old Port of Montreal, I treated myself to a massage at Bota Bota, a historic ferry that once plied the St. Lawrence River, and now serves as an upscale spa and yoga studio.

I took a walking tour of Plateau Mont-Royal with its multi-colored houses, outdoor staircases and narrow, shady cul-de-sac, and Mile End, the incubator to which all those creative types – artists, writers, musicians and filmmakers – gravitate.

On another day, I signed up for a foodie walking tour in one

of the city's farther flung neighborhoods, Rosemont, with its famous Jean Talon Market and tiny, hole-in-the-wall ethnic restaurants.

If there is one area in which Montreal's creativity reaches its zenith, it's in the cuisine. I had three of the best meals I've experienced west of Paris and north of New Orleans.

At Helena, a Portuguese restaurant in Old Montreal, I started with a tomato and goat cheese salad, and ended with

pork chops accompanied by clams and tomatoes, garnished with tarragon, mint and delicate sprigs of parsley.

Another memorable dinner was at Brasserie T! in the Quartier des Spectacles, Montreal's cultural heart. From my table in the tiny glass cubicle overlooking a plaza of dancing waters, I sipped a South African chardonnay, and feasted on smoked sturgeon and potatoes, gazpacho and goat cheese soufflé.

On my last day and still in

birthday mode, I decided to indulge in afternoon tea at the elegant Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Referred to as "the Grande Dame of Sherbrooke Street," it embodies all that the luxury hotel brand has become known for.

As I was ushered into the elegant Palm Court - part of a recent \$200 million renovation - and presented with a glass of champagne, I decided that rain or no rain, Montreal was a pretty good choice for a birthday celebration.



STEPHAN POULIN / Tourism Montreal

A busy night on Rue Saint-Paul in Montreal's Old Town. Visitors to the city will find plenty of arts, culinary treats and lots of history.



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Place Jacques Cartier in Old Montreal is named for the explorer who first claimed Canada for France and is the gateway to the Old Port.