

Why The Best Deal On A European Vacation Is In Canada



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I cover the best in wine, spirits, hotels and travel. [FULL BIO](#) ▾

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A vacation that delivers on scenery, old world charm and an international vibe without the jet lag and hefty airfare is right at America’s doorstep: Canada. More precisely, Montreal and Quebec City--where French is the spoken language, but everyone understands English; where the dollar is quite strong and where tourists are welcomed with a singular warmth that defines the friendly Canadian. Why travel to Paris and be subjected to rail strikes, jet lag and ballooning airfares when you can make a short hop to Canada, and for a three-day investment enjoy a truly European feel. This article begins a two-part feature on Montreal and Quebec City---and visiting both cities in one trip is quite doable. In terms of logistics, we scheduled our trip to begin in Montreal (for two days) and then purchased rail tickets for the three-hour journey to Quebec City. The tickets were about \$38 a piece and the train was quite comfortable—far nicer than any airplane—and we were deposited in the heart of the city, just a two-minute ride to our hotel.



Montreal

Montreal is the stylish big city (the second-largest in Canada with four million residents) boasting five star restaurants, designer boutiques and ample culture to explore. While the city is large, it is easily navigable and most of the attractions are within a short walk from each other. Natives are kind and more than willing to speak English if your French is awful. We made the [Hotel Monville](#) our home base—a sleek new hotel property located in between Old Montreal and the shopping district, and adjacent to the Palais des Congres. Rooms are infused with a hip urban vibe accented with glorious floor to ceiling windows that look down over the city. The bar and lounge are nice for a happy hour but the rooftop terrace with 360-degree views of the city is the best place to relax after a day of touring.

How to Spend Your Time in Montreal:

Eat: Montreal is home to the most restaurants per capita in Canada—and second only to New York City. Dining out is a sport here and the options can be overwhelming. We discovered, despite much hand-wringing over where to eat, that regardless of our choice, we ate like kings. Indeed, there is good food aplenty in Montreal.

[Maison Christian Faure](#): Epic pastry from world-renowned pastry Chef Christian Faure in a historic building in the Old Montreal. Faure also runs his pastry school from this location. You'll see more locals than tourists here and for good reason. The croissants are mountainous airy temples to butter and chocolate; ditto the macaroons and handmade candies. We made this our morning routine—about a ten minute walk from the hotel and worth every step.

Belon: An upscale oyster bar and bistro, with a tight focus on sustainable seafood. Just a two-minute walk from Hotel Monville, this two-story venue is a “bar,” and according to Canadian standards, no one under 18 is permitted to dine. We indulged in the signature Clam Bake—a dish for two featuring whole lobster, shrimp, clams, mussels, and chorizo—is a labeled for two but could have easily fed a third person.

Le Serpent: A great spot for Italian cuisine in a chic industrial space, populated with locals rather than tourists. Be sure to try the rabbit tartine—divine layers of flaky pastry and decadent rabbit.

Iberica: A hip and happening Spanish tapas experience in the heart of Montreal’s shopping district. Comprised of two floors, seating is tight but quite convivial as diners share tips with neighbors on what to order. The tapas, ceviche and paella were all executed with skill and uber fresh seafood. A fabulous stop for lunch or dinner after a day of shopping.

DO

AURA Basilica Montreal: The AURA show (put on by Moment Factory) is a captivating 30-minute multi-media light show inside the stunning Notre Dame Basilica—a testament to Gothic Revival architecture. Reservations are recommended and take time to schedule a separate tour outside of the AURA experience.



Denis Gagnon's fabulous Zipper [+]

Mount Royal Park: A great place to stretch your legs on the many miles of trails; and once at the top, enjoy sweeping views of the city. The park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, whose credits also include the gardens and grounds at Biltmore Mansion in Asheville North Carolina and Central Park in New York City. A short drive from downtown Montreal.

Old Montreal: The central street here is Rue St. Paul. For a broad selection of local artisans visit the [Bonsecours Market](#). You'll find your share of tourist trinket shops as well, for the token t-shirt, but stay the course and keep walking. A few blocks beyond the Bonsecours you'll find stylish ateliers featuring local designers—this is where the real shopping begins. Don't miss the [Atelier La Pomme](#) (a collection of local designers) or [Boutique Denis Gagnon](#)—home to Montreal's famed designer Denis Gagnon.

For more information on what to see and do in Montreal visit the [tourism website](#).

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Old Port Montreal