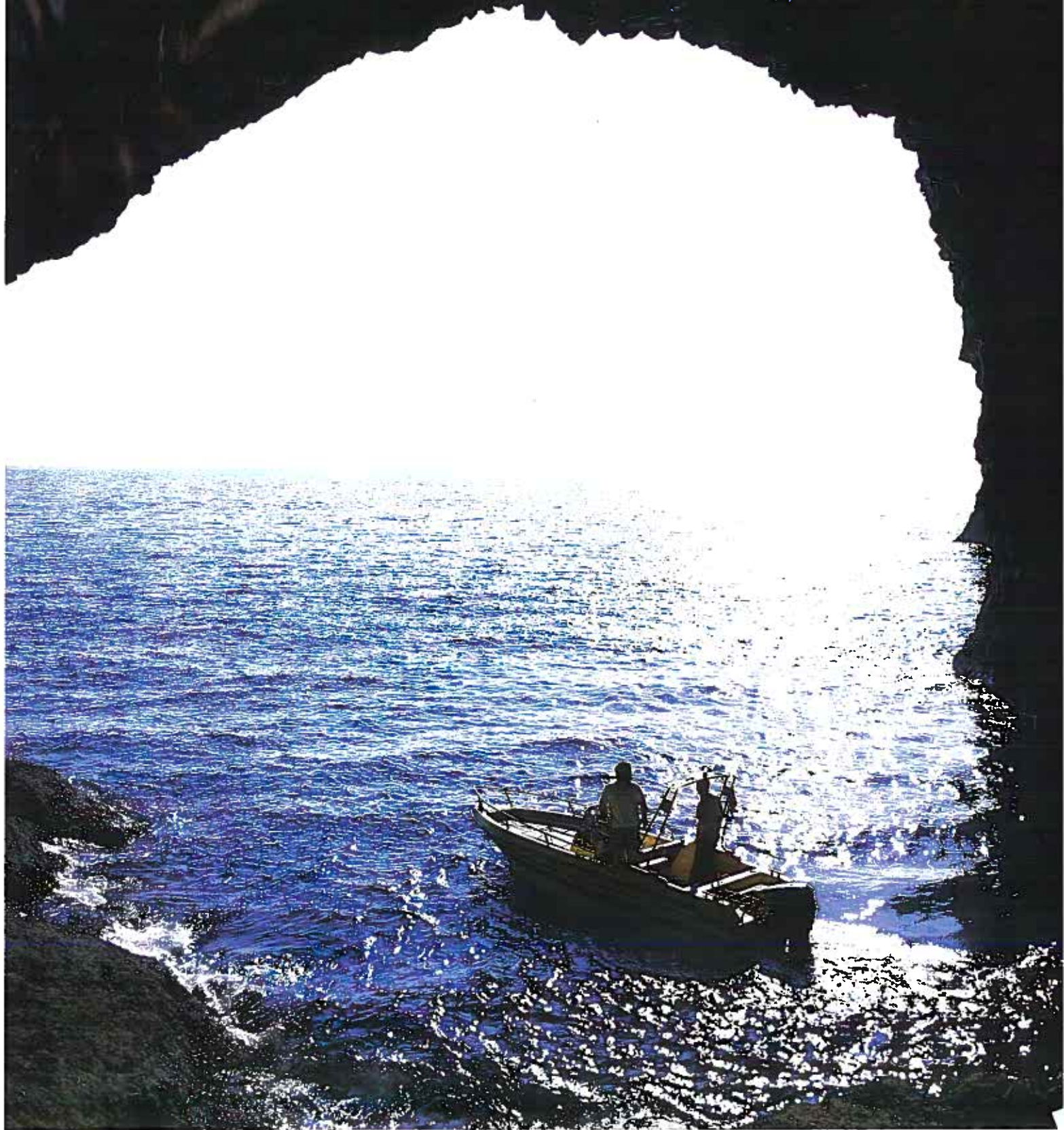


THE SOPHISTICATED TRAVELER

Part 2, September 29, 2002

The New York Times Magazine



THE SOPHISTICATED TRAVELER

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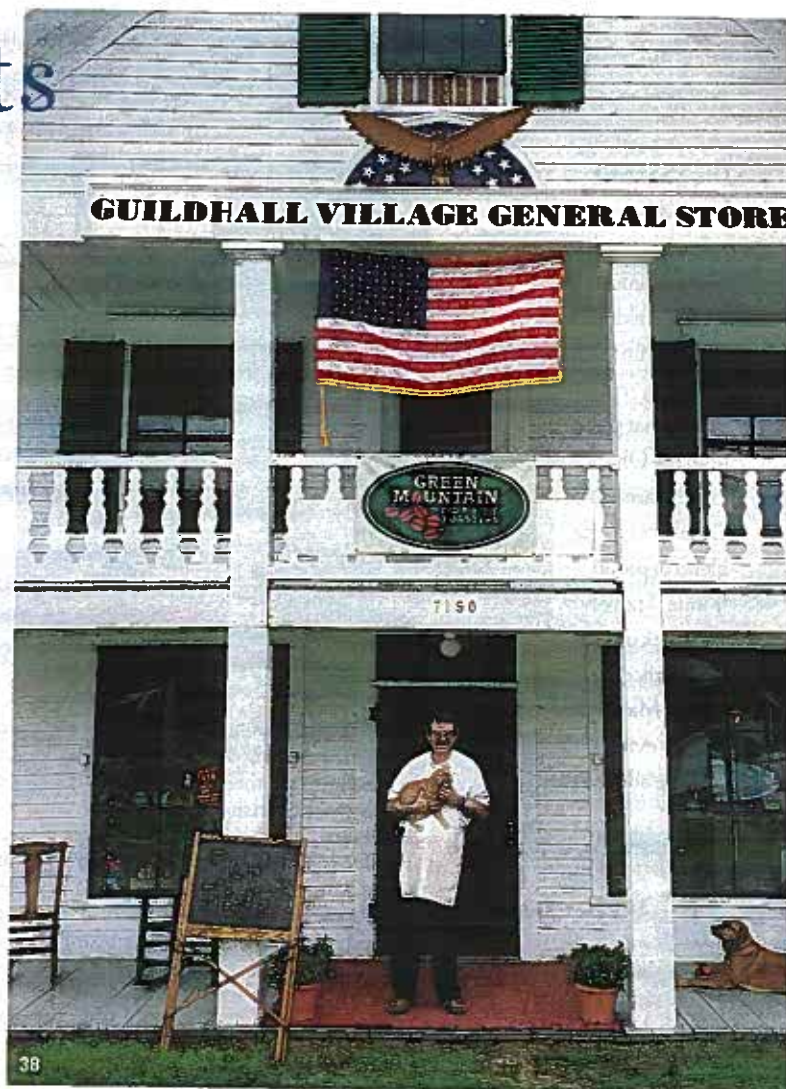
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On the Cover: The Blue Grotto on Filicudi Island.
PHOTOGRAPH BY KEN KOCHÉY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
This page: Allen Hodgdon at his store in Guildhall, Vt.
PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT LEWIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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CELEBRATION

Montreal

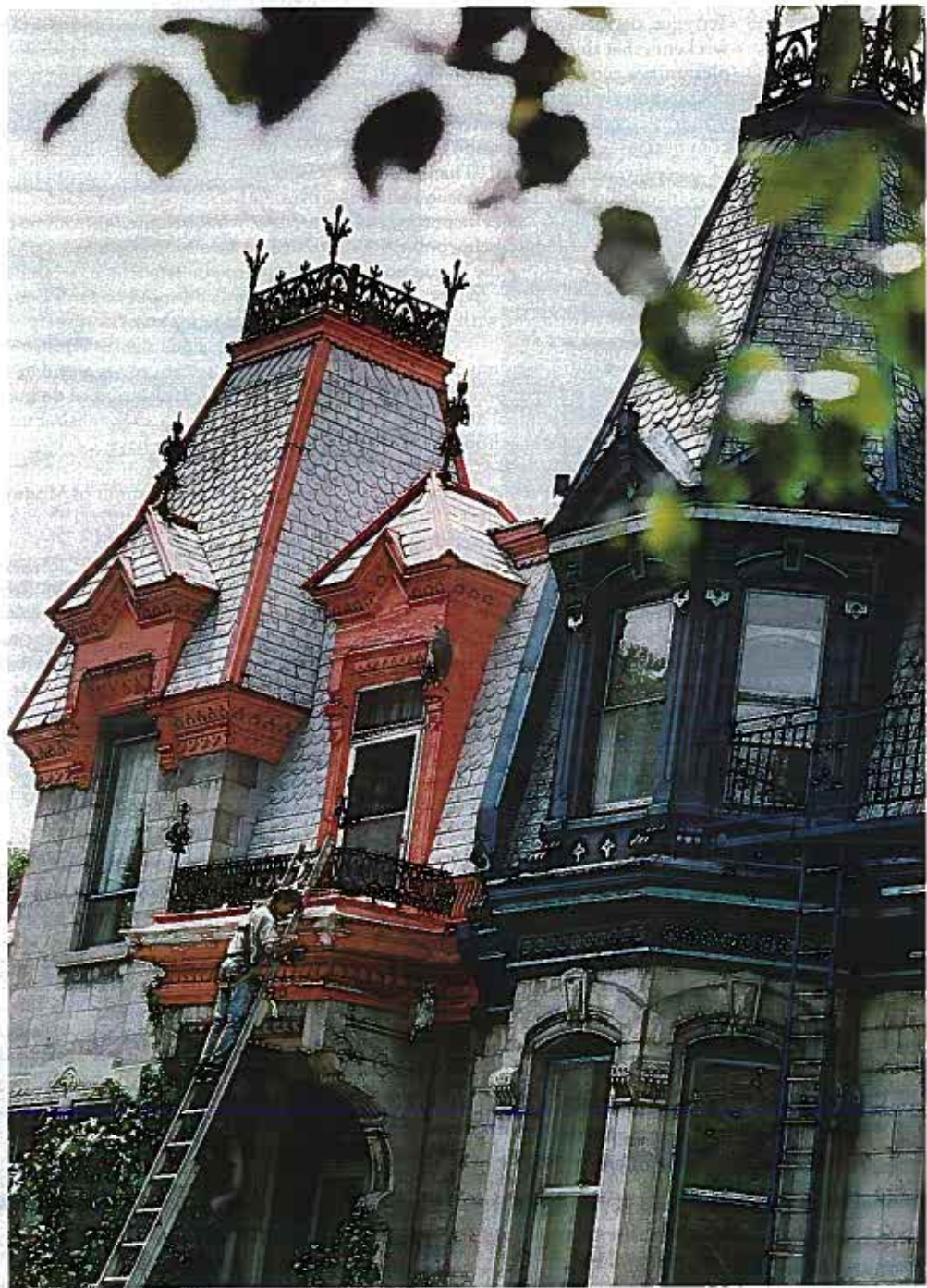
By Patricia Hampl

Montreal comes by its beguiling multiculturalism over a long history. In the mid-1500's the resident Indians welcomed the French, whose burning rivalry with the conquering English has endured for centuries. Today, old alliances and antagonisms, along with recent immigration, African, Asian, Middle Eastern, give Montreal its durable international sprit.

And you can try out your high-school French there without having to fly across the Atlantic.



Sprucing up: Vieux Montréal has been under continuing municipal and private renovation since the 60's.



MAP BY MYRA KLOCKENBRINK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Photograph by Stewart Ferebee

The Mood

"*Bonjour!* Hello!" My husband, Terrence, decided, a day into our Montreal weekend, that this doubling up of social pleasantries accounted for the feeling of uncommon civility we kept encountering. Cabdrivers, hotel clerks, waiters, Metro commuters — everybody said "Hello," "Excuse me," "Please" and "Thank you" in French, followed by the same in (usually unaccented) English. "They're putting twice the time we do into being polite," Terrence figured. Double the linguistic courtesy, double the urban civility.

It was hard to disagree with this charmed equation.

Montreal this June was much altered from the city I visited on weekends in 1964, when I was a student at Université Laval's French summer school in Quebec City. I lived with a French-Canadian family who reeled off economic inequities and cultural grievances against "the English" in dismaying detail.

As recently as 1995, when Quebec voters defeated a referendum on separation by less than 1 percent, the political identity of the city — and the economy of the province — were up for grabs. A few votes, and we would have been visiting the capital of a sovereign country, a proto-Paris in a sparky French nation-state perched atop an English and Spanish-speaking continent.

The response to the 1995 referendum defeat appears, seven years later, benign, even miraculous. Francophones, making up 69 percent of Montreal's population, seem confident but not combative in their cultural ascendancy. Separatism no longer dominates civic discourse. But Francophones did win the language war: in Quebec all public signs must be in French — first and larger, second in diminished English.

Vieux Montréal, much beloved of ambling tourists, has been under

Patricia Hampl is the author, most recently, of "I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory" (Norton).

continuing municipal and private renovation since the mid-60's. It is now home to 3,000 households and the workplace of 50,000 Montrealers. As the city likes to say, it is a "new" Old Montréal.

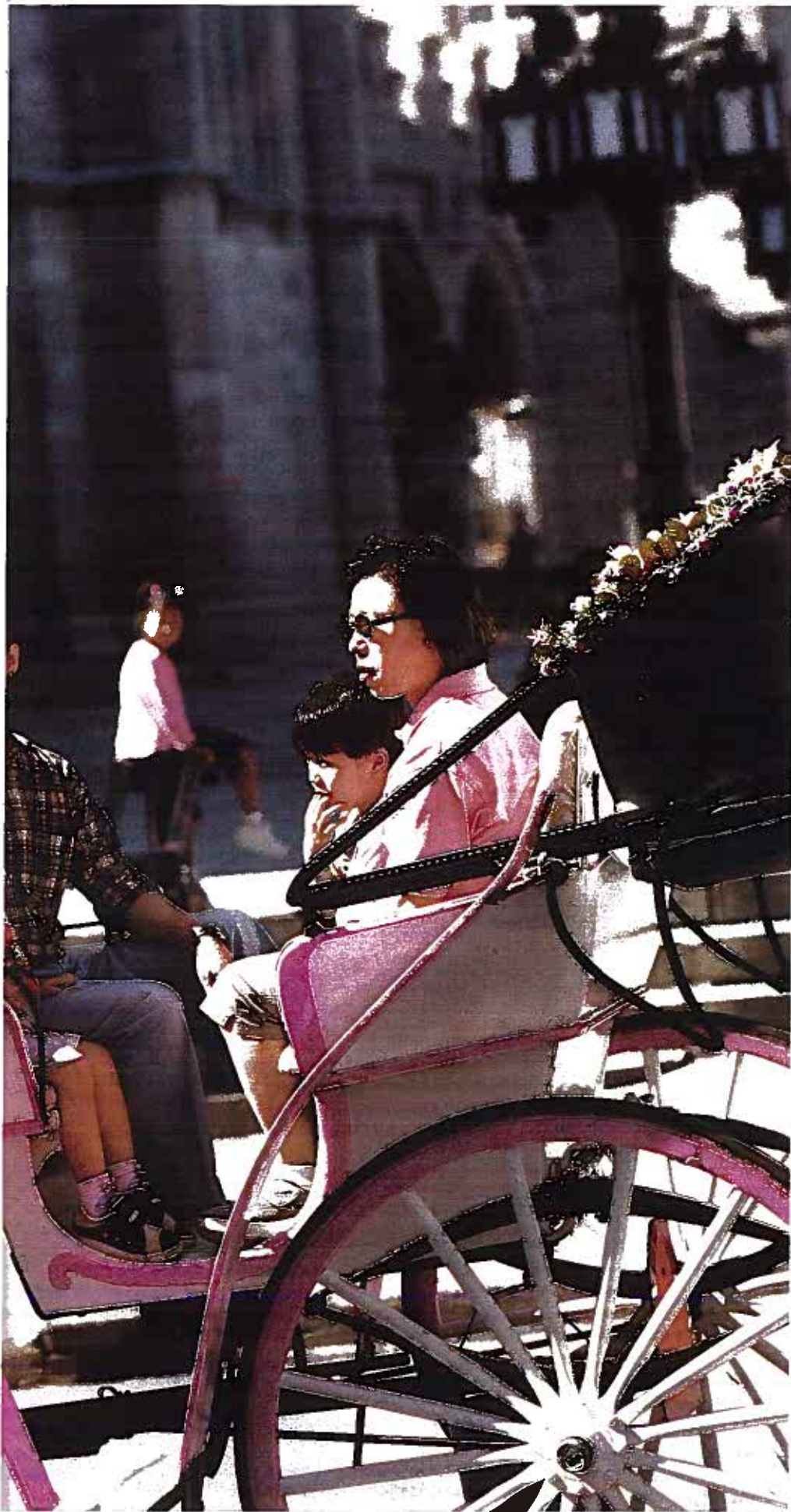
The old *quartier's* gray stone buildings have been turned into boutique hotels, shops and restaurants, as well as office suites. The seminaries, churches and convents attesting to the strenuous conversion efforts of Roman Catholic missionaries among the Indians remain. Some, like the Musée des Hospitalières de l'Hotel-Dieu, the founding home of the Hospitalières de St.-Joseph, who arrived in 1659, have been turned into cultural attractions. But the Séminaire de St.-Sulpice is still inhabited by members of the order. Meticulous gardens wink behind its wrought-iron fence on Rue Notre-Dame.

On the subject of language, our Turkish cabdriver (who spoke to us in English, responded to his staticky dispatcher in French and hailed a pal in Turkish) assured us that if you want to get ahead in Montreal — "if you want to do business" — then "It's English, English, English. English you got to have."

This wasn't apparent on Saturday, when we walked to the summit of Mount Royal to survey the city. Montreal glories in this mountain in its middle, a treasured civic space with aerial views. Without a map, we followed ascending Montrealers, a United Nations of weekenders — women in billowing saris, wand-thin Nigerian women, barrel-shaped Russians, everyone speaking any language, it seemed, but English. At the top, a plaque informed us that on Oct. 2, 1535, Jacques Cartier, "under the guidance of the Indians," had climbed the mountain and bestowed the word "Royal" on its majesty.

The light was fading as we hailed a cab to take us down to dinner. We weren't sure of the restaurant's name, and had left the address at the hotel, but our paternal driver, tie smartly knotted, assumed this addled behavior was his problem, not ours. He and his dispatcher conferred, discussed, disputed and finally concurred. He deposited us at the right place — the happily named Chorus — all smiles and good will. "*Au revoir,*" he said, "Bye-bye."





Tourists come from all over the world.

Below: Art of a sort on the Place Jacques Cartier.

Bottom: The Séminaire de St.-Sulpice, founded in 1657.



The Food

Montreal has its share of charming cafes and wine bars. These easeful places are dedicated to the philosophy of the *flâneur*: sitting, sipping, gazing. Serious meals, however, present the difficulty of deciding which restaurant, which trendy bistro or “undiscovered” Thai or Chinese or Peruvian *boîte* (name your ethnicity) to try.

The question becomes more deliciously problematical if you add, as we did, a visit to the Marché Artwater. You find yourself buying an oozing round of Brillat-Savarin, a crock packed snugly with pheasant pâté and two jewel-bright berry pastries. Who needs dinner?

About the size of a city block, the market stands like a grand old department store along the eight-mile Lachine Canal Bike Path. The building’s venerable Art Deco clock tower tolls the hour above the fruits and vegetables and artisanal cheeses as solemnly as any monastery campanile.

The day we visited, the outdoor stalls were festooned with bedding plants and fauvist cut-flower bouquets. Baskets brimmed with mixed bunches of strawberries and blueberries, raspberries, blackberries and cherries, arranged by a truck farmer with the eye of a Dutch still-life painter.

Sculptural jams and preserves shone in their pint jars, farmstead jellies glinted like miniature stained-glass windows. But the quarts of poached pears suspended in sweet vinegar with stem ginger and cinnamon and the bottles of hard-boiled eggs floating amid rosemary branches in mustard vinegar were, we decided, the *marché*’s masterworks.

Until we ventured inside. There we came upon a profligate array of charcuterie, the French easily outsmoking the Eastern Europeans with great rosy ham haunches, dark and pale sausages, 5 different boudin blancs, white wine sauerkraut and 19 different pâtés.

In the patisserie were cakes burdened with buttercream roses, tortes with architectural ambitions, tarts savory and sweet, chocolate pavés, beribboned ladyfingers clasping peaches sliced and fanned under a pane of shivering gelatin. And in a burst of patriotic cross-

cultural pastry making, a straight-sided French tart-shell was laden with maple sugar custard, the Canadian maple leaf impressed on its surface like the national seal of approval.

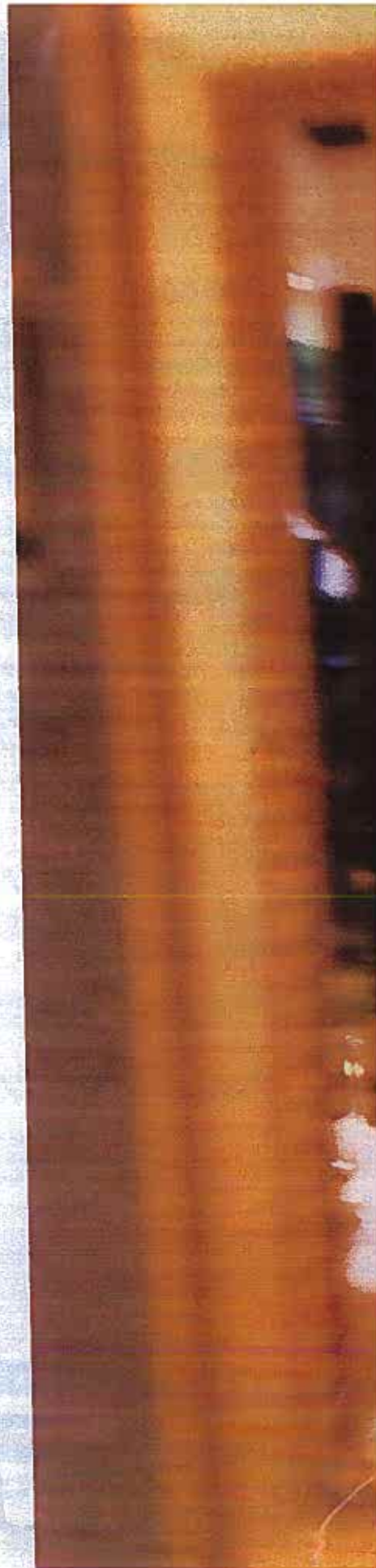
Clearly, the only way to get me out of there was to suggest dinner. Our sentimental favorite of the Montreal restaurants we tried was Chorus. The name, our waitress explained, expressed the communal spirit of everyone working in the restaurant. The food was too sophisticated to be merely homey, but blessedly pretension free.

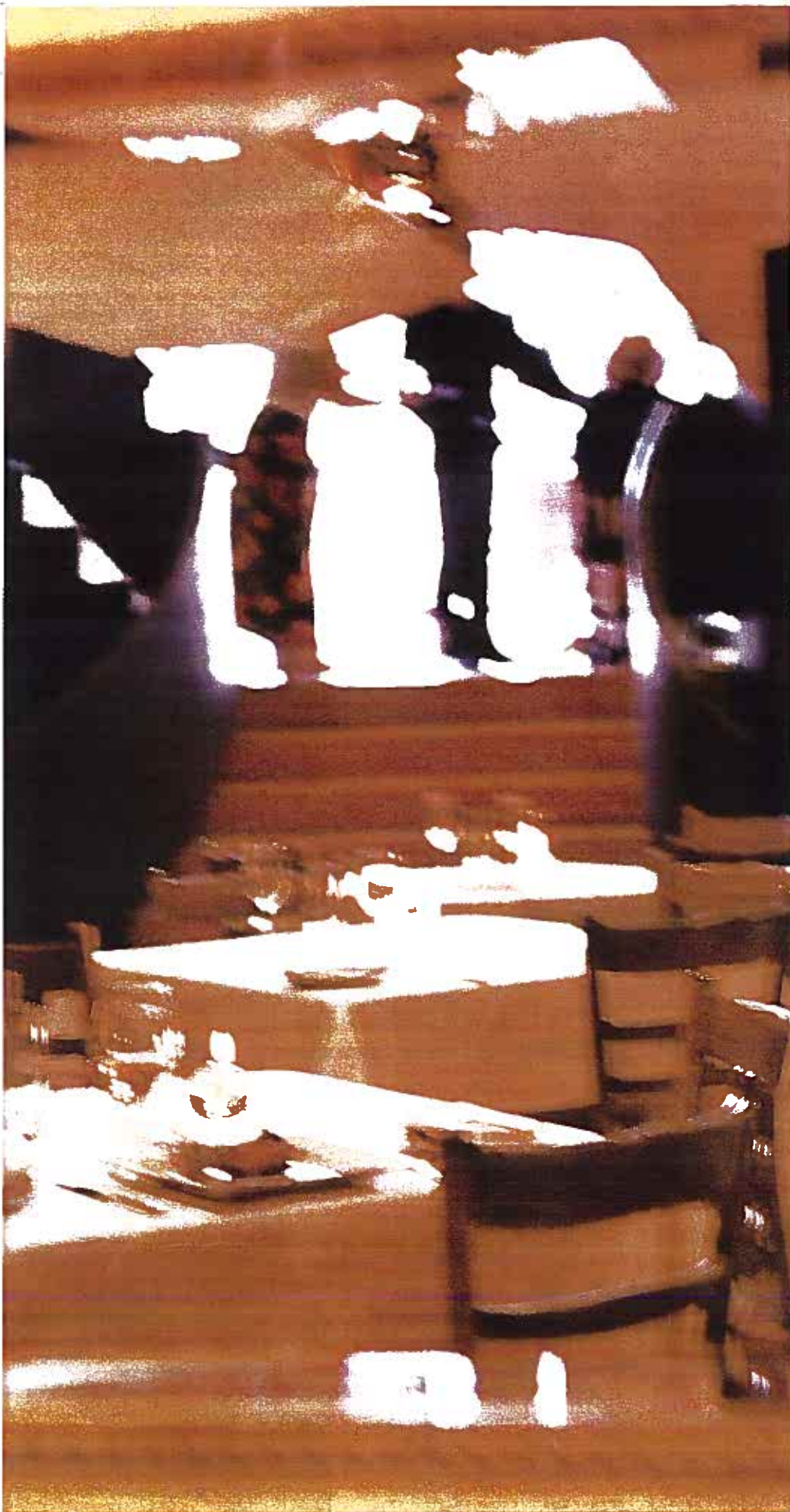
The chef sent out an *amuse-bouche* that really was a jest — a thimble of asparagus consommé peppered with red dots of lobster roe, served with a baby-food spoon. We moved smartly on to the first course of smoked pheasant and celery-root broth touched with truffle oil and a creamy chèvre trundled into *mille-feuille* with beets and potatoes. Terrence ordered Quebec lamb with artichokes, and I braved halibut and cod unapologetically cooked in lard. I requested (and was cheerfully given) a side of fennel tarte Tatin. The service was more than excellent; it was solicitous.

When we asked our waitress where she went for dinner, she pointed farther up Rue St.-Denis: “We all go to L’Express.” We had lunch there the next day where, it seemed, *le tout Montréal* was having its weekend steak frites, with much air kissing and Champagne-toasting.

Our last night we squeaked into Toqué, the most sought-after table in town. I had called a month in advance but we still had to wait for a cancellation. Despite the hype, we were soon converted, carried from the satin sheen of Cap St. Ignace quail with maple lacquer to briny Îles-de-la-Madeleine lobster and day-lily buds with beet caramel and sea parsley purée.

Then on to cloudberry sorbet and clove ice cream. And finally, the best espresso of my life accompanied by a discreet carré of chocolate so intense it caused an ache behind my eyes. Our waiter gazed down at us from behind his designer half-glasses, distant but all the more alluring for that. I was a little in love with him by the end of the chocolate. I sensed that Terrence perfectly understood.





Before the curtain rises at Chorus, the author's sentimental favorite.

Top: A dessert of many parts at Toqué.

Above: Making the alternative music scene at Casa del Popolo.

The Style

On the way to the airport our last morning, I asked our cabdriver about Montreal's famous Underground City. We hadn't made it there. The tourist brochures were enthusiastic about this web of subterranean walkways and shops, a winter city's mid-20th-century solution to its weather.

"To tell the truth," the cabby admitted, "it gives me the creeps. It's a dungeon — all those shops, the food courts."

Even as a metaphor, the "Underground City" seems all wrong. Montreal seems poised to display, above ground, the hard-won civic spirit that encompasses its two old warring cultures.

Another strong cultural strain comes from the heritage of Canada's native peoples. Like Canada generally, Montreal considers the northern wilderness integral to its urban identity. This is a city where nobody apologizes for wearing a fur coat. At Indianica, a native-arts store on Rue St.-Paul, the display cases were stocked with a remarkable collection of Inuit soapstone carvings of Arctic animals, as well as leather and fur clothing. I looked up from a rack of jackets to see the intent face of a raccoon centered on his own body fashioned into a hat, the ears perked, the gaze philosophical.

Montreal, it seems, finally likes its multiple self. This self-regard avoids smug complacency. The city can't quite decide

if it's a town on the edge of what it still imagines as back country or if it's Paris West, with Chinatown and Little Italy thrown in. But it has awakened to its variety, and appears willing to relish its diversity.

This spirit was evident at the Marché Atwater and among the global-village picnickers of Mount Royal. Here's a northern city whose inhabitants have figured out how to be outside together.

Clunky 1970's-era skyscrapers give the downtown an anonymous somewhere-in-North-America look, but they don't cramp its open-air spirit. Montreal's style transcends the hip boutiques and banner restaurants of Rue St.-Denis, enticing as they are. The venerable Holt Renfrew department store, with its 1930's streamlined moderne style, has emerged from the English-tweed doldrums on Sherbrooke Street, and is seriously chic. But "chic" doesn't capture the city's style. And certainly not its spirit.

For that we were drawn to the Jardin Botanique. We wandered all day from rose collections to the Insectarium's jeweled scarabs, on to the Chinese Dream Lake Garden and into the Japanese garden.

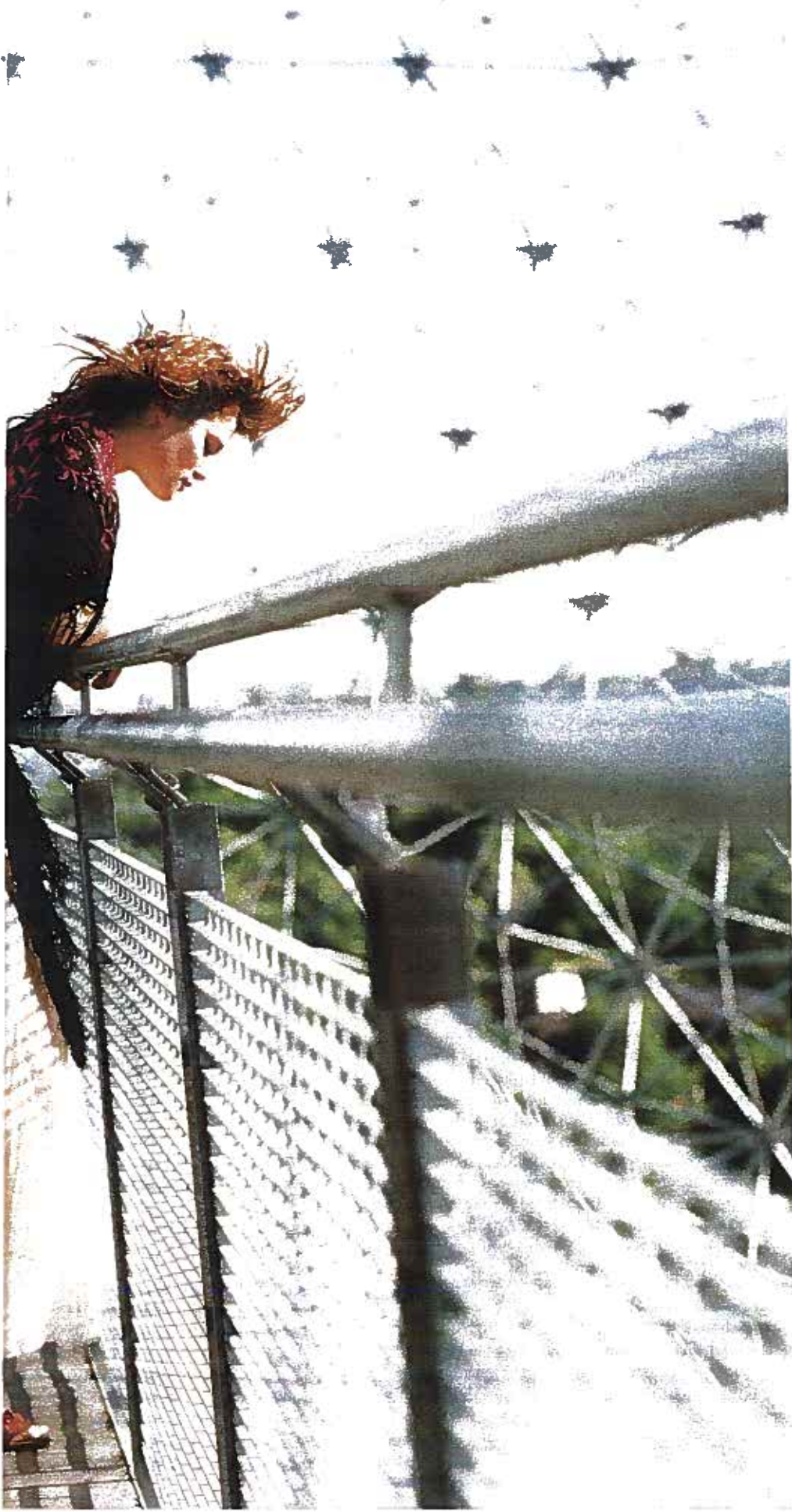
Montreal gave itself this vast collection of gardens, one of the largest in the world, in 1931, thanks to Brother Marie-Victorin, a botanist monk. "You need to give a gift, a royal gift to the City, our city," he wrote the mayor. And because, he pointed out, Montreal is obviously a woman, "you certainly can't give her a storm sewer or a police station." The solution: "A corsage for her lapel. Fill her arms to overflowing with all the roses and lilies of the field!"

The day before, we had stopped for a drink at a funky cafe, the Casa del Popolo, a center of Montreal's alternative music and poetry scene. The place was empty, awaiting the nighttime crowds.

The *barista*, tattooed and sporting spiky royal blue hair, confided that she had just moved to the city from the family farm near Ottawa. She loved Montreal, loved the Casa. "The vibe of this place," she said earnestly, "is just to give music to the people, for the people." A way-pierced servant of the public good.

Now, at the Jardin Botanique, Terrence and I sat under fragrant locust trees, eating a croque monsieur near a splashing fountain, birds dipping and diving in the spangled light. Maybe Montreal shouldn't be seen as a city, I thought. Maybe it's an improbable northern shrine to the open air, to the very idea of openness — a sanctuary of public space, open for residents' and visitors' common delight, to welcome us all, whatever our language. ■





*Marie Eve
Warren in
Buckminster
Fuller's
Biosphère,
the centerpiece
of Expo 67.
Far left: Mounties
at the port.
Below: The
venerable
Holt Renfrew,
newly chic.*

