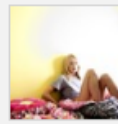


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NY CULTURE | June 27, 2012, 9:19 p.m. ET

Driving North for That French Flavor

Jazz-Hungry New Yorkers Head to Montreal for an Early-Summer Escape

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By TAD HENDRICKSON

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MONTREAL—One of the great pleasures of living in New York is leaving it—especially in the summer. Europe is always appealing, though a bit of a trek. Many city dwellers get that continental flavor instead by heading due north to Montreal.

Summers in Montreal are a revelation, particularly during the annual Festival International de Jazz de Montréal, which opens Thursday and runs through July 7. Held during the week and weekends that bookend Canada Day (July 1) and American Independence Day, the world's largest jazz festival attracts some 2 million visitors annually—40% of whom are from out of town, including 10% from the U.S. Northeast.



Enlarge Image

Jean-François Leblanc

Thousands flock to Montreal each year for its annual International Jazz Festival.

"I run into people from the station quite often," said WBGO DJ Michael Bourne, who is attending the festival this year for the 20th time, and broadcasting there on WBGO for his eighth. "I had a heart attack years ago. I got a triple bypass and I couldn't go to the festival. I wasn't mad that I had a heart attack. I was mad that I missed Montreal."

Those New Yorkers who don't drive can take an 11-hour Amtrak ride through the scenic Adirondacks, or a 75-minute flight that will have them in the airport longer than in the air.

"The trip is appealing because we can drive there, but we feel like we are somewhere quite different from New York or the U.S.," said Ariyike Diggs, an attorney who lives along the Hudson in Kingston and works in the city. "It really helps us feel like we are on holiday."



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Ms. Diggs, who has visited the jazz festival in Montreal twice with her husband, cited the music, cuisine, and being able to walk everywhere as highlights of her trips.

Whereas most major music festivals hold fans captive in isolated fields far from the host city, the historic old city and St. Lawrence River are an easy stroll from the festival's 1.5-million-square-foot site, right in the middle of the city.

"We don't try to compare to New York, but there's a certain level of sophistication in Montreal, a quality of life," said the festival's artistic director, André Ménard. "There is lots of diversity; it's a miniature of the activity in New York."



[Enlarge Image](#)
Ramin Talaie for The Wall Street Journal
New York guitarist John Pizzarelli is a regular presence.

The 33rd edition of the festival is presenting 3,000 musicians from 30 countries on 22 stages (14 indoors and eight outdoors and free). Venues range from three theaters on the Lincoln Center-like Place des Arts, at the center of the festival site, to nearby rooms like Club Soda, which was a previously a strip club.

One of the festival's main draws is the free outdoor performances

presented on stages around the site. Performances start at noon and go until midnight, though there is still after-hours fun to be had. Smart programming means artists often play more than one set in case the dense schedule forces attendees to choose between concurrent shows.

"We're going up a day early," said guitarist John Pizzarelli, a New Yorker and festival regular who is playing two nights this year. He's also bringing his family. "I decided that rather than showing up the day of, we'd go up a day early because it's Montreal and we can either catch some music or go out to dinner. Just sort of browse around and have some laughs before we actually have to go to work, which is unusual for the way we go about our business."

The sprawling, open-air shows can draw 100,000 revelers, but in Montreal, the crowds tend to remain calm and friendly.

"I remember coming out of a gig once when I was with my daughter and there was a world-music group playing and there must have been 100,000 people," Mr. Pizzarelli said. "The place was just insane; you could get through and everyone was cool, but it was just shoulder-to-shoulder craziness."

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