



Montreal

Montreal is Canada's most vibrant city, half French and half English. Famed for its festivals, its ice hockey team and an underground network of shops and restaurants that would baffle King Minos, it's a cultured place where you can stroll in safety.

Montreal is a conservative city of liberal-minded people. If that sounds contradictory, it is, but so is the second largest city in Canada. This is a city of the English and the French, as European and American as it is Canadian. It's cold in winter, hot as hell in summer.

Many of this city's three million inhabitants have never been to other parts of Canada, though a lot cross into the US at least once a year, and sometimes once a week for cheap shopping — it's only a 45-minute drive to the New York state border.

Just when you think you've mastered the usual tourist orientation problems, try negotiating Montreal's 65 kilometres of underground, a massive network connecting high-fashion shopping malls, restaurants, hotels and condominiums, a subterranean maze.

Montreal is a city which prides itself on its sense of fine style. Attend a hockey game and be sure to wear a tie. You won't see a dress-code sign posted, but regardless of where you go in this city, you'll find yourself looking sharp to fit in. Give a Montrealer a plain piece of cloth and marvel at what he can make of it — fashion in this city is a skill, an attitude and definitely a sight to see.

And then there are the French people. Montreal proper is 60 per cent francophone and 40 per cent anglophone or allophone. The province of Quebec is 80 per cent French speaking. Geographically, West of St Laurent boulevard is mostly English speaking, East is French. This division is becoming less and less evident as the younger generation of both cultures break down the invisible language border, but it will serve as a reference point for this guide. Part of this city's charm is its ability to switch with ease between several different languages. Maybe you won't understand the road signs, but stop a local and ask. Part of the fun of being a tourist is attempting to use your broken French without getting scowled at.

The major difference between Montreal and most larger cities (besides its bilingualism) is its uncanny ability to avoid the urban hell that has afflicted so many of its neighbours. Making your way around Montreal is a breeze by car, by public transport and by foot. Its *centre-ville* (downtown) core is divided into four major streets, perfect for a day's stroll and of course, a shopping blitz. Montreal is very safe, day or night, and lacks that frantic New York pace that makes tourists uneasy. The ideal way to see it is to relax, set your own pace, and explore.

BY AVA CHISLING