

On Montréal

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Officially the second largest French-speaking city in the world after Paris, the French-speaking metropolis of the New World, Montréal is perhaps best described as a bilingual, multicultural city. Even in the Frenchier quarters of the city, a Thai restaurant or a kippa-wearing local will ruin the cliché.

At first glance, Montréal's linguistic geography is simple. Loosely, one may say West is English, *Est* is French. But the fuzzy borders between the two worlds create fascinating spaces where conversations switch fluidly from one language to the other, or more surprisingly, where people speak different languages to one another without seeming to notice the absurdity of the scene: "Bonjour! -Hello. -Vous n'avez plus Le Devoir ? -No. Only The Gazette left. -Ok, merci. -No problem." Purely French or English neighborhoods hardly exist anymore and that mixed quality is found all over the island, even in the slightly French accent of old-stock Montréal "anglos," or in the perfect pronunciation "francos" take on to say English words.

Montréal's cultural melting pot is further complicated by its mixed immigrant community. Wander from North to South on Boulevard Saint-Laurent. You'll first pass through the Italian quarter, one of the oldest ethnic communities in the city, with renowned institutions such as the Caffè Italia and Milano's supermarket. Then swerve right to the Greek neighborhood on Avenue du Parc, and back left to the Portuguese quarter around St-Urbain and Marie-Anne, where on a sunny Sunday little girls in white satin dresses walk to communion with their families. Bars and nightclubs line the street as it approaches Rue Sherbrooke. Further south, the small Chinatown follows La Gauchetière Ouest. Contrary to other Canadian cities where immigration has created largely closed ghettos, Montréal's

immigrants have established themselves in the heart of the city. And while Irish and Italian immigrations go back far enough that many a French Canadian will go by the surname MacComber or Vezina, the various waves all seem to have found some place in the city's vibrant cultural and culinary scene. Montréalers take pride in this diversity and will happily detail their latest exotic discovery, be it the best Ethiopian restaurant in town or the latest "salsa" club.

There is also a certain "trashy," port-city, quality to Montréal. When Saint-Laurent plunges into downtown towards the intersection of Sainte-Catherine, strip clubs, sex shops, and tattoo parlors line the "red light" district. Strangely enough, these institutions share the street with hip concert halls, theaters and even a university, highlighting the city's surprising capacity to harbor very diverse lifestyles at a stone's throw from one another. Montréal's "alternative" culture has given rise to a thriving musical scene, but also to internationally-recognized contemporary artists. From jazz to independent theater, abundant summer festivals reflect culture's central role in the city's identity.

Just as Montréal's ethnic and cultural identities are diverse, the city's look is also quite hard to pin down. The Revolution tranquille, the decade from 1960 to 1970 that saw Quebec's Francophones shed their Catholic past and the whole province modernize, left its trace on architecture with an unfortunately pronounced taste for concrete. Inaugurated in 1966, the city's subway, decorated in oranges and maroons, aquas, and purples, is a testimonial to the esthetics of those booming times. These kitsch memorials are interspersed with Montréal's classier, properly 19th century brick buildings, but also with the modern, sophisticated interiors of restaurants, cafés

and clubs, and with a touch of colonial Nouvelle-France on greystone buildings.

Visitors tired from this kaleidoscope of styles and colors might want to retire into the streets of Outremont or Westmount, the twin municipalities to the North and South of Mont-Royal, the mountain that sits in the middle of the island. There at last large Victorian houses in matching colors with matching gardens and front porches sit side by side and the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves soothes the mind. As they walk across to the parc du Mont-Royal, sagacious tourists will wonder about this classic 19th century park's resemblance to a more well-known city park, only to discover that a certain landscape designer, having won fame for his New York masterpiece, was hired by the city of Montréal in 1873 to remodel this green space. Exiting the park, another one of Montréal's dichotomies strikes the eye: to the south a very North American city center complete with shopping malls and tall buildings, to the East, another downtown, the Plateau neighborhood, beckons with its cafés and boutiques.

With varied ingredients, Montréal cooks up a tasty and uncommon meal. Attempts to explain this unique blend have been made, but the small metropolis is best savored with a synthetic mindset and a curious eye. ■