

36 Hours in Montreal

Canada's second-largest city has an atmospheric Old Town that everyone flocks to, but there are also outlying neighborhoods to explore, along with natural wine bars, street art and pop-up markets.

Image



The dome of Bonsecours Market, as seen through Le Grande roue de Montreal, an observation wheel, in Old Montreal. Credit: Christine Muschi for The New York Times

By Elaine Glusac

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Its cobblestone streets and French architecture make Old Montreal, the original settlement on the St. Lawrence Seaway, compelling. But the second largest city in Canada, now 376 years old, also has much to offer in its surrounding neighborhoods. From the new restaurants of Gay Village to the annually updated murals of the Plateau and the trendy shopping of Mile End, the city's districts make a strong case for buying a subway pass. Street festivals, outdoor performances, pop-up markets: Montreal so

likes to mingle that even tourism boosters call it “the smoking and drinking section of Canada.” Come for the innovative food and drink — namely, the recently opened natural wine bars, speakeasies and restaurants serving Quebecois small plates — and stay for the culture, especially the new mural tours, digital light shows and symphonic experiments.

Friday

1) 3 p.m. Meet Montreal’s Masters

The expansive [Montreal Museum of Fine Arts](#) is known for its vast collection, including encyclopedic holdings of graphic and decorative arts. Narrow it down by focusing on its Quebecois and Canadian art housed in a former Romanesque Revival church, one of five pavilions at the museum. Start at the top level with Inuit art and work your way down over five more levels, progressing from the 1700s to the 1970s. This is an immersive dive into Quebecois painting and the talents of Montrealers specifically, starring the moody landscapes of James Wilson Morrice, 1920s modernist portraits from the Beaver Hall Group, the urban landscapes of Marc-Aurèle Fortin and the abstractions by Jean-Paul Riopelle.

2) 6 p.m. Cathedral of Light

Montreal is a city filled with churches, but few match the architectural splendor of the 19th-century [Notre-Dame Basilica](#) whose original Protestant designer, James O’Donnell, was so moved by the work that he converted to Catholicism when he finished the job. In its new sound and light show, [Aura](#) (admission, 24.50 Canadian dollars, or about \$18.80), the neo-Gothic interiors get the 21st-century digital treatment from Moment Factory, the Montreal-based multimedia studio that is also responsible for the climate-influenced lighting of the river-spanning [Jacques Cartier Bridge](#). The 20-minute sound-and-light spectacle traces the arches, columns, altar and vaulted ceiling in colorful rays and uses them as canvases for projected images of lightning, shooting stars, crashing waves and autumnal leaves, all of which generate nondenominational awe.

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3) 7:30 p.m. Village People

When the chef Antonin Mousseau-Rivard opened [Le Mousso](#) in 2015, it became an instant classic for inventive set-menu meals in a laid-back setting where diners could hear the jovial staff shouting out orders in the subterranean kitchen. Now the team has expanded, opening Le Petit Mousso, offering an à la carte sample of Le Mousso in the original space and moving its parent next door. The menu changes frequently but may include bites like a foie gras nub within a cloud of cotton candy and crab folded taco-style in a thin slice of rutabaga (dishes run from about 15 to 85 dollars). The grazing format makes it easier to hit two hot spots in one trip to the Gay Village neighborhood. Head around the corner to Caribbean-rum-centric [Agrikol](#), backed by Win Butler and Régine Chassagne of the band Arcade Fire, for Haitian beignets and a ti-punch.

Image



At Montreal Plaza, an energetic brasserie with an open kitchen, diners can enjoy dishes, including tuna "soup." Credit Christine Muschi for The New York Times

Saturday

4) 10 a.m. Street Art Stroll

In the past five years, the commercial buildings lining St.-Laurent Boulevard in the Plateau district have emerged as a gallery for street artists in Montreal, and many of the walls are painted over during its annual [Mural Festival](#) each June. Take a two-hour walk (25 dollars) to two dozen of these vibrant works with the [mural tour](#) from Spade & Palacio, an innovative company run by native Montrealers Danny Pavlopoulos and Anne-Marie Pellerin, who are so keen on their city they leave tour-goers with a list of their favorite bars, breweries, coffee shops and restaurants. The tour visits Kevin Ledo's monumental portrait of the late Leonard Cohen; the local street artist Fluke's depiction of Jackie Robinson, who first played professional baseball in Montreal; and a 2018 contribution by Michael Reeder facing the mural-ringed parking lot that is the center of the annual festival.

5) 12 p.m. A Storied Sandwich

Montreal is known for its bagels, but its Jewish community has also made smoked meat a culinary centerpiece of the city's delicatessens. Join the line at [Schwartz's Deli](#), which has been smoking brisket since Reuben Schwartz, an immigrant from Romania, opened shop in 1928. The narrow room festooned in old press clippings is perpetually crowded, and good cheer prevails at shared tables and counter

stools. The substantial smoked meat sandwich (9.95 dollars) comes with a generous dousing of yellow mustard and is accompanied by a large dill pickle and a black cherry soda.

EDITORS' PICKS



At Brooklyn Cantine, sidewalk seating consists of vintage folding lawn chairs. Credit Christine Muschi for The New York Times

6) 1 p.m. Style by the Mile

Montreal's creative class, a group that includes Cirque du Soleil performers, and digital art and video game creators who helped the city earn Unesco's City of Design distinction, surfaces in striking street fashion, and the Mile End neighborhood is the best place to shop for Montreal-made style. [Annex Vintage](#) combines carefully selected thrift items with Stay Home Club T-shirts, pins and patches. The designer Sabina Barilà sells her vintage-inspired wrap dresses and striped palazzo pants at [La Montréalaise Atelier](#). [Yul Designs](#) showcases the work of local fashion, graphics, housewares and jewelry designers. [Lowell Mtl](#) sells locally made leather bags, with several styles named after Montreal neighborhoods. Nearby cafes provide ample respite, including [Brooklyn Cantine](#), where sidewalk seating consists of vintage folding lawn chairs, or the competing bagel shops [Fairmount](#) and [St-Viateur](#).

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7) 5 p.m. A Movable Feast

Judging by the number of new wine bars, Montrealers love natural wine. Follow the throngs to the new [Mon Lapin](#) in Little Italy. From the owners of the acclaimed restaurant Joe Beef, Mon Lapin (meaning My Rabbit) serves mostly small plates on a daily-changing menu — recent dishes included peppered whelks (13 dollars) and duck with rhubarb (25 dollars) — in a small and perpetually packed room decorated in cheeky rabbit-themed art. The place doesn't take reservations, so if you're squeezed out, head over to [Montréal Plaza](#). Its partners, Charles-Antoine Crête and Cheryl Johnson, formerly worked at the high-end Le Toqué downtown. Here, in an energetic brasserie with an open kitchen, they let their hair down — the “Star Wars” theme song plays during birthday celebrations — but keep culinary standards high. Specials may include succulent lobster salad that arrives under the shell (25 dollars) or veal heart shaved in a salad (21 dollars).

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The Cloakroom Bar, which can seat 25 people, is concealed behind a mirror in a men's clothing shop. Credit: Christine Muschi for The New York Times

8) 8 p.m. Culture Trip

Montreal's cultural scene covers the spectrum, from circus troops and comedy festivals to theater in both English and French, the Montreal Opera, Grand Ballet and the symphony. The multi-venue Place des Arts makes one-stop shopping for many performing arts companies. A ticket to the [Montréal Symphony Orchestra](#), directed by the conductor Kent Nagano, provides entree to the acoustically state-of-the-art, 2,100-seat concert hall the Maison Symphonique de Montréal, where programming ranges from the classics to science fiction soundtracks.

9) 10 p.m. Speakeasy Hour

Those in the know in Montreal scuttle off to drink at secret addresses in increasingly hard-to-find bars. Among a pair of newcomers, the [Coldroom](#) in Old Montreal is marked by a black door with a duck logo in the cement threshold. Ring the bell and a staffer guides you through a warren of pipelined stairways to the basement bar, a circa 1887 cold storage cellar, where bartenders specialize in seasonal cocktails like summer's gin-basil-cucumber-green-strawberry Starling (13 dollars). Even more discrete, the [Cloakroom Bar](#) in the Golden Square Mile is concealed behind a mirror in a men's clothing shop. Only 25 people can squeeze into the walk-in-closet-size space where bartenders fittingly mix up made-to-order cocktails based on your flavor preferences (starting around 16 dollars).

Image



Place Jacques-Cartier, a square in Old Montreal, is filled with terrace restaurants and street artists. Credit Christinne Muschi for The New York Times

Sunday

10) 9 a.m. D.I.Y. River Tour

Montreal has 400 miles of bike paths and an extensive shared bike system called [Bixi](#) (5 dollars for one day; download the Bixi app for maps to bike stations). Pick one up near the river in the Old Port and follow the St. Lawrence to a series of riverside architectural sites starting with Habitat 67, the influential housing project of stacked boxes designed by the architect Moshe Safdie for Expo '67. Catch the roughly nine-mile bike path that follows the park-buffered Lachine Canal past the grain silos that attest to the area's industrial heritage, repurposed warehouses and plenty of new construction. Double back to the canal-side [Atwater Market](#), one of Montreal's lively green markets, to browse the bakeries, butcher shops, cheese mongers and flower stalls with a café au lait in hand from Première Moisson Atwater bakery.

11) 11 a.m. Anglophile Brunch

Reward your cycling efforts with brunch at the grand [Bar George](#), newly opened in what was once the elaborate 1880-vintage home of Sir George Stephen, the former president of the Bank of Montreal and the Canadian Pacific Railway. Grab a seat at the oval bar in the main lounge to gorge visually on 300-year-old stained glass, the carved Ceylon satinwood ceiling and Italian onyx fireplace (impressive even in its day, the house was temporarily dismantled in 1893 and exhibited at the World's Fair in Chicago). Savor it over George's full English breakfast (20 dollars), including black pudding and a Bloody Caesar (11 dollars), Canada's favorite eye-opener.

LODGING

St.-Laurent Boulevard threads through three distinct neighborhoods — the Plateau, Mile End and Little Italy — that are popular on [Airbnb](#), easily reached by bus and close to the Metro Orange line subway. One-bedroom apartments, condos and lofts in these areas tend to cost between \$42 and \$128. [Airbnb.com](#).

The modern new [Hôtel Monville](#) near Old Montreal has 269 loft-like rooms with window walls, a lobby papered in black and white photos of city landmarks, staff uniforms designed by the local brand Frank and Oak and room service delivery by robot. Rooms from 198 dollars; 1041 Bleury Street, [hotelmonville.com](#). Newly renovated, the 950-room [Fairmont the Queen Elizabeth](#) now has a trendy lobby bar, Nacarat, and a gourmet food court, Artisans. Guests can splurge on room 1742, the room where John Lennon and Yoko Ono staged their 1969 "bed-in" protest of the Vietnam War, newly decorated in period style. Rooms from 299 dollars; 900 René Lévesque Boulevard West, [Fairmont.com/queen-elizabeth-montreal](#).

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