

Early lessons for an ex-Buffalonian beginning a year in Montreal

BY CINDY SKRZYCKI

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

MONTREAL, Quebec – This is not a visit. This is a long-term stay in Canada. It's more than crossing the Peace Bridge to visit the Chinese food icon, Ming Teh, in Fort Erie.

This is daily life in Montreal, the largest city in Quebec, and I'm a semi-resident working at a Canadian institution, McGill University. Until June, my husband and I are fellows there, teaching at a new graduate program.

This has been, since late August, an immersive dip into one of Canada's most interesting provinces, and its most distinctive city, places that have been both wrecked and enriched by its differences from the rest of Canada.

Language, nationalism and resentment in the other nine provinces over Quebec's franco-phone culture lend a sharp flavor to every aspect of life here: The school system, the food, public policies, community expectations, how people dress and comport themselves, and the official spoken language – French.

Montreal is a gastronomic and cultural display case. There are giant open-air markets with locally grown foods, flowers, pastries, sausages, seafood, cheese and just about anything you would like to put on your table or in your stomach. Cafes and croissants abound.

In just one neighborhood, there are multiples of Greek and Italian restaurants and the remarkably

sweet, flat Montreal bagels taken out of an open-hearth oven at St-Viateur Bagel Shop, open 24 hours a day. Orthodox Jews and millennials are regulars.

One of my first Canadian experiences beyond Ontario was a summer trip to Montreal. I was in grade school. My parents mostly wanted to see the Saint Joseph Oratory, a basilica on Mount Royal. It is the largest church in Canada and a reminder that French Quebec once was dominated by the church in ways personal and professional.

Now, throughout the city, there are empty convents, huge beautiful sprawling pieces of property ringed with small windows, each signaling that one nun may have lived in one small room.

Religious observance in Montreal has all but disappeared, in large measure because of a backlash against the near-absolute power wielded by the clergy and because of the way orphaned children and indigenous people were abused. There are lasting scars.

The face of Montreal is language tolerance, though many Americans believe only French is spoken in Montreal. Not so.

Some 21% of Montrealers are trilingual, speaking French, English and a mother tongue, making Montreal Canada's most trilingual city, according to Statistics Canada. A much higher percent said they have knowledge of French and English. The transition for some is completely fluid.

In fact, it is often hard to get people in the city to speak any

French to someone who obviously speaks English. Hence, the salutation, "Bonjour, Hi."

But in Saint-Sauveur-des-Monts, a charming village only about an hour north of the city, there is an abundance of ski areas, but little English rolls off the tongue. Best to order your poutine in French.

Most Americans think little of and about Canada. When they do, they often are in error. I thought I knew a good bit about Canada and Montreal. I did not.

They would not know there is an urban culture outside of New York City where it is normal to walk everywhere, every day. You can ride a graffiti-free subway system; pedal miles in the city on paved bike paths; and enjoy largely spotless streets.

(Let's not talk, however, about the dreadful conditions of the city streets. It's way beyond Buffalo-level potholes.)

Other things Americans might be surprised about: There are guns in Canada and people use them to bad ends. There are divisions about taxes and spending. Quebec passed a law this summer forbidding the wearing of religious garb and head wear. Montreal opposed it before it was passed.

The federal election was held here on Oct. 21, and its results exposed the fissures among Canadians – a dramatic contrast from the soft, gauzy view that Americans cultivate of Canada as a place of order and contentment where everyone gets along.

The electorate gave the young and handsome Prime Minister

Justin Trudeau and his Liberal Party a minority of seats in Parliament, forcing him to form a government that depends on the support of the New Democratic Party and the Greens, also left leaning. He lost the popular vote.

The opposition Conservative Party made sure everyone knew about Trudeau's serious missteps, such as an inexplicable stunt of applying blackface and brownface at parties when he was in his late 20s.

Some consider the results a reasonable outcome. The vote sent the message that Trudeau did not perform up to expectations in his first term as prime minister and did not care enough about the concerns of the entire country.

Voters here, by and large, do not expect, condone or get excessively whipped up by candidates' bad behavior; maybe that's why it's not so much in the candidate playbook. Debates are run only in French and then only in English.

The government relentlessly encourages voting during the six-week election period (you heard me right) with ad campaigns on television, Twitter and taking ballots to people who are in the hospital.

Some 66% of registered voters turned out. The tally for Americans voting in the 2016 presidential election was far smaller.

This is a sliver of adopting Montreal for less than a year. Check back later – say during the frigid winter that will soon be here when there is less light and piles of snow. Much like my hometown, Buffalo. The change in weather – and learning what you don't know – can change your perspective.

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