

## Full Circle: Montreal

By Emily Cerveney

Ah, Mount Royal, the 'Mountain'. The ancient remains of an eroded volcanic complex. The green heart, today a park. Designed by Frederick Law Olmstead (the designer of New York's Central Park), much of his original landscaping design was neither completed nor carried out. Ascent to the summit's lookout offers a lovely panoramic view of the urban landscape and the St. Lawrence River all year round. In addition to being the city's largest green space, Mount Royal is the site of some of the largest cemeteries in North America, which are lovely and peaceful despite their solemn purpose. The mountain remains a witness to all that takes place here. Before the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century, various First Nations communities, particularly the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, occupied settlements on the island and in the surrounding area.<sup>1</sup> Upon contact, the French established a fur trading post, which subsequently became a mission and colony. Originally named Ville-Marie, the city was founded in 1642. Montreal's history is reflected in virtually every name encountered on the island. Walk around and take note of the names of parks, metro stations, street signs and commemorative plaques. With a bit of research, a mental image of those considered the most important figures in the city's history is pieced together.

The trees on Mount Royal glow with varying hues of orange, red, and gold. Given the time of year, inhabitants attempt to take advantage of any warm weather while it lasts. It is the final opportunity to visit the city's outdoor markets before they close during the colder months. Jean-Talon Market is one of the largest and most varied, hosting

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Hochelaga National Historic Site of Canada*. URL: [historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=12017&pid=0](http://historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=12017&pid=0).

dozens of vendors selling fresh local produce. Moving through the stalls is a stimulating sensory experience, of unlimited edible possibilities. The market is also a prime location for dumpster diving, as some vendors allow people take their discarded food at the end of the day. Items can also be procured from the huge dumpsters, where the extent of food waste is blatant, and many times, unnecessary. Chilly, blustery winds soon infiltrate the streets, catching people off guard as they walk around corners. It is the season of Halloween and crunchy rustling leaves. Of dampness, and increasingly shorter, moody, crisp days. Savouring a delicious, warm, freshly baked Montreal-style bagel from St-Viateur Bagel is a wonderful experience. This bakery is one of the best spots to procure the famed food, and is even open 24/7. That is dedication!

The trees on Mount Royal are bare, branchy things, dusted in frost or cloaked in heavy snow. This season is the stuff of legends among international students, some of whom have never experienced snow before. Winter here has a unique atmosphere that is difficult to describe, bringing equal parts awe and frustration. Go for a walk at night. Snowy blankets cover the city, muffling traffic and urban noise. Christmas lights decorate trees and buildings on most major streets, and remain hanging during the cold months, contributing to the festive ambience. In the air lingers the smell of freshly fallen snow, its very specific sound, and its feeling underfoot. A hockey puck hits the boards of the neighborhood ice rink. Ghostly wisps trail from noses and mouths, as light from windows illuminates the frozen ground with a soft glow. Montreal is composed of 19 large boroughs; they bring to mind 'burrow', which is what homes really become during the chilly months. Thanks to the 'Underground City' (known as RESO), located in the downtown core and connected to the metro system, it is possible to spend an entire

day out and about without putting a foot outside. The city also has a special task force: late at night, capacious dump trucks and special ‘snow vacuums’ collect piles of snow from the streets and shuttle it away to depositories.

Despite the cold, which on occasion falls below 30 degrees Celsius, the city’s inhabitants understand the importance of getting out and keeping the imagination active during these short days. The chilly months are a time of unique festivities. Igloofest, Nuit blanche, and Luminothérapie are some of the cultural events that bring city-dwellers together in celebration of light, music, art, and winter in all its frozen glory. The ‘Quartier des spectacles’ and Place des Arts are appropriately named for a reason! There are many enjoyable outdoor activities to try, such as snowshoeing, tobogganing, ice skating, skiing, and, of course, hockey. Failure to mention the sport would seem scandalous, as fans of the Montreal Canadiens (or Habs) are some of the most dedicated, and on occasion, riotous.<sup>2</sup>

The fauna with whom we share living space is often overlooked, but it is very much present in Montreal. There is nothing quite like walking five blocks very late at night to a *brasserie*, when the wind is so cold the distance travelled to get there seems eternal. But there is nothing like sitting in a cozy place with good friends enjoying a tasty brew or hot cider during the darkest days. There is *especially* nothing like doing the latter, and having a mouse scurry across the middle of the floor! The bartender said simply, “mice must find ways to stay warm too...”

---

<sup>2</sup> See *A List of Significant Hockey Riots in Canada*. URL: [www.thehockeynews.com/news/article/heres-a-list-of-significant-hockey-riots-in-canada](http://www.thehockeynews.com/news/article/heres-a-list-of-significant-hockey-riots-in-canada).

Eventually, the urban grey becomes monotonous, and profuse amounts of slush can only be tolerated for so long. The trees on Mount Royal slowly take on a viridian hue that deepens with every passing week. Teasing are the increasingly pleasant temperatures; the air is fresh, sometimes stinky. At this point, anything above 10 degrees Celsius calls for a t-shirt, and people shed their layers. The river begins to thaw while the city's rhythm shifts again. The skyline gradually loses its steamy trails as heating systems shut down. Slowly, green shoots and flowers emerge in planters and gardens. The only permanent outdoor flowers are likely the four depicted on the official city flag. A fleur-de-lis, a rose, a shamrock, and a thistle symbolize the four European nationalities who shaped Montreal: the French, English, Irish and Scottish, respectively. This is a multicultural place. Over a quarter of the population belongs to a visible minority, and the constant flow of people from various global areas contributes to the city's worldly feel. Today, 87.5% of children attending school in French are allophones (their first language is neither French nor English)<sup>3</sup>, and over half the population is bilingual in both French and English. Foreign ears may perk up upon hearing *français*.

To circulate within the city, the metro is a reliable friend. Each station is decorated with art or is architecturally interesting in some manner. Montreal is the only city outside of Paris that has an original Hector Guimard Art Nouveau gate, one of many access points into the system's innards at Victoria Square. The metro has its own voices which keep you company. One is the rumble of the train car engines; another, typically female, announces the stop names along the way. One may come to miss them. Many people use bicycles, and it's one of the only places you'll find some commuters on bikes in the

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Mauvaise Langue* by Marc Cassivi, p. 22. URL: [thehockeynews.com/news/article/heres-a-list-of-significant-hockey-riots-in-canada](http://thehockeynews.com/news/article/heres-a-list-of-significant-hockey-riots-in-canada).

winter. It appears owning a car is more hassel than it's worth, between the obnoxious gasoline prices and the ticket police ready to pounce as soon as your parking time expires. It is only *half* a joke that they are rumored to hide in nearby bushes...

Despite the various forms of public transport, Montreal is a very walkable city, a place that keeps legs strong. The fine for Jaywalking is over a hundred dollars, but seemingly everyone does it anyway. The city's topography is varied; sometimes very flat, and hilly in other locations. In Old Port, the ground under the soles is different. The area retains its historic soul, its cobbled streets, which produce their distinctive sound under the weight of feet, cars, and sometimes horse carriages. It is a place to briefly rewind time, and imagine the city hundreds of years ago, its life sustained by the port, a drastically different horizon. Cracks usually form during this exercise, as modern features inevitably jump out. Montreal is home to a great juxtaposition of architectural styles, from Gothic Revival churches, classic grey French edifices, and art deco buildings, to skyscrapers, disused factories, and the famous Habitat 67. The city's heartbeat begins to increase. Tam-tams, a weekend drum circle held on Mount Royal, resumes as people get ready for the coming heat. Church bells, some chiming hourly, ring with a clearer sound; a sound that gives the impression that the days are getting brighter, and that anything is possible.

The trees on Mount Royal are a deep, lush green. They provide cool shelter from the heat that casts a smog upon the city, on some days humid and weightly. Terraces become flooded with people enjoying food and drink. A new wave of cultural events and festivals emerges, which include the Montreal International Jazz Festival, Osheaga, Nuits d'Afrique, Under Pressure, and Comic Con, to name a few. The city understands

the importance of celebrating design, culture, and the arts as sources of daily well-being and inspiration. In 2006, Montreal was named a UNESCO City of Design, and it is one of only three cities in the world to carry this title.<sup>4</sup> It is home to many successful enterprises in a wide variety of sectors, including music, fashion, art, design, film, video games, local businesses, and more. If you can't get out of the city, there are a number of options. Hang out in the many parks and green spaces. A bit of nature is vital in metropolitan areas, and greatly aids in diffusing tension and stress. The forest paths on the Mountain are excellent locations for escaping hot stone and concrete. Other options include the Botanical Gardens and Biodome, or the man-made beach at the waterfront of Old Port.

The days are longer, the sun, hotter; the city pulses with a vibrant energy. People stay out late, and streets echo with voices, occasional laughter, the chime of bottles. Air is heavy, but light breezes bring whispers of refreshing cool. The winds leave clouded, inky traces in late twilight skies. Admire a sprinkling of stars on clear nights. These skies are a disappointing sight compared to the few dark places left in the world however. Gazing from a balcony into night, one may experience yearning for another season. The secret, though, is to enjoy and experience what each has to offer, as they come.

---

<sup>4</sup> See *Montreal, Canada, appointed a UNESCO City of Design*. URL: [portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=30945&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.htm](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30945&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.htm).