

Crème de la Crème

Gillian Thornton explores the cities and coastline of Canada's French heartland

North America with a French accent, that's Québec – a province quite unlike other parts of Canada. The country is officially bilingual but most of its French speakers live here along the Saint Lawrence (or Saint-Laurent) river, which connects the Great Lakes to the Atlantic.

It all started with Québec City, founded by Frenchman Samuel de Champlain in 1806 as a trading post, but forts have existed at the site since the 16th century. Flights from the UK land at Montréal but it's easy to combine the two contrasting cities by rail, then follow the river north into the countryside of Charlevoix.



MONTREAL

Montréal is the largest French-speaking metropolis after Paris, but most residents are bilingual so don't be surprised to be greeted with a friendly 'Bonjour-Hil!' Stay in the Old Town for easy access to all the main attractions, shops and restaurants. The Place d'Armes Hotel proved a great base, with spacious rooms and a panoramic rooftop bar. I took a free guided tour of Notre Dame Cathedral, opposite, for the full impact of its stunning blue and gold interior.

Few buildings remain today from the city's early years, so don't miss Château de Ramezay, home of the first French governor and now a museum. Place Jacques Cartier nearby is named after the Frenchman who discovered Canada and it thrums with artists' stalls and cafes. And I loved the way ultra-modern

buildings have to reflect some element of the more historic ones around them; for instance, the arched windows in the Tour KPMG skyscraper behind Christ Church Cathedral. Step inside public institutions like City Hall and Bank of Montréal to admire grand interiors, and browse the design boutiques in historic Bonsecours Market.

A short metro ride from the centre, the 1976 Olympic Park is a must-see. Take the lift up the viewing tower for spectacular panoramas, then head into the Biodome to play 'spot the sloth' in the tropical forest and watch puffins showing off underwater. The tranquil Botanic Gardens opposite are among North America's finest. And when you want to party, head for the Quartier des Spectacles – Montréal's entertainment district – day or night.

Great For Food lovers

Visit local food producers, and their restaurant partners, along Charlevoix's Route des Saveurs, to try anything from cheese to chocolate, emu steaks to tomato wine! See routedesaveurs.com



The street for eats

La Malbaie is the gateway to a beautiful National Park



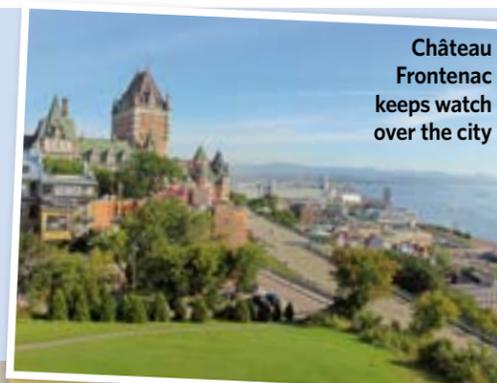
You'll see more by bike

Great For Culture vultures

Book on to a themed cycling tour of bike-friendly Montréal with Ça Roule Montréal to discover architecture, art and gastronomy from the heart of the Old Town. Visit caroulemontreal.com

QUEBEC CITY

From Montréal, I travelled north along the Saint-Laurent with ViaRail on the three-hour journey to Québec City, which was added to UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1985. The city is dominated by Château Frontenac, part of a network of luxury hotels for Canada's first rail travellers and now boasting over 600



Château Frontenac keeps watch over the city

bedrooms, but I opted for the more intimate surroundings of the Manoir d'Auteil, a boutique hotel in the heart of the Old Town.

The only fortified city north of Mexico, Vieux Québec is a maze of European-style



A European feel in Petit Champlain

streets. The Petit Champlain area beside the river is the oldest district, but British commander General Wolfe took the city in 1759 at a battle high above the river on the Heights of Abraham, now transformed into Battlefields Park. Take a summer tour of the British citadel to top up your history, enjoy the panorama from Dufferin Terrace, and take a free tour of Parliament and its beautiful gardens – you can even eat their veg in the Parlementaire restaurant!

CHARLEVOIX

On the outskirts of Québec City, a two-coach light train leaves from a picturesque platform beside Montmorency Falls – 30 metres higher than Niagara – for the two-hour scenic trip to Baie Saint Paul in Charlevoix. Disembark, and maybe stay over at Hotel La Ferme to explore this pretty small town, renowned for its artists and small galleries.

A connecting service hugs the shoreline to La Malbaie – a popular riverside resort since the 19th century – or you can do as I did and pick up a hire car for the freedom of the road. I enjoyed Charlevoix Maritime Museum, a memorial to the historic schooner industry, before taking the free ferry to Ile aux Coudres and the Hotel Cap aux Pierres.

The island is popular with leisure cyclists who follow the 23km perimeter road for unbroken river views. Sample speciality iced cider at Pedneault orchards, visit the island's windmill and watermill and refuel at Boulangerie Bouchard with goodies made from the mill's

flour – all part of Charlevoix's eco-museum network.

La Malbaie is the gateway to the spectacular National Park of Hautes-Gorge-de-la-Rivière-Malbaie for hiking, biking or kayaking with attitude. The gentle 90-minute river cruise offers a close-up view of the highest peaks east of the Rockies. Bathed in evening sunshine after a downpour, they cast mirror-image reflections in the still water.

There were more glorious views from my balcony at the Auberge des Falaises in La Malbaie, but you need to go a little further downriver to enjoy the area's biggest tourist attractions – whales. Cruises leave from Baie Saint Catherine for the protected marine park where water rich in food from the Saguenay Fjord attract 13 species of these giant mammals.

The real big boys eluded us this time, but with beluga, minke and fin whales obligingly breaking the surface around our boat, everyone headed home happy.

Great For

Tranquil travellers

Book a wellbeing course or just chill out at the Monastère des Augustines, an innovative new Québec City hotel that continues the work of the Augustine Sisters by caring for body and soul. Visit monastere.ca

Yoga is one of the programmes offered



Useful websites

- tourisme-Montréal.org
- Québecregion.com
- charlevoixtourism.com
- aircanada.com

Woman's Weekly TRAVEL OFFER
Canada's Maple Leaf Trail
 8-days from £1,049
 Departing October 2015 - October 2016. Take the 'Maple Leaf Trail' from Ontario's welcoming waterfront capital, Toronto, heading north to historic Ottawa, then east into French Canada to Montréal, and finally to Québec. All this – plus a visit to the awe-inspiring Niagara Falls – make this a tour you'll never forget.
 To book or request a brochure, call 0330 160 7857 quoting code IWW, or visit newmarket.travel/IWW15016

NEXT WEEK
Cruise The Loire

Words: Claire Gervat. Photos: Alamy, Getty, iStockphoto.com, Shutterstock