

Quebec to



Montmorency Falls, Quebec

PICTURE: Région de Québec/GouvQc/Jean-Guy Lavoie

to the future

Nature, culture and urban charm come together on a fam trip tour of Montreal, Quebec City and Ottawa, finds **India-Jayne Trainor**

You could hear a pin drop in the silence of the vast church we're sitting inside, pitch black but for the glow of flickering candles. Slowly, lights grow brighter on the huge altarpiece, illuminating intricately carved statues and rich indigo vaults gilded with gold stars. Dramatic music builds until the organ's keys crash in concert as each stained-glass window and biblical scene is spotlighted in a spectrum of dazzling colour.

This is the Aura Experience, an immersive music and light show inside Montreal's Notre-Dame Basilica. From the outside, you'd never know this impressive church contains such a spectacle, but I'm quickly learning that this region of Canada is full of unexpected wonders.

A HIDDEN CITY

Our Destination Canada fam trip group arrived in Montreal knowing little about the city, save for the dual-language signs that put us firmly in French Canada.

An in-depth city tour reveals Montreal's many contrasts, with old-world architecture sitting side by side with modern skyscrapers. We go from downtown across the raging St Lawrence River, passing the city's Formula One track and St Helen's Island, before winding back towards Old Montreal.

The European influences are strong – the diners spilling out on to the cobblestones of Place Jacques-Cartier wouldn't look out of place in Paris. But the metropolis soon melts into greenery at Mount Royal, a city park with panoramic views, a shady forest ➤

DESTINATIONS

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ASK THE agents



Leilani Bell,
Triangle Travel

"My favourite experience was our visit

to Wendake to learn about the Indigenous community. But Montreal was also very special – there were so many beautiful streets and shops, and the Underground City was impressive. I've never seen anything like it. Some cities have great public transport but there can be a lot of walking involved, which is something to consider for clients with reduced mobility."



Alice Howe,
Premier Travel

"Quebec City was my favourite

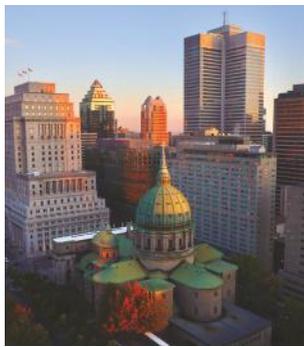
place, with its French influence and beautiful architecture, although I didn't expect it to be so hilly. I was surprised by the contrast – you can drive less than 20 minutes from the cities and be in nature, which is useful to know, since so many clients come to Canada for the scenery."



Annie Hughes,
Newell's Travel

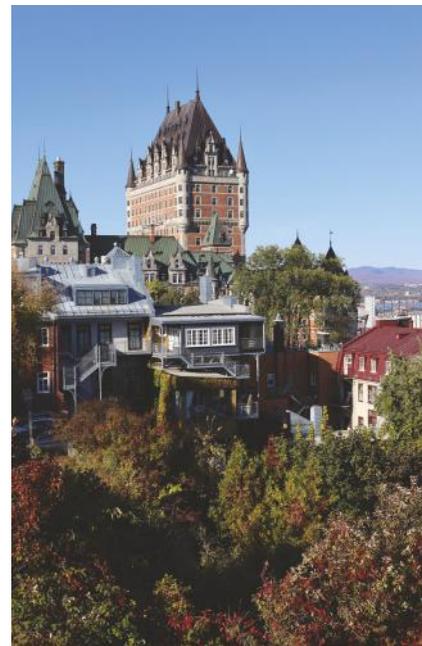
"When I think of Canada as a destination,

I picture breathtaking natural landscapes, vibrant multicultural cities and a real sense of adventure. That's why I'll now suggest clients combine cities and nature when visiting. Ottawa was a wonderful surprise – it felt relaxed and picturesque but still full of culture and history, and I really enjoyed visiting the National Gallery of Canada."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Fam trip agents in Montreal; Fairmont Le Château Frontenac; Notre-Dame Basilica; Montreal skyline

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Chris Howey; India-Jayne Trainor



and Beaver Lake, where locals walk, cycle and jog in the sunshine.

It's not the only area that has a few surprises in store. Taking the Metro across the city, I pop out at a station area filled with bars, shops, restaurants and businesses – except I'm still far below the ground. RÉSO is also known as Montreal's Underground City, and many major hotels and stations have lifts straight down to its subterranean streets, so there's no need to venture out in the rain or snowy weather.

We add more layers to Montreal's diverse culture at the McCord Stewart Museum, where a permanent exhibit, Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resilience, dives into the history of and attitudes towards Indigenous people. Brought together by curator Elisabeth Kaine – a member of the Indigenous Wendat community – and featuring contributions from Quebec's 11 Indigenous nations, it's a moving collection that not only looks to the past but also shares what is being done today to restore Indigenous voices and cultures to prominence.

YOUR CARRIAGE AWAITS

There's no skimping on comfort on our Via Rail journey from Montreal to Quebec City. The business-class carriage comes with spacious seats, so we tuck into breakfast while enjoying views of Canada's foliage, which is erupting from green into fiery reds and oranges. Three hours pass quickly and soon we're following our guide Jacques on a walking tour of Old Quebec.

This Unesco World Heritage Site looks like a fairytale town, with the Fairmont Le Château Frontenac the picture-perfect castle at its summit. Narrow cobbled

“From the ground, I spot a tiny person whizzing past on a zipline 83 metres above ground – and it's my turn next

streets, centuries-old buildings and cosy cafes spread in every direction in the Lower Town. A speedy funicular ride (about £3.25) takes us to the Upper Town, where Dufferin Terrace affords views over the Old Quarter and the St Lawrence River beyond.

But any sense of serenity I'd gained from this pleasant stroll is quickly quashed the next morning at Montmorency Falls, just 15 minutes from the city. From the ground, I spot a tiny person whizzing past on a zipline 83 metres above ground – and it's my turn next. As the wind rushes past and I careen towards the opposite ledge, I see the river raging below and water thundering over the edge of the falls. It's an epic experience, but I'm nonetheless relieved to find out our route back down is via the cable car, which moves at a reassuringly glacial pace.

TALES AND TRADITIONS

Just half an hour's drive from Quebec City lies the Wendake community, which has a deep Indigenous heritage. On a tour of the Huron Traditional Site, we gain an understanding of the Wendat people's culture and how they're working to recover their traditional language and way of life. I'm blown away by the longhouse – a huge, hand-built wooden structure complete with ➤

DESTINATIONS

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations; immersive forest walk experience Onhwa' Lumina; the fam trip agents explore Quebec City; Byward Market PICTURES: Destination Ontario/Ben Hemmings; Stéphane Groleau; India-Jayne Trainor



stone fireplaces, tools and beds laden with animal furs. We go on to see an even more spectacular longhouse nearby at Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations, a property owned by and focused on First Nations people, which is home to the Huron-Wendat Museum.

It's surrounded by woodland, where we experience Onhwa' Lumina, an immersive walk through the forest. Under a bright moon, we stroll from point to point: one flashes coloured lights in the darkness in time with a gentle traditional song, while another projects the story of the Wendat people preparing for war against the invading Hurons. At nearby Sagamité Restaurant, we reflect on the experience over a dinner of venison, elk and bison paired with maple syrup-infused cocktails.

CAPITAL CHARM

Our final stop is Canada's capital, Ottawa, straddling the provinces of Quebec and Ontario and abuzz with busy shopping streets, museums and markets. On a Gray Line city bus tour, we get the lay of the land, passing the Canadian War Museum and Museum of History. Then comes the Rideau Canal, the city's metaphorical heart, where locals stroll, kayak and even ice skate every winter. Keen to dig further into the city's museums, we take a guided tour of the National Gallery of Canada, an art museum filled with both Canadian works and those by artists such as Andy Warhol and sculptor Louise Bourgeois, whose spider *Maman* stands outside the entrance.

But all of the walking leaves everyone hungry so, led by guides from C'est Bon Ottawa, we're taken on

“Among the tasters we sample is a Beaver Tail – a classic Canadian pastry shaped like a beaver's tail

a food tour around Byward Market, a central hub of restaurants, bars and entertainment venues that's home to more than 600 businesses. Among the many tasters is a flavourful wrap cooked in a tandoor oven followed by a Beaver Tail, a classic Canadian pastry shaped like a beaver's tail that can be topped with everything from Nutella to strawberries and cinnamon.

We dive back into our Indigenous education at the Canadian Museum of History, where the impressive Grand Hall houses totem poles, a traditional canoe and works by Indigenous artists from Canada's northwest.

A final museum not to miss is the Canadian Royal Mint. Here, we see hundreds of solid silver and gold bars transformed into Canadian currency and learn about some of the most valuable and interesting coins created, including one that glows in the dark. The guide passes us each a \$2 coin and, flipping it over, I admire the limited-edition design by Daphne Odjig – the first by a female Indigenous artist when it was released in 2025. It perfectly represents this region, where there's something surprising hidden everywhere you look. **TW**

BOOK IT

First Class Holidays offers a seven-night trip from £1,839 per person, based on Air Canada flights from Heathrow to Montreal and back from Ottawa in May. The price includes two nights each in Montreal and Quebec City, and three in Ottawa, business-class travel on Via Rail, walking tours of Montreal and Quebec City, museum entrance and a visit to Wendake. fcholidays.com

Cosmos offers an eight-day Ontario & French Canada tour from £2,199 per person, based on two sharing, including flights from Heathrow with Air Canada, accommodation, all transport and activities, based on a June 5 departure. cosmos.co.uk