

The place to meet

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Montréal is creative, artistic and full of life, so it's no wonder it's Canada's top meeting place, says Felicity Cousins

Montréal is named after Mount Royal, which overlooks Quebec's island city. At 233 metres, it's not what most people would call a mountain, but don't mention this while you are there – it's a mountain to the locals and that's that.

From the top of Mount Royal, north of the centre, the city looks peaceful and the waterfront is a distant trail of glitter, but down on the streets, an energy bounces through the city's 29 neighbourhoods. From the cool designer shops on Rue Saint-Denis to the waterfront and Old Montréal, where the cobbled streets heckle the heels of sure-footed women on their way out to dinner, there's a creative buzz.

This hasn't always been the case. Luc Charbonneau, director of sales and marketing for Tourisme Montréal, says: "The recession in the 1980s hit us really hard and we had to make some tough decisions. We decided to let go of some of our traditional industries, such as textiles – it was a big decision but it opened the door to invest in aerospace, pharmaceuticals and creative industries."

Moving into the digital age was a shrewd decision and has kept the city ahead of a fast-paced game. Montréal controls 80 per cent of visual effects software on the world market and is a leader in digital special effects for films – Titanic, Jurassic Park and Spy Kids all used software designed in Montréal. The city is also the location for more than 150 films each year – in recent times these have included The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, The Day After Tomorrow, The Terminal and Catch Me if You Can.

The creativity doesn't stop there – the city is the birthplace of the weird and wonderful Cirque du Soleil. Salsa and tango lessons are held for free across the city and the jazz festival in June is the largest in the world. Cycling is also huge here and there are 660km of bike paths on the island. Last year, the city launched the Bixi bike-sharing scheme (bixi.com), similar to the one London plans to adopt in the summer. It's safe and simple to cycle in Montréal – in fact, everything about the city seems to be geared towards making life as easy and enjoyable as possible.

Part of the vibe comes from its young population. There are four universities – two French and two English – with a big focus on medical and pharmaceutical research. Some 70 international organisations are based here. The International Quarter is home to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and, in addition to Seattle and Toulouse, Montréal is one of the world's major aerospace hubs – some 42,000 people in the city are employed in the industry. It has the headquarters of IATA (International Air Transport Association) and ICAO (International Civil Aviation Authority), and is one of the few cities in the world where almost all parts of a plane can be sourced within 30km.

Charbonneau points out the city's good air access – the airport is 20 minutes' drive from the centre and the city is served directly from London in about seven hours with British Airways and Air Canada (for reviews see businesstraveller.com/tried-and-tested). He adds: "UK people are often very surprised by Montréal – they are expecting a French city but we are multicultural."

In 2009, Montréal made more than C\$2 billion (£1.2 billion) from tourism and business travel, and it is used to hosting large events. In October last year, it hosted the International Diabetes Federation's general council, with 12,000 people from around the world descending on the island. The convention centre – the Palais des Congrès de Montréal – has welcomed almost 13 million people since it opened in 1983 and, in 2002, the building had to expand to twice its original capacity (it now has 18,500 sqm of exhibition space).

The Palais des Congrès holds about 200 events a year, about a third of which are held by US visitors and a third by overseas organisations. Patrick Guidote, sales manager of the Hyatt Regency Montréal (see panel, previous page), says: "What's

great about Montréal is that the convention centre is actually in the centre so you have culture, museums and restaurants right there for people. In most cities the convention centres are on the outskirts, away from anything of interest."

The Palais des Congrès covers four blocks of the city centre, stretching from Chinatown to the outskirts of Old Montréal. The newer part is a striking piece of modern architecture. Large coloured panes of glass throw kaleidoscopic light across the breakout areas. It has two entrances, and one has an installation of strange red tree-like sculptures, known as the "lipstick forest". (The installation is part of Montréal's 1961 1 per cent public art by-law, meaning every new building throughout the city should dedicate 1 per cent of its budget to public art).

Jocelyne Perron, manager of business development for the international market at the Palais des Congrès, says: "Montréal is the first Canadian city for international meetings, and the second in North America after New York. We are in competition with exotic destinations, so our main strength here is customer service. For example, we recently had a convention for deaf people and all our 100 employees learnt sign language."

Another way the city makes life easier for visitors is with the weatherproof underground city, Réso. With temperatures ranging from 45 degrees in the summer to -45 degrees in the winter, the mini-city, which was built in 1962 with the arrival of the metro system, is a way of continuing business as usual during the freezing winter months.

There are 32km of underground shops, restaurants, walkways and access to subway stations, and many of the hotels are connected directly to it. Guidote says: "You can leave your coat in your room in the winter, as you can literally walk to meetings across the city underground." It's an impressive claim, and out of the 26,000 hotel rooms in the city, 8,000 are in four-star properties and half of these hotels are connected to the underground city.

Charbonneau at Tourisme Montréal says: "The great thing about Montréal is not knowing what to expect. It's easy for people to find the best of what they like and enjoy." And this is Montréal's strength – with its great food, venues and energy, it would be very hard not to have a good time.

For more information on Montréal visit tourisme-montreal.org, montrealsweetdeals.com

Where to stay in the International Quarter

Intercontinental Montreal

The 26-floor Intercontinental completed a C\$14 million renovation at the end of last year with new décor and technology (including 40-inch flatscreen TVs and iPod alarm clocks) in all 357 rooms. There's a distinct W-esque feel to the hotel, with room names such as Intimate, Irresistible and Illustrious. The Club lounge has been moved to the lobby level to make it more accessible.

Also new is the stunning absinthe-themed bar Sarah B, a French restaurant, Osco, a wine cellar with 1,200 bottles, and an Italian café. There are 18 function rooms and two ballrooms, and the hotel is connected underground to the convention centre. Wifi is free for groups, while for individuals it is C\$15 (£9) for 24 hours.

■ 360 St Antoine West; tel +1 514 987 9900; montreal.intercontinental.com

Westin Montreal

This hotel opened in May last year in the former Montréal Gazette building with typically clean and simple Westin décor. It's opposite the Palais des Congrès, and connected to Réso underground city. There are 454 rooms (30 of which are suites) and wifi is free. The hotel has 3,700 sqm of meeting space, with a ballroom on the 11th floor seating 860 guests.

In March, a 1,800 sqm banquet hall is due to open on the eighth floor. The Gazette restaurant serves local produce, and the Reporter bar is on the mezzanine floor near a quirky centrepiece in the lobby – 60,000 pieces of twisted aluminium on 600 pieces of string (there is a similar offering in the convention centre).

■ 270 St Antoine Ouest;

tel +1 514 380 3333; westinmontreal.com

Sheraton Centre

The well-established Sheraton Centre is 28 years old and has just completed a C\$24 million (£14 million) renovation of its 825 rooms. It's further away from the Palais des Congrès but is closer to downtown attractions. The hotel will be installing a Link@Sheraton business centre and updating the lobby area by the summer, with the meeting rooms to be refurbished by the end of the year.

Events space is extensive, with 4,700 sqm in total – 43 meeting rooms and a 1,200 sqm ballroom. On the sixth floor there is a pool and fitness centre with a terrace. Rooms are large (about 42 sqm) with good views and wifi for C\$16 (£9.50) for 24 hours.

■ 1,201 Boulevard Rene-Levesque West; tel +1 514 878 2000; starwoodhotels.com

Hyatt Regency Montreal

Located right outside the new Place des Festivals and opposite the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Hyatt is within walking distance of the Palais des Congrès, and is part of Complexe Desjardins – a retail and office complex with 120 shops, boutiques and restaurants. It's also connected to the underground city.

The hotel was built for the 1976 Summer Olympics and has 605 rooms. These have recently been renovated and have mini fridges, flatscreen TVs, coffee machines and wifi (C\$13/£8 for 24 hours). There's 3,200 sqm of meeting space and the ballroom was renovated last year.

■ 1,255 Jeanne-Mance; tel +1 514 982 1234; montreal.hyatt.com

Venues with character

Marche Bonsecours

In the centre of Old Montréal, this is the oldest market in the city and now houses restaurants, cafés and 15 boutique shops selling Canadian arts and crafts. On the third floor, with views of St Lawrence River, the Old Port and Old Montréal, are three long, traditional reception halls for cocktail parties and fashion shows for up to 975 people. Visit marchebonsecours.qc.ca

Biosphere

For those with a green agenda, across the water on Saint Helen's Island, the stunning Biosphère has been holding meetings since it hosted the World Fair Expo in 1967 – it only hosts green events and can seat 20 in its conference room. Next to it is the Ecological [sic] House – a solar-powered building designed to be completely environmentally friendly. Visit biosphere.ec.gc.ca

Montreal Science Centre

For great views over the St Lawrence River, this is the perfect venue. There are several large exhibition spaces housed in the old warehouses, and the big windows offer superb views. Le Belvedere is particularly impressive, with a capacity of 600 for cocktails or 450 seated. Visit centredessciencesdemontreal.com

Cirque Eloize

Put a bit of magic into your event with this circus troupe, which has been performing all over the world since 1993. The training centre, housed in an old station, can be used for events and workshops of up to 600 people – delegates can learn tricks and circus skills in a dramatic, theatrical environment. Visit cirque-eloize.com/en

Windsor Station

Once the headquarters of the Canadian Pacific Railway, this is a stunning space with a high arched ceiling, white marble interior and courtyard garden. Windsor Station hosts some of Montreal's most popular events, from the Daffodil Ball in April,

where the space is decorated with 30,000 of the flowers, to the Beer Festival in June. Visit tourisme-montreal.org

Windsor ballrooms

Le Windsor, once the Windsor hotel, has a long corridor known as Peacock Alley that lies between two stunning ballrooms – Salon Windsor is Victorian-style with a bandstand and chandeliers, while Salon Versailles has a French Renaissance theme. The two spaces can each accommodate about 400 people for a banquet. Visit lewindsor.com

Mount Royal Chalet

Set in Mount Royal Park, this venue on top of Mount Royal can host up to 700 guests. The sweeping panoramic views on the terrace make for an impressive backdrop to cocktail parties.

Visit ville.montreal.qc.ca

Where to eat

Montréal is home to more than 6,000 restaurants, and as a third of the population are immigrants, there is a fantastic variety on offer. Crescent Street has several good options and Rue Saint Paul in Old Montréal is an all-time favourite.

A lot of eateries pride themselves on offering local produce. Toqué is a beautiful, discreet restaurant with top-end service and superb fare – I tried the oysters served with two champagnes, princess scallops with wasabi foam, and tender leg of lamb with bordelaise sauce. (Menus change according to what can be sourced locally.) It's in a great location at 900 Jean-Paul Riopelle Place. Visit restaurant-toque.com

One meal that will always be available in Montréal is poutine – chips, gravy and melted cheese curd. To try it with a twist, head to Restaurant au Pied de Cochon. The warm wooden décor and busy chefs set the scene for a memorable meal – on the menu are pig's head and trotters, foie gras hamburger, and carpaccio de canard – but it's the poutine that comes out of the kitchen time and time again.

The chips are cooked in goose fat, the gravy is stirred and thickened for two days, melted cheese curd is added in layers, and the pièce de résistance is the addition of some rich, creamy foie gras. Half a portion will do. 536 Duluth Est; restaurant aupieddecochon.ca

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