



# France Without The Jetlag:

Pre- and Post-Cruise Vacations in Montreal, Quebec and Saguenay

**A** bartender at Quebec City's fashionable L'Echaude restaurant expresses mock indignation when a visitor asks how Quebec's capital compares with the province's largest city, Montreal. "They are not truly French," the bartender says, conveniently overlooking the fact that as a Canadian, neither is he. "In Montreal, people speak French 50, maybe 55, percent of the time." He steps back from the bar and folds his arms to proclaim, "Here, we speak French 95 percent of the time."

Welcome to Quebec, Canada's sole French-speaking province, only a short hop from the U.S. border, yet culturally worlds away. Indeed, the language and the lifestyle in this Eastern Canadian province are reminiscent of the motherland across the Atlantic. There is an authenticity of experience here that fools travelers into thinking they're traveling not in Canada but in France itself.

It's no faux French either. English does not even rank as an official language in Quebec, and though English is spoken with fluency in the big cities, things can get more challenging in the province's hinterlands. A waiter in the village of La Bai apparently must have owned a French-English dictionary too heavy for him to lift, because each time we asked the English equivalent of a menu item, he trotted off to the kitchen and returned with the translation. The fact that he did so gladly was a clear indication that we were not in France.

Snobbery (that unfortunate French attribute) is conspicuously ab-

sent in Quebec; friendly people and genuine hospitality are not. Even locals who struggle with English are happy to give directions and advice. Extending the spirit of generosity to their bottom lines, many Montreal restaurants even invite patrons to "apportez votre vin," or "bring your own bottle of wine," making the cost of meals with wine ridiculously inexpensive when compared to what you would pay for similar meals with wine elsewhere.

Nearly 400 years after the French explorer Champlain sailed along the St. Lawrence River to pitch camp at what would become Quebec City, French Canadians still hold France in high esteem. Today, 82 percent of the population speaks French in this North American crossroads between America and Europe.

Like Champlain, a growing number of visitors are arriving via the St. Lawrence. May through October, cruise ships run regular itineraries between Quebec and East Coast ports in the United States, primarily Boston and New York. Cruises often begin or end in Montreal, stop for the day in Quebec City, cruise up beautiful Saguenay Fjord, and make their way along the Atlantic coast.

Cruise "turn arounds" in Montreal provide a great opportunity to spend time in the area before or after your cruise. Combine Montreal with a three-hour train journey to Quebec City, then rent a car to drive to Saguenay. Return to the United States from international airports in Montreal and Quebec City. Seldom will U.S. travelers have the opportunity of being so close to a place that seems so far. It's like having France in the backyard.



**If there is one phrase that characterizes Quebec, it is “*et pourquoi pas?*”** The phrase, which translates to “and why not?” seems to be on the tip of every Quebecer’s tongue. It is a ready response of permissiveness and tolerance, a defender of an important concept — the *joie de vivre* or “joy of living” — that is alive and thriving in Quebec.

And no place more so than in Montreal, a metropolitan city of 2 million where anything and everything goes. “We don’t care if you’re straight, gay, whatever,” says Céline Bernier, a Montreal city guide. “We’re very open to all people and lifestyles.” (In 2006, both *Traveler’s Digest* and *AskMen.com* ranked Montreal as the world’s number one city to live in for its culture, architecture, history and ambience.)

That tolerance perhaps explains why Montreal is so good at welcoming visitors. Stroll down almost any street to feel the palpable city vibe. Sidewalk cafes spill over with patrons sipping coffee or glasses of wine or champagne (*et pourquoi pas?*), cyclists pedal along sections of the city’s 400 miles of biking trails, shoppers crowd boutiques and shops both above, and below, ground. That’s right: below ground. With 22 miles of mazes and walkways, Montreal boasts the world’s largest underground city.

Indeed, Montreal is a city of dual identities — an above ground metropolis and an underground city within a city; the French *joie de vivre* mixed with North American pragmatism; modern architecture (UNESCO designated Montreal a “City of Design”) mixed with a well-preserved historic quarter.

To put yourself in the center of it all, check in at the Intercontinental Montreal ([www.montreal.intercontinental.com](http://www.montreal.intercontinental.com)), a five-star hotel situated in the International Quarter and also linked to the Underground City. Or plant yourself at Hotel St. James ([www.hotelstjames.com](http://www.hotelstjames.com)). If nothing else, stop in the St. James to admire its grand architecture and perhaps take afternoon tea or a bite at XO Le Restaurant.

It’s an easy walk from either hotel to “Old Montreal,” where the city was founded in 1642. (For arriving

cruise passengers the cruise terminal also is located only a few blocks from the hotel and Old Montreal.) Find your way to Rue Saint-Paul, “the street” where it all happens, our guide Celine tells us as we walk along the cobblestone roadway. You can drop in the Tourist Information Center or visit the official web site before leaving home ([www.tourisme-montreal.org](http://www.tourisme-montreal.org)) for suggestions on what to see, but simply to walk and absorb the ambience is a sufficiently pleasurable experience.

Old Montreal embodies the many periods of the city’s history: the winding paths of the former French colony, 18th- and 19th-century architecture and the first Canadian skyscrapers. Architects came here from nearby Boston and other cities south of the Canadian border, so you’ll see a lot of American influence.

The center of Old Montreal is Place Jacques-Cartier, named for the explorer who founded the city. Walk to the top of the square to the monument of Admiral Nelson for superb views of the old port, then make your way down the festive sloping street past street artists, musicians, jugglers, mimes, face painters and other entertainers. Stop in a sidewalk cafe for lunch, a light snack, coffee or cocktail. Recommendations in the area include: Restaurant du Vieux Port (good and reasonably priced), or if you’re willing to spend a bit more, Auberge de Saint-Gabriel or the unique Jardin Nelson, with its beautiful gardens.

For a romantic, five-star dinner, hail a taxi for Casino de Montréal on Notre-Dame Island. Dine at Restaurant Nuances, awarded the 5-Diamond Award by the Canadian and U.S. AAA/CAA associations.

On one day of your visit, hop on a bicycle at Carroule Montreal on Wheels ([www.caroulemontreal.com](http://www.caroulemontreal.com)) and ask the shop’s owner to direct you on a flat 25-mile ride along the canals. Break for lunch at Atwater Market, where you can pick up some cheese (La Fromagerie has more than 400 types of cheese from France and Quebec) and bread (from Premiere Moisson Bakery where the croissants are also tasty) and fresh vegetables. And that bottle of champagne you’re eyeing? As any Montrealer would tell you, “*Et pourquoi pas?*”

Photo © MTOQ Linda Turgeon

## Montreal: Sail into another world



Port of Montreal  
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# Quintessential Quebec



**Quebec City offers beauty, fine dining and delightful diversions.** And that's just in the train station. Our three-hour train journey from Montreal to Quebec ended in what has been called "the most beautiful train station in North America." Reminiscent of similar grand terminals in Europe, Quebec City's train station attracts those who come here not only to travel by rail but also to dine at the best steak house in town, according to our cab driver. The train station also houses a few shops and even a dentist office, should you want to dash in for a quick cleaning before the conductor calls "All Aboard."

No matter how you arrive, you'll find "the most European city in North America" bubbling over with charm. Founded in 1608 as an outpost for France, Quebec City is considered to be the cradle of French civilization in North America. Old Quebec is the only North American fortified city north of Mexico whose walls still exist. Within the city walls, Quebec City has the feel of Europe, with its stone buildings and winding cobblestone streets.

Perhaps the city's best known landmark is the Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac ([www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com)), the legendary 19th century castle turned hotel. With sweeping views overlooking the St. Lawrence River, the hotel stands sentinel over the city from its hilltop post at Cap-Diamant. After checking in, stroll Quebec City's lovely streets, flanked by boutique shops and restaurants.

Just outside the Fairmont, step aboard the Funicular ([www.funiculaire-quebec.com](http://www.funiculaire-quebec.com)) to travel between the hotel and the charming shopping street Rue Petit-

Champlain. Or exit the hotel in the other direction to head outside Old Quebec's city gate and stroll along Rue Saint-John. Be sure to visit Erico, a popular chocolate shop just outside the old city walls ([www.chocomusee.com](http://www.chocomusee.com)).

You could spend a couple of days strolling the streets of Quebec City, but don't leave until you've rented a car or joined a tour to get to ile d'Orleans, less than 30 minutes away from the city center. The island is famous for its farms, strawberry fields, orchards and woodlands. Be sure to visit the Chocolaterie de l'ile d'Orleans, a chocolate factory situated in a 200-year-old ancestral house. Stop in at Forge a Pique-Assaut, where Guy Bel, a world renowned craftsman in wrought iron, demonstrates traditional forging; and Domaine Steinbach Cidrerie et Relais gourmand, a 30-acre estate that operates a biologically controlled apple orchard and an early-day vinegar and cider factory.

On your return to Quebec City, stop at Montmorency Falls, one and a half times higher than Niagara Falls. Ride the cable car to the top and walk across the bridge overhanging the falls.

Back at the Chateau Frontenac, dinner is only a short walk away. Make your way across Place d'Armes to Restaurant Gambrinus for Italian and French cuisine served by friendly staff in a charming setting as you gaze out the window at North America's most European city.

**To Be Considered:** *Quebec's capital city will celebrate its 400th anniversary on July 3, 2008, an eventful time to be there if you're planning a 2008 summer cruise.*

Photo © MTOQ Claude Huot

Québec  
City and Area



Your EuroStyle Destination

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**We're celebrating 400 years—and you're invited!**

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For information, visit [www.quebecregion.com/cruises](http://www.quebecregion.com/cruises)



# Seductive Saguenay



**It's a 2.5-hour drive from Quebec City to the Saguenay region.** We pointed our car toward La Baie, where we checked in to L' Auberge des 21 ([www.aubergedes21.com](http://www.aubergedes21.com)). Located on the shore of the Saguenay Fjord, the warm family inn also features fine regional (read: French) cuisine at a shockingly good restaurant for such a small inn.

The fact that the food was so good, however, should have come as no surprise. Saguenay may just be the most French of all the areas we visited during a one-week post-cruise vacation. Here, French is by far the predominant language. Our guide Ingrid, who could express herself in English, had trouble pronouncing English words and phrases, such as "rural roads." The "r's" simply would not loosen themselves from her lips. Most of Saguenay's tourists, Ingrid told us, came from France or Belgium, so there were plenty of opportunities to speak French but few opportunities to practice English.

The front desk receptionist at L' Auberge des 21 had no trouble with English, however, and she waxed poetic about how great it was to live in this remote region of the world. Life is slower here, she said, and much of the emphasis is on nature and fine living. "We know how to breathe," she said, alluding to the fact that many of her guests came from the busy and breathless pace of the big cities. "It's nature by day," she said, "and romance by night." Indeed, after a day of sailing, we dined exquisitely over a bottle of wine while looking out on the beautiful fjord.

If you seek cultural diversions, visit the Musée du Fjord, or Museum of the Fjords ([www.museedufjord.com](http://www.museedufjord.com));

Verrerie d'Art Touverre, a glass-art workshop; and Olivier Soapery, a living economuseum emphasizing the traditional craft of soap-making in the early 19th century. The latter two are called Economy Museums, and you can find more information about them at [www.economusees.com](http://www.economusees.com).

The highlight of our trip, however, was a morning sailing in Saguenay fjord. On many sailing excursions, whales, especially Beluga whales, are often seen, but we saw none on our sailing. Still, it was a wonderful day out on the fjord.

To get to La Baie, we drove through the interior, but to return to Quebec City, we charted a route along the St. Lawrence River, through Charlevoix, where we stopped in Baie-Saint-Paul. The entire town had turned out for a Tour de France style bike race. The streets were closed. Spectators sipped glasses of wine and cheered the riders. Had we not known better, we could have sworn we were in France. But that's just the way our whole trip had been. It was hard to believe that we were just north of the U.S. border. Never had a place so near home felt so far away.



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# Finding Contentment In Quebec



**I had traveled the world before traveling to Quebec, and if my foot could reach my behind, I would kick myself for doing so.** Of all the places I have visited, Quebec surely ranks in my top ten. The irony is that I traveled halfway around the world to visit less-inspiring places when Quebec was (and is) fewer than three hours by air from my home. The French-speaking Canadian province is practically in my own backyard, and yet it took a cruise (from Boston) and 49 years to get me there.

While many travelers embark on Canada/New England cruises for the blazing fall foliage, few water-bound travelers venture all the way down the St. Lawrence Seaway to end their cruises in Quebec (cruises, of course, also start in Quebec). From Boston, our cruise called on Bar Harbor, Maine; Halifax and Sydney, Nova Scotia; Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; Saguenay Fjord; and Quebec City before ending in Montreal. Of those ports, I had been only to Halifax, which I loved.

A few years ago, I stepped into the cruise terminal in Halifax and sneezed, causing no fewer than five Nova Scotians to look up and reply, "Bless you." My feet had been planted only a few minutes on Canadian soil, and yet it appeared what the Scottish hairdresser working for Princess Cruises told me just might be true — that the people in Halifax were the nicest people she had ever met in a port. Step off the ship, and people politely offer you directions, maps and literature about the area — without trying to sell you anything at all.

But even as an avid cruiser, I had not given Quebec a lot of thought until The Avid Cruiser's Summer 2005 issue, when Holland America Line Captain Jonathan Mercer chose Quebec City as his favorite port to sail into. It took me going there to see why Captain Mercer made his choice.

Known as the "most European city in North America," Quebec City is perhaps the most romantic city in North America too. Pitch camp at the legendary Le Chateau Frontenac, dine on fine cuisine at sidewalk cafes over a bottle of French wine, step into a horse-

drawn carriage and listen to the clack of hooves on narrow cobblestone streets. The language, the lifestyle, the cuisine — nothing suggested we were just a few hours from the U.S. border.

Montreal was equally enchanting. The two cities, in fact, rank among the best I have ever visited. I liked them so much that I found myself looking for apartments to rent, a hazard of my profession.

I loved Saguenay too. I found it charming and relaxing and other-worldly. Life there seemed to revolve around the fjord and the fresh breezes off the water. As noted in one of the preceding stories, a hotel receptionist in La Baie, said of the Saguenay lifestyle, "We know how to breathe." That's an important attribute that residents in few other places in the world can claim.

If you've read the stories preceding this one, it should be apparent that I also loved Quebec because it has many of the positive aspects of being in France — and none of the negative ones.

There's no jetlag, as Quebec is only a short flight from most U.S. gateways. And although the Canadian dollar was gaining strength against the U.S. dollar when I was there and when this article went to press, Quebec is still a bargain when compared to most of Continental Europe. The fact that you can bring your own bottle of wine to many restaurants also makes Quebec even more of a bargain.

While my intention is not to bash France, comparisons are necessary with two places that are so much alike — and so very different. Quebec has none of the snobbery that many tourists attribute to France, deserved or not. Quebecers, in fact, are some of the friendliest and most hospitable people I've ever met.

If you're ending or beginning a cruise in Quebec, you owe it to yourself to add a week (two nights in Montreal, three nights in Quebec City, and two nights in Saguenay). And if not, then it's time to begin planning. Don't do what I did and put off visiting Quebec. If you do, you'll want to kick yourself for waiting so long.

— Ralph Grizzle