

## Montreal-Quebec 2005

**Introduction:** The concept was to hang out somewhere with the 4 “kids” in the late summer, about the time of our 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary. We pretty much left the decisions as to where to do this up to the four of them and they settled in on Montreal as it is a large enough city for Sabina and has interesting things for everyone else, like a Film Festival for Nathan. They, the kids, also selected the dates, which amounted to basically an extra long weekend prior to when Sabina starts classes. We managed to get frequent flyer tickets to cover Nathan and Dannette and the two of us, a nice situation considering the price of the regular tickets and the desire to use up some United miles before they have more bankruptcy problems. To maximize playtime for the amount of time away from work, N&D wanted to fly on a redeye and we joined them even though we didn’t have the same work-play constraints.

Then things fell partly apart. Dannette’s back got bad/worse rapidly so she ended up having to cancel out on the trip and get some extensive, and painful/debilitating, tests done on the Friday of our planned trip; so neither she nor Nathan made the trip. But the other 4 of us did.

Tuesday-1: Betty drove us to SFO where we caught our redeye. It was non-stop to BWI, which was nice, and then a hop to Philadelphia and a hop to Montreal. None of the planes were full so we were able to spread out a bit, like had three seats for the two of us for the long leg, so not bad actually.

Wednesday-1: Arrived Montreal and connected up with Sabina and Russell. They had scheduled themselves to get in about 15 minutes before we would and we had made some arrangements as to how to get together at the airport if convenient or just at the hotel if that didn’t work out. Turned out we were on time, they were about 30 minutes late, and the getting together worked out just fine. Took a taxi to the hotel, a better deal than the aerobus when 4 folks are involved. Checked in, only one of the two rooms was made up as it was still before noon, and then went to a somewhat rather crazy place for lunch. Good bread, far-out sandwiches, hippie-like, patio sitting; worked out fine. After lunch we did a bunch of walking, going from our hotel-area to the old town to see the sights and hit the tourist bureau, then out towards a suburb to go to a large market. The walk was longer than was good for Dawna but she made it. We did have to walk a bit slower than normal, however, so only got there about 30 minutes before closing time. Bought lots of good cheese and a variety of other things, including bread. Took the metro/subway back to our hotel. After a bit of resting and the purchasing of a bottle of wine from a nearby store, we simply had cheese and bread “for dinner” and then got some well-deserved sleep.

An aside on the hotel. Initially we interacted with one another via e-mail and selected a small hotel that the NYC girls had stayed at once and thought very highly of. However, it didn’t have high-speed Internet connections and Dannette was likely to have to participate in one or two work Internet conferences while on this outing so we changed to a different place that she had located on the net. It was in an even better location (in terms of cafes, restaurants, small shops, etc than the first place although maybe not quite as nice/neat. A good feature of it, however, was a small kitchen-like wall with a fridge, microwave, coffee maker, and some utensils. The latter came in handy right away with our cheese and wine tasting meal, for example. And it did have wireless Internet.

Another aside, lots of fun architecture during our many walks what with “funky shops and 19<sup>th</sup>-century homes with ornate wooden or wrought-iron balconies, pointy Victorian roofs and exterior staircases” being the way Lonely Planet describes it.

Thursday-1: Got up, had some coffee and croissants (they put a couple on your doorknob at 7:30 AM each morning, and then went by subway to an area east of town where there are several attractions. Oh, yes, we picked up three-day metro passes that are good on both the subway and the buses at the start of this outing. First attraction was just looking at the Olympic stadium. I liked it, Sabina definitely didn't. Then we did the Biodome. This place has four different sections each with a different climate, beginning with a hot humid jungle area and ending with an Arctic area. It was built inside of what had been the bike racing “stadium”/velodrome for the Olympics. Quite a few animals in each of the environments, especially a lot of fish. The outstanding item was probably the penguins who were extremely active and interesting to watch. Boy can those suckers swim, nothing like the slow waddle you associate with them on land.

Dawna and Russell then did the nearby Insectarium while Sabina and I hit the road. We went back towards town, stopped before getting there and did a lot of walking/wandering around. Also had a reasonably good Greek lunch. Part of our wandering amounted to checking out a lock on the St. Lawrence that was letting a small boat through, so I got to expound on the locks in France that we went through a couple of months earlier. We all met back at the hotel around 5 PM and eventually went to dinner at an Indian place that Russell had sized up when he and Dawna walked by it earlier (I think). Had a quite good meal there.

Friday-1: Sabina enjoyed a sleep in while the other 3 of us went off to see a couple of churches, really basilicas. First the highest rated attraction in Montreal, Basilica Notre Dame. Then, Basilica Marie Reine du Monde, which lonely planet implied was actually neater – it being a ½ scale version of St. Peters in Rome. Well, LP had this one really wrong. It was OK but Notre Dame was really good, probably the best I've ever seen. Quite soft and peaceful and beautiful. We took a guided tour of it that was also very informative (in English). Amongst many spectacular aspects of this church was an organ that had about 7,000 pipes and we got to hear a bit of it when we first came into the church as a chap was practicing. Went back to the hotel, picked up Sabina, and had a pizza lunch at a near by spot. There were dozens and dozens of places to eat in our area. Followed this up with a visit to the “underground city.” This amounts to hundreds of shops, a few metro stops, hotels, etc, etc all connected so that in the winter you'd never need to surface into the cold. Not especially interesting but something we figured good (semi at least) tourists had to experience. Had a coffee in the process, which I mainly point out because (a) we were always having a coffee because the “kids” are into this and (b) there were a huge number of coffee places throughout the city.

Next activity was to walk a street fair that just happened to be going on this weekend. Interesting how the restaurants along this street built extensions to their ground floor right out into the street to provide extra seating capacity during the fair. Back to the hotel and about now was when Russell did some magic to my computer so it would recognize the provided wireless network and thereafter I logged on a fair amount. Dinner that night was at an Ethiopian spot and quite good. The downside was the service was very very slow. After dinner D&I went with Sabina to a spot

where she was going to tango the night away. Watched for a couple hours and then I went home, arriving about 1:00 AM. Dawna stayed and she and Sabina got back an hour or so later.

As an aside, we had been having quite good weather. Prior to getting there it seemed to me like it was rain or showers almost every day based on the newspapers listings, but we had had no rain and it had been warm. Almost too warm in that along with the humidity things were often a bit stuffy/sweaty in the eating establishments; we'd been having nearly every meal outside, however.

Saturday-1: Time to sleep in for (almost) everyone. I say "almost" because Russell gets up early (say 5-6 AM) everyday it seems. Even worse than myself since on trips I tend to actually sleep in (like 7 AM) even though I never do so at home, or even later if it has been a really late night. Once we were all up we headed northward to a famous bagel spot. Lots of hype about the competition between Montreal and NYC for the best bagels in the world, etc. Our gang would vote for NYC after having given Montreal a fair shot. We then hopped a bus and went down town for the next food-must, a smoked meat sandwich (for the meat eaters that is). This is like pastrami and again a competitor with NYC. We thought it different than pastrami but quite good. The place we went was one of the old must-do places/cafes. After that, Dawna and I went to the McCord Museum that is part of McGill University and the kids went somewhere else. The museum was excellent in terms of giving the history of the city and area. Dinner that night was at a brewpub where we enjoyed the food, beer, and general friendliness of this old spot.

Sunday-1 (our Anniversary by the way): Dawna, Russell, and I headed off "to church" while Sabina slept in. The goal was to hear some good organ music along with a choir at the Notre Dame Basilica. We got to the area rapidly enough to stop at a nearby spot and have a good coffee, but in retrospect that was a mistake because we missed the prelude organ music. The bit of organ music during the service was OK and the postlude was good but what we really had needed was an organ concert like would be taking place that evening – but none of us would be in town. Back to the hotel, picked up Sabina, headed to a breakfast place in R's book but it no longer existed. Dawna asked some walker-bys for a suggestion and we ended up in a good spot and ate a huge breakfast (Portuguese omelet for me, for example). Packed up and the kids took off for the airport by cab and Dawna and I took the bus down to the central bus station where we then got a bus to Quebec City. I had initially planned to take a hydrofoil up the St. Lawrence but it is no longer functioning. Thought maybe the bus would go along the river but it actually cut across country so nothing really special to look at other than nice farmland. Relaxing and a relatively short trip, however. When we got to QC we checked out the nice old railroad station near the bus station and then got a taxi to our hotel. Like in Montreal, we had selected a small/"historic" hotel in a convenient part of town. It was a couple blocks away from the river (St. Lawrence) and the large, old, grand hotel (Chateau Frontenac). After checking in we walked the inner/upper old city, the part that was walled for fortification at one point in time. Ended up eating at a creperie near our hotel. Nice weather, outside patio, OK food but wished we had waited in line at a famous creperie more downtown.

Monday-1: Lots of walking and looking. Hit the visitor center, did an English-speaking tour of the parliament building since it was just starting when we got there, followed portions of step-by-step walking tours in Lonely Planet and AAA. Had lunch at an old and famous spot (Restaurant

aux Anciens Canadiens) with interesting and good food (game pie and pork pie for our mains and maple pie and some sort of banana+strawberries+blue-berries+cream thing for desert. Dropped down from the upper walled city to the lower port city and continued walking, exploring, etc. Lots of antique shops down there. That night we ate at a fairly high-class restaurant and Dawna had excellent sweetbreads and I had a good rack of lamb. A fine day.

Tuesday-2: Much cooler and windy today. Wandered over to the fancy hotel and checked it out, did some shopping, went to the excellent Museum of Civilization down in the port area and spent a lot of time there viewing fine exhibits about the local area with much emphasis on the French vs English aspect of things. Good “first people” exhibits as well. Did a boat ride on the river, then lunch (excellent mussel and fish soup on what was now a rather cold day), and then back into the museum (ticket good for all day) to finish off a couple more exhibits (fine one on Light and interesting one on Salt) and hit the gift shop. Trudged back to our hotel. By the time we went out to dinner it was raining and we did a bit too much hunting for a dinner spot but ended up doing quite well even if a bit wet. Seems like Dawna did the lamb this night and I forget what I had.

Wednesday-2: The day to go home but not until the afternoon. And it was pouring out; this being the end of Hurricane Katrina as it had rolled up the eastern seaboard. But off we went with our jackets and umbrellas. Walked along the boardwalk high above the river, dried off in the visitor center, checked out of the hotel but left our bags there, walked back down to the port area and to the same lunch spot we had gone to the day before so that Dawna could have sweetbreads again and I had something good. Still pouring out so called a cab. It took us to the hotel where we grabbed our bags and then to the airport. At the airport I even changed shoes and socks to dry out a bit, but then the boarding of a small plane required walking across the tarmac through large puddles, so got wet again. We, by the way, caught a plane an hour earlier than our scheduled one so as to get out before weather would close the airport. The small plane took us to Toronto where we changed to a larger one that went non-stop to SFO. Rather interesting that we actually cleared US customs in Toronto, by the way. Easy flight home but for some reason I didn't type much of the trip letter on the plane; thus doing it two months later has certainly dulled my memory of things.

Summary: Fine trip with better weather than we deserved and then an interesting storm at the end. Enjoyable/interesting cities; strange to be in French cities in North America. Quebec City as the oldest city in the US and Canada and only walled city north of Mexico, is a World Heritage site and deserves it, while Montreal has lots to see and the area we were in was very multicultural and enjoyable. Too bad that Nathan and Dannette couldn't make it – one advantage of writing this note so late is I can report that she had her major surgery and it went well; she is now in a long recovery process.