

Right on the Crossroads

As I overlook the Ottawa River behind Parliament Hill in Canada's capital, a tourist placard says this city began as a "ramshackle lumber town in the middle of nowhere." It's true. When Queen Victoria named this unknown place the Canadian capital in 1857, there were grumblings in Montréal, Toronto and Kingston, Ontario—all of which once vied for the title.

Urban myths run rampant about why she chose Ottawa, including one tale that has her arbitrarily sticking a hatpin into a map. But as it turns out, Ottawa is on the crossroads of the ethnic triangle of Canadian history—that of the British, the French and the aboriginals, otherwise known as the First Nations peoples.

THE WILD CATS OF PARLIAMENT HILL

Ottawa originally grew out of the necessity for an alternative water route to the St. Lawrence River following the War of 1812. The British feared a U.S. attack, so an adventurous engineer named Lieutenant Colonel John By was given the task

of building the Rideau Canal, connecting Kingston to the Ottawa River. The city of Bytown, which later became Ottawa, grew from and because of the effort to build this canal, which is North America's oldest continuously operating waterway. The locks open and close by hand, just as they did more than 150 years ago, and UNESCO recently designated the canal a World Heritage Site. Situated between Parliament Hill and the historic Fairmont Chateau Laurier, the canal forms the historic centerpiece from which all of Ottawa extends.

Parliament Hill itself consists of three buildings: the West Block, the Centre Block and the East Block. Inside the Centre Block, fossils are hidden in the limestone walls, and the marble steps dip where politicians

have marched up and down for more than a century.

Just outside sit felines almost as famous as any politician inside. Since the late 1970s, dozens of feral cats have found their homes in two homemade wooden cat houses outside the Parliament buildings. Rene Chartrand, known as the Catman of the Hill, arrives every day at an undisclosed time to feed the cats, all of whom are spayed or neutered and inoculated. The Canadian government isn't allowed to spend official funds for his cause, but it would never consider booting him off the property. He solicits donations from the public and raises thousands of dollars annually to take care of these cats. The folks in Parliament cite the whole

YOUR SPOTLIGHT ON Ottawa

BY GARY SINGH

phenomena as a reigning symbol of Canadian compassion.

CANADIAN HISTORY

The Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC)—sitting directly across the Ottawa River in Gatineau, Québec—is the most-visited Canadian museum, housing 3 million artifacts of Canadiana, including a gargantuan collection of aboriginal *objets d'art*. Dr. Victor Rabinovitch, the museum's president and CEO, has recently orchestrated the second part of an exhibition swap between the CMC and the National Museum of China. The latter institution loaned the CMC a huge exhibition of native Chinese artifacts last year, and now CMC has announced a new exhibition of aboriginal Canadian artifacts to be displayed in Beijing just in time for the Summer Olympic Games in August.

"Never before has a major exhibition of CMC artifacts debuted outside these walls," he explained, first in French and then in English. "We're hoping we're paving the road for all those Canadian medal

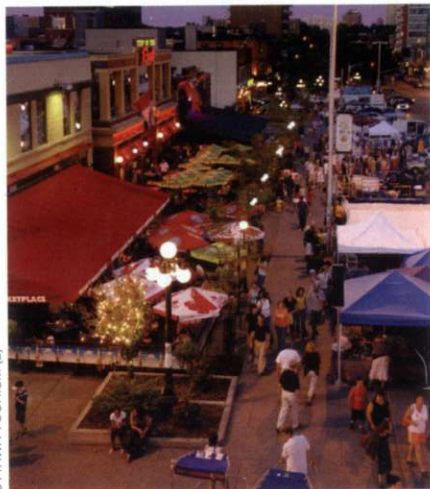
winners in Beijing."

Even though the CMC is on the Québec side of the river, it functions as part of any Ottawa itinerary, and residents of both provinces regularly travel back and forth across the bridge. Other recent CMC shows include an exhibition of Glenn Gould, the eccentric Canadian virtuoso pianist who pioneered the recording of classical music in the late 1950s, and a presentation on Maurice "le Rocket" Richard, the Montréal Canadiens hockey legend and hero who played a major role in French-Canada's coming of age in the mid-20th century.

As in many international cities, in order to circumvent language barriers, Ottawa uses universal symbols to designate locations, whether it's a washroom, a restaurant or, in this next case, another museum. As I motored eastward down the Ottawa River Parkway that follows the river, my gaze caught a road sign that could only have meant the Canadian War Museum was approaching. With a picture of a museum, the sign had one word: War, with the French translation, *guerre*.

The Canadian War Museum dates to the late 19th century, but this new location features architecture based on the theme of regeneration. Inside, visitors walk through 400 years of Canadian military history as it happened, beginning with the aboriginal peoples through the Cold War, including an entire exhibit featuring written and visual reportage from Afghanistan.

Thankfully, the museum includes not just tragedy, but comedy as well. Near the end of the Seven Years War in 1759, in the battle that created Canada, the British trounced the French on the Plains of Abraham outside the Québec City walls. The museum thoroughly documents the violent, 30-minute-long skirmish through one particular video featuring three hockey fans on the couch watching a television special about it: A Francophone wears a Montréal Canadiens jersey, an Anglophone wears a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey and an aboriginal man wears a Vancouver Canucks jersey—simultaneously representing and satirizing the triangle of Canadian history (the French, English and First Nations



OTTAWA TOURISM (2)

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peoples). While eating popcorn, the three facetiously mock each other's history and ethnicity before changing the channel midway through the show to watch a hockey game instead. It just doesn't get any more Canadian than that.

DEFINITIVE NEIGHBORHOODS

Not only did Lieutenant Colonel John By design the Rideau Canal, he also set out street plans in 1826 for what's now called the ByWard Market, a 12-square-block area east of Parliament Hill that today remains Ottawa's definitive neighborhood and one of Canada's oldest public markets. The market is open daily, except Christmas and New Year's Day, no matter what the weather may bring. Shoppers find fruits, vegetables, street performers, jugglers, nightlife, bars, pubs, trendy spots to smooch, historic quads, trinket shops and, of course, the U.S. embassy, which locals correctly describe as a gigantic submarine.

But one would forgo quite a bit by only exploring the Parliament Area of Ottawa, as many visitors from other Canadian

cities tend to do. A roll call of neighborhoods for the discerning voyager includes The Glebe, a trendy area south of the downtown core featuring a more pastoral section of the Rideau Canal; Hintonburg, a historical district reinvented as an artsy-hipster retail mecca; and New Edinburgh, with its stately mansions alongside the embassies of smaller countries.

A more nondescript locale—and now one technically part of Ottawa proper due to amalgamation in 2001—is the high-tech neighborhood of Kanata, which was called Silicon Valley North during the 1990s dotcom boom. The running joke in Ottawa is that a generation of aspiring techies studied computer science with grandiose plans of hitting it big in California, but wound up right down the 417 freeway in Kanata instead.

High-tech research campuses and mid-rise buildings sprout from the otherwise flat landscape like flowering plants anticipating the next phase of technological growth. Like its high-tech model back in California, Kanata is essentially suburban sprawl, but as said in the real Silicon Valley, this collection of bedroom communities changed the world. Ottawa today has the

highest percentage of Canadian Internet users, and the first digital telephone switch and the first ring tone were invented here.

GETTING AWAY

With Ottawa, you don't even have to limit yourself to the city confines. The wilderness waits just over the river, using Gatineau as a leaping-off point. Gatineau itself was amalgamated in 2001 from five different cities: Aylmer, Buckingham, Gatineau, Hull and Masson-Angers. Even today, one has to be careful when explaining destinations to taxi drivers. For example, if you're looking for a locale in what used to be Hull, but you say Gatineau, the driver won't automatically differentiate between the original city of Gatineau and the all-encompassing new Gatineau. In order to clarify things, you must say "the Hull sector." Old timers in Ottawa tell stories of how they used to make late-night dashes across the bridge to Hull, Québec, back when the bars and liquor stores were open one hour later there than in Ontario. Today, folks continue to travel back and forth between the two provinces, as the official capital region of Ottawa includes municipalities on both sides.



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SHOWCASE
Destinations
OTTAWA

Know Before You Go

Major Airport: Ottawa International Airport
Currency: Canadian Dollar
Electricity: 110V, 60Hz
Primary Languages: English, French
Population: 800,000 (2006)
Time Zone: GMT -5

Web site:
Ottawa Tourism
www.ottawatourism.ca

For more information about meeting and event venues in Ottawa, please visit the destination's wiki page on www.mpiweb.org.

What's New In Ottawa

- The **Ottawa Congress Centre** will expand to 200,000 square feet, with the largest contiguous space being 100,000 square feet, opening 2011. Demolition of the original building will commence in September.
- The **Rideau Canal Festival** will debut in August, celebrating the newly designated UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- The **Hilton Garden Inn Ottawa International Airport** opens this summer with 168 guest rooms.

But no amount of time spent in Ottawa would be anywhere near complete without at least a modest infiltration of this section of Québec, which is called Outaouais (pronounced OOH-TAH-WAY), and it's not enough to simply venture across the river to the Museum of Civilization and call it a day. A different dimension of off-the-beaten-path getaways and alternative enclaves await, especially in Gatineau Park, a gemlike wilderness filled with approximately 60 miles of trails.

Outaouais is easy to navigate, as the highways follow the river system, and if you take Autoroute 5 from Hull you'll get to Wakefield Village, a perfect nest-like

Bohemian haven on the western shore of the Gatineau River where tourists hop off the steam train from Hull and intermingle with the artists who live and work there.

Another escape is the village of Montebello—halfway between Ottawa and Montréal—where you'll find the Earth's biggest log cabin, the Fairmont Le Chateau Montebello. All in all, the villages are popular getaways, and many Ottawans split for Outaouais for their vacations before returning to the grind of government or service life back in the capital.

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