



AllWays Traveller

Ottawa, Canada

A capital idea

Set hard against the Québec border, Ottawa was a sensitively correct choice as capital when Canada became an independent nation.

It was acceptable to both French and Anglo Canadians.

The stunningly beautiful setting, beside a wide flowing river and athwart falls which, while not as grand as those at Niagara are awe-inspiring in their own right.

The city's role on the parliamentary and diplomatic front has saved it from being merely a sleepy backwater.

But has not, as yet, made it quite the draw for tourists that it deserves to be.

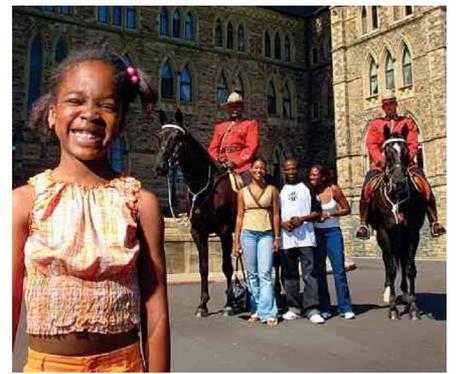
As pretty as Québec, as lively as Montréal and Toronto but on a thoroughly human scale, Ottawa is a gem just waiting discovery.

The experience can be as breathtaking as it must have been when the great 18th Century explorer Samuel De Champlain – 'The Father of New France' – first looked across the river from the clifftops and chose this as the site for a brand new trading post.

www.ottawatourism.ca

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A personal view

Canada's first city is a lot more interesting than you might expect

by Roger St. Pierre



On a recent transatlantic trip, I spotted a tee-shirt that read assertively: "My country is twice the size of yours ... No, I do not live in an igloo ... Yes, I do have a TV ... I'm a Canadian".

There's nothing that winds the Maple Leaf brigade up more than American ignorance about the next-door neighbour!

We Brits are almost as bad. Want to fill in the gaps in your knowledge?: simply flip an atlas open.

You'll probably be surprised to find that London is on the same latitude as the bottom of icy Hudson's Bay and that Montreal is as far south as Bordeaux (no wonder they grow such fine wines).

A wonderful welcoming people



The Canadians are wonderful, welcoming people.

They seem somehow to have combined the best of British, French and American influences, coming up with something special – without the ignorance of the Americans, the arrogance of the French or the sheer bloody-mindedness of the Brits.

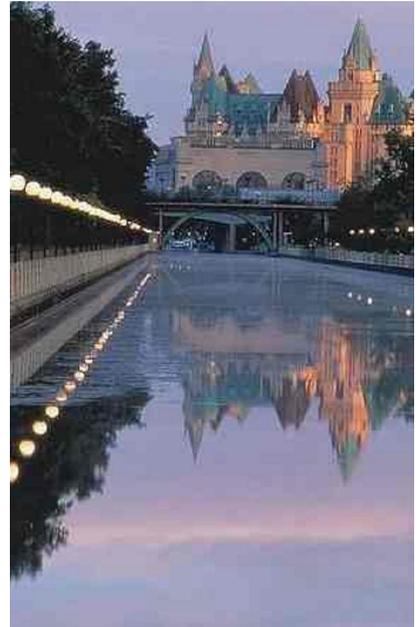
If those from the outside world neglect Canada in general, they certainly neglect Ottawa in particular.

The direct flights from Europe concentrate on Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, with only a token few Ottawa services.

The tourist trails signpost Quebec, Calgary and Whistler while the nation's capital is dismissed by too many – Canadians and foreigners alike and most of whom have never ever been there – as being boring and not worthy of a visit.

The facts

The city



Ottawa is Canada's fourth largest metropolis, the seat of the federal government and site of many historic and national celebration.

It is a city of 1.1 million people, with English and French widely spoken.

Ottawa also enjoys top-class shopping and some wonderful restaurants and inviting bars.

But it is, most of all, a place where the great outdoors comes right into town – a superb natural setting supporting year-round recreation and sports activity.

Ottawa's neighbourhoods

Chinatown

The Orient comes to Canada, with Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese and other merchants vying for business along with the Chinese.

Some great restaurants – and some not so good!

Downtown Rideau

Some 546 businesses and organisations occupy a lively 23-block city centre business and shopping area east of the Rideau Canal and south of George Street.

A dramatic location



Don't you believe it! For starters, the city's location – astride dramatic falls on a beautiful tributary of the mighty St. Lawrence – is truly spectacular.

Big enough to be a city, small enough to be a town, Ottawa has great shopping, excellent museums and galleries, year-round sporting attractions and some outstanding restaurants and lively bars.

Like others, I tacked my visit onto a trip to Toronto, almost as an afterthought. In fact, cosmopolitan Ottawa more than deserves a week all to itself.

You'll find plenty of ideas at the Ottawa tourism website and the excellent A5 official visitor guide runs to 88 jam-packed pages.

The tourist board site also offers a value for money Attractions Passport which provides free ad-lib admission for two at most of the big tourism draws.

Cold War reminder



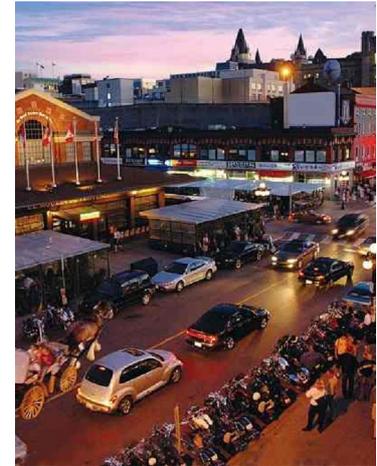
Wandering past the host of grandiose public buildings in city centre – places where many a major international diplomatic deal was done – stopping off in moody local barns and coffee shops, it's easy to imagine what a den of intrigue the place must have been at the height of the Cold War.

This was when CIA operatives trailed KGB agents who were spying on MI6 as East tried to meet West on relatively neutral ground.

Just outside town, those grim pre-perestroika days times are chillingly recalled at Diefenbunker (the once secret underground bunker) where the Canadian government would have bolted in the event of nuclear war. My tour of this bizarre facility ended with a screening of Marlon Brando's *'The Ugly American'*.

www.diefenbunker.ca

ByWard Market



Established in the 1820s, this covered one-time food market and stalls has trendy fashion, places to eat, drink and be entertained.

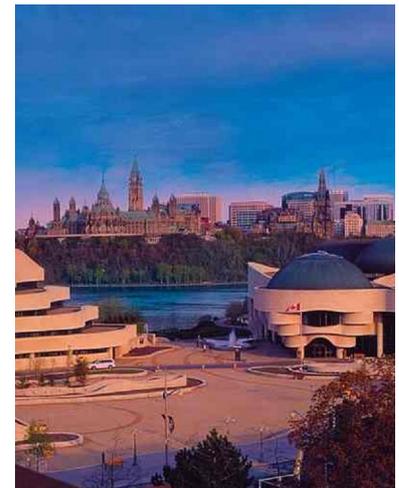
Corso Italia (Little Italy) and Preston Street

Another district with a strong ethnic ambience, featuring popular restaurants and speciality stores.

Sparks Street Mall

Distinctive heritage architecture abounds at what was Canada's first pedestrian mall – stretching from Elgin to Lyon Street, a block south of the Parliament buildings.

Gatineau



Across the river in Québec province, Ottawa's sister city has a decidedly more French ambience.

It is home to the superb Canadian Museum of Civilisation – the country's largest and most fascinating museum

Parliament Hill



When you've done eating and are all shopped out, discover the iconic Parliament Hill, with a self-guiding booklet that will take you round the elegantly imperious government buildings that more than match our own at Westminster.

Then take a 10 minute ride across the Ottawa River to Gatineau to uncover a thousand years of Canadian civilisation at the splendid Canadian Museum of Civilisation.

Great eating out

Ottawa abounds with 'name' chefs.

One of the best known is English-born Michael Blackie, a passionate master of inventive contemporary Canadian cuisine.

His venue is the simply named Le Café which is tucked away behind and beneath the superb modern National Arts Centre.

Michael's specialities include a superb steak tartare, pulled short rib poutine, soft shell crab in ale, ginger snap crusted rack of lamb and sweet grass smoked three fingered duck.

I dined at two other outstanding eating places, both on Murray Street, which is in the historic old town that centres on the restored ByWard Market (or Marché By – this town is truly bilingual) with its boutiques, bars and restaurants.

Taking its name from the thoroughfare it's on, focuses heavily on fresh local produce and has a way with offal and with pork products, though there's plenty of other choice, including local freshwater fish, beef, duck and elk.

The food at the bright, upscale Domus Café (domuscafe.ca, or call 001 613 241 6007), just down the street, is more conventional, if still highly inventive in its presentation.

Here John Taylor's menu follows the seasons.

I started with an excellent ballotine of quail and took stuffed rabbit saddle for my exquisite main, eschewing dessert so I could stop to sample a unique local speciality. As hot dogs are to New York, beaver tail pastries are to Ottawa!

Out and about

After the megapolis of Toronto, lively Ottawa is Ontario province's largest city. It's role as national capital adds an extra piquance of cosmopolitan grandeur and chic.

Most of the surrounding countryside comprises low, rolling hills but to the north are ranges high enough to provide worthwhile winter ski runs.

Other interesting facts

Ottawa's oddest landmark is a 9 metre (29 feet) giant spider made of cast bronze – the creation of Louis Bourgeois. Titled Maman, this eye-catching work stands in front of the National Gallery of Canada, on Sussex Drive.

Among Parliament Hill's attractions are the stray-cat sanctuary, Barbara Paterson's quirky monument and the nearby granite National War Memorial, with its 22 bronze figures

Details of more than 80 pieces of public art in the capital region can be found at :

www.canadacapital.gc.ca

Getting to Ottawa

By air

The Ottawa International Airport terminal serves more than 30 destinations in Canada and the USA, as well as London and Frankfurt, with more than 125 daily non-stop flights.

Porter Airlines is the prime regional airline, with services to various Canadian and American cities within a 500-mile radius of Toronto, including Ottawa.

www.flyporter.com

By bus

OC Transpo runs rapid transit between downtown and the VIA rail station, airport and the bus station.

www.octranspo.com

YOW Airporter operates a round-trip shuttle service between the airport and Ottawa area hotels.

www.yowshuttle.com

Fresh tastes

Culinary tourism is alive and well, with numerous farmers markets operating from May through to November and restaurants increasingly placing the emphasis on local produce.

Tulips from Amsterdam



Each May, Ottawa hosts the world's largest tulip festival, celebrating warm links of friendship with the Netherlands, whose royal family lived here in exile during World War II. The several million tulips are a gift of gratitude.

Flowers are a constant theme. Rideau Hall's glorious gardens are now graced with an impressive arc of roses.

The National Gallery



You should set half a day for the National Gallery of Canada, the Canada Aviation Museum and the vast and brilliantly displayed Canadian War Museum.

The War Museum reduced me to tears with its sad and evocative recounting of a nation's history at arms, from skirmishes with native Indians to the War of 1812, on through Canada's part in the Boer War and the sufferings of two world wars through to its modern role as a peacekeeper.

Add in a ride on the UNESCO World Heritage Site listed Rideau Canal, a flutter at the Casino du Lac-Leamy and a stroll or two through the ruggedly beautiful Gatineau Park and, bang, there's a week gone already!

Sandwiches on the lawn

Picnics are very popular in summertime, Favoured venues include the grassy downtown Major's Hill Park, the benches in Confederation Park, with its free concerts, and overlooking the waterfalls sand rapids of Hog's Back Park.

By rail

Getting there by train is easy, thanks to the excellent VIA Rail Canada services on the busy Ontario – Québec Corridor.

There are 320 train services a week, year round.

I chose the business class option, getting a comfortable reserved seat with a panoramic view of the countryside flashing by, ample legroom and airline-style inclusive meal service.

And you can stay wi-fi connected en-route.

Departure from Toronto's main station, at the heart of downtown, has a real sense of occasion.

As well as a welcoming business lounge to enjoy before the train whisks you off on the five-hour plus journey east.

Trains used to arrive at a similar imposing Victorian-era edifice close by the Parliament buildings in Ottawa.

Now that's now government offices and the railway uses a modern station on the outskirts of the city.

www.viarail.ca

Taxis

The biggest taxi operators are Blue Line
www.bluelinemtaci.com
Capital Taxi
www.capitaltaxi.com
DJ's Taxis
www.djstaxis.com

Most drivers are very courteous and seem to be from Afghanistan or Pakistan; fares are inexpensive.

Where to stay

Not surprisingly, considering the diplomatic and commercial comings and goings, many of the big international hotel have a presence in Ottawa.

These have a wide selection of rooms available at all price breaks and also boasts a good stock of independently-run boutique properties and B&Bs.

Wheeler dealers



There are a number of bike hire outlets. Mountain bikers of all abilities can find 90 kms of dedicated trails at Rideau Park while the metropolis as a whole has 170 kms of cycleways.

The pathway along the Rideau Canal is popular with cyclists and in-line skaters while the canal itself freezes over in winter when it becomes a popular venue for ice skating. Skiers will find 24 cross-country and downhill runs at Camp Fortune.

You can take your bike out of town by train for excursions further afield. Go to www.biketrain.ca for schedules and tickets.

Quirky sports

Mooney's Bay Park is the setting each June for the largest dragon boat race in North America while the Ottawa-Carleton Ultimate Association, which operates the world's first dedicated facility for the sport, runs the world's largest ultimate frisby league.

February's Winterlude festivities include the annual Bedzz Race when 50 teams of four and their jockeys push highly decorated beds round 50 metres of ice at Dows Lake, raising money for charity.

Soak up some culture



There are myriad arts and culture events.

Noon under the Bridge is a series of free midweek lunchtime concerts, staged from June through August.

Also free are the Orchestra in the Park concerts at the National Arts Centre from July 23-36, the colourful Changing of the Guard ceremony on Parliament Hill daily from 10 am from June 27 - August 29, and the spectacular light and sound show at the same location every evening between July 6 and September 13.

Afternoon tea

Afternoon tea at the majestic Château Laurier Hotel is a not to be missed experience.

Built in 1912 and now part of the luxury Fairmont chain, this is one of the world's great hotels, oozing history and tradition but with all modern amenities.

The afternoon tea ritual here is a hallowed event, with its dainty little sandwiches, wickedly rich cakes and comprehensive choice of brews, sharing the experience with business people, diplomats and women who do lunch and – had it still been the Cold War era, probably with spies too.

Built in 1912 and now part of the Fairmont chain, this is one of the world's great hotels, oozing history and tradition but with all modern amenities.

The guest rooms are suitably magnificent.

www.fairmont.com

Twenty minutes ride from downtown, as city gives way to rolling countryside, the excellent and highly modern Brookstreet Hotel is the centrepiece of what's been dubbed Silicon Valley North – Ottawa's high-tec community.

Surrounded by cycling and jogging paths and with a golf club next door and a fitness studio and two pools on-site, this is a true work, rest and play destination.

A unique feature is that each guestroom is adorned with original works by past and present students at Ottawa's highly reputed Canterbury Arts High School.

The hotel also features the acclaimed Perspectives restaurant where chef Clifford Lyness holds court.

www.brookstreet.ca

More information

www.ottawatourism.ca

The International Travel Writers Alliance



AllWays

AllWays is the consumer travel service from the International Travel Writers Alliance.

The International Travel Writers Alliance

The International Travel Writers Alliance represents travel writers, editors, broadcasters and photographers worldwide

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A long-standing member of the British Guild of Travel Writers, Roger St. Pierre is, among other things, something of a North American specialist, having visited all but one of the American states and most Canadian provinces.

Ottawa has been on his radar for many years and he finally made it there among the early snow flurries in early winter 2009 – reporting that the city exceeded his expectations