



Le Baluchon Eco Resort offers massages in a curtained cubicle next to the river, like the one above, or in a tree house near a waterfall. PHOTOS: CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR

## A tasteful tour of Montreal

From the vibrant ethnic neighbourhoods of the city to the farms of the countryside there's much to savour



A mural, one of many, covers the wall of a building in downtown Montreal.

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SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

In an international city like Montreal, you can't talk about food without talking about history and culture.

At least that's what I discovered during my first visit to this eclectic, vibrant and multicultural city.

Culinary tour guide and lifelong Montrealer Ruby Roy and her driver picked us up from our downtown accommodations, Le St-Martin Hotel, for a fascinating driving tour through Montreal's unique neighbourhoods.

Our group, an international mix of food and travel writers, was in town for the Omnivore Festival — a world tour also touching down in Sydney, Shanghai, Moscow and Paris — that celebrates young and innovative chefs and producers, plenty of whom reside in Montreal.

As professional gastronomes, we were keen to absorb as much as we could about the city's food scene; but anyone interested in getting a handle on Montreal's history would find this style of tour fascinating too, with its focus on the different influences that converged to create the city's present-day dynamism.

Roy says that Montreal's neighbour-

hoods are a mix of commercial and residential buildings — as opposed to business districts that become deserted once the workday is done — master-planned to support a positive community energy and to reduce crime.

Another community-building strategy is Montreal's four main public markets: Atwater Market at the city's south-central edge, Maisonneuve Market to the east, Lachine Market to the west, and Jean-Talton Market to the north in Little Italy.

The bustling markets supply a bevy of produce, cheese, meat, flowers, craft beer and wine, 90 per cent of which, Roy says, is locally grown and produced within an hour of Montreal.

The fruit and vegetable stands are marked with a fleur-de-lis (grown in Quebec), a maple leaf (grown in Canada), or an airplane (grown outside Canada) — and purveyors and shoppers alike are passionate about supporting local.

We visited Atwater Market, named for municipal politician Edwin Atwater but also fittingly located near the Lachine Canal, and sampled aged goat cheese from La Fromagerie Atwater and pastries from Première Moisson made with in-season fruit. Everything was so tasty I considered permanent residence.



Hungry for more, we joined culinary guide Ronald Poiré the following day for a walking tour starting in Chinatown at the base of Saint-Laurent Boulevard.

In Montreal's early days, the boulevard (or The Main, as locals call it), a main artery running north to south, was the dividing line between the east and west halves of the city — and its English and French residents.

As immigrants from Asia, Europe, South America and Africa arrived by boat at the city's southern shore, they settled up the middle, creating a rich mix of cultures and a diverse blend of cafés, grocers, nightclubs, boutiques, restaurants, cultural centres and specialty stores.

From the cobbled streets of Chinatown we walked north to Montreal's Plateau Mont-Royal neighbourhood for a smoked meat sandwich at Schwartz's, where an ever-present lineup stretches down the street outside the Hebrew delicatessen.

A little further up, we veered off Saint-Laurent Boulevard a block to grab freshly-made bagels from another Montreal institution: Fairmount Bagel.

Next, we hopped on the No. 55 bus, which runs all the way up the boulevard, to take us to Jean-Talon Market, where we sniffed, nibbled and sipped our way through the heady culinary wonderland.

Saint-Laurent Boulevard's cultural and historical significance was recognized in 1996 when it was designated a National Historic Site of Canada.

If you'd prefer to take a solo trip back in time, a free downloadable audio guide is available from the "FRAG on the Main" project's website ([atsa.qc.ca/en/frag-on-the-main](http://atsa.qc.ca/en/frag-on-the-main)), and FRAG stations — for fragments of history — are posted on buildings along the way with vintage photographs and historic anecdotes.

Keen to see the surrounding countryside, we left the city for a taste of the neighbouring regions of Lanaudiere and Mauricie to the north.

Quebec is famous for its Nordic spas and, only an hour outside Montreal in Lanaudiere, La Source Spa is an incredible gem among them. Co-founders and partners Patrice Lalancette and Caroline Simard spent six years preparing to open their eco-friendly spa, which was the first spa in Canada to use geothermal energy for their hot tubs and cold plunges.

They also cut no corners designing the sprawling property, with its meditation trail and Zen grove of hammocked trees, making sure the site was an authentic immersion in

nature — not just surrounded by it.

Next we visited La Terre des Bisons, a family-run bison and elk farm, where we were warmly greeted by Josée Toupin and her son Jean-Philippe Demontigny, a recent agricultural studies grad, for a guided tour (available on weekends).

Toupin and her husband Alain Demontigny bought the 400-acre farm in 1992 and started with three buffalo. They now have more than 100 of the magnificent, massive and incredibly agile creatures, in addition to 10 curious and majestic elk.

Learning about these animals and seeing them up close was a real highlight for this animal lover. Tours include a tractor ride to the bison enclosure as well as to the elk enclosure, followed by a tasting of products at the on-site shop.

From the Lanaudiere region into adjacent Mauricie, we travelled to our final destination: Le Baluchon Eco Resort.

You could spend weeks exploring this truly unique property, which stretches out over 1,000 acres and encompasses numerous buildings, 22 kilometres of hiking, biking, horseback riding and cross-country skiing trails, and the Rivière du Loup meandering through the grounds.

We stayed in the Archipel Lodge, one of four inns on site, embodying the "slow design" philosophy with a mix of rustic and modern elements sustainably sourced from local artisans — and a 15-minute walk along a boardwalk atop the forested riverbank to our breakfast on the resort café's sprawling patio.

Our incredible immersion in nature continued with one of Le Baluchon's new health spa offerings, an outdoor massage, either in a spacious tree house adorned with gauze curtains perched next to a crashing waterfall, or downstream in a similar enclosure on a serenely floating dock.

I chose the waterfall massage, which was total bliss. Before setting out for our respective homes, we joined executive chef Claude Girard, a trained herborologist, for a sample of his signature experience; foraging for wild ingredients and then returning to the kitchen to prepare a nourishing meal with them.

We boarded a pontoon and drifted down the river, docking at a spot where he showed us nettles, burdock, dandelion and wormwood, and explained their medicinal properties.

From Montreal's vibrant food scene to Lanaudiere and Mauricie's immersion in nature, I left Quebec feeling nourished in body and spirit, satiated by my first taste of this wonderful part of Canada and its energizing joie de vivre.



La Terre de Bison, a bison and elk farm, covers over 400 acres north of Montreal. PHOTOS: CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR



LaSourceSpa was the first in Canada to use geothermal energy.



An ever-present line stretches outside Schwartz's deli.