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Keeston Lowery Lesbian & Gay Democratic Club
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PEACH BUZZ

Falling in love again

An oasis in the frozen north, Montréal recalls the warmth and romance of Southern France

by Kevin Isom

He took my hand beneath the table as we shared coffee at four in the morning, our green cups clinking softly in their saucers. Montréal was shutting down for the night, but Christian had insisted on buying me café au lait before walking me back to my hotel. His dark eyes sparkled, as his lips moved in outlines of the cadences of Canadian French. This was what I'd come to Montréal for: To fall in love with the French all over again, but on the other side of the Atlantic.

I wondered what I would find in this island city, at the junction of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers. I landed at the Montréal airport, breezed through customs (returning to the United States is nowhere near as easy), and hopped a \$9 Canadian Blue Line bus to the Terminus. About two minutes' walk away—less than half a block—was the Hôtel des Gouverneurs, at the corner of Rue St.-Hubert and Rue Ste.-Catherine. This four-star hotel is very inexpensive by big city standards, about \$100 Canadian a night for two people, taxes included, or roughly \$70 American. The exchange rate favors the American dollar, at about \$1.38 Canadian per \$1 American.

Besides having well-appointed rooms with great views of Montréal on the upper levels, Hôtel des Gouverneurs is host to numerous gay guests. Rue Ste.-Catherine is the main gay street in town, so to the left from the hotel are the major bars and nightclubs, while to the right, just across Rue St.-Hubert, is a Metro station for easy subway access to the rest of the city. There are many other less expensive hotel and bed-and-breakfast options in the area, but some of them sound better in their guidebook descriptions than they actually are. They're certainly worth trying—and leaving if they don't measure up to expectations—but for a short weekend, I wanted immediate gratification. I settled in, ready to explore the unknown.

Montréal is a city of parts. More than two-thirds of Montréal's inhabitants are French-speaking, and its French population is the largest outside of Europe. Even if you speak French, however, Canadian French is pronounced differently from French French. French Canadians tend to sound a little like Swedes on acid speaking French, but you can adapt fairly quickly, and French Canadians have no trouble understanding French French pronunciations. Besides, in all the service industries, everyone speaks English as well. If all else fails, body language is always an option.

Montréal is also divided into old and modern parts. Perched on the edge of the harbor, the Old City is a maze of narrow streets, restored buildings and old houses, built around a central square. The grand Hôtel de Ville, city hall, sits at the top of the square, sporting a green patina to add to its elegance. Around the square are pretty, if touristy, cafés and restaurants, while in the middle of the square on sunny days tourists surround street performers and vendors, in a blaze of color and sound.

Aside from the Old City, the Basilique Notre-Dame, a church boasting European-style Catholic opulence, is worth a leisurely visit. So are Mont-Royal, which rises 764 feet at the center of Montréal,

and McGill University (Canada's Harvard), with its ivy-covered walls. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the modern part of Montréal, with its skyscrapers, museums, theaters and shopping.

At the conclusion of a walking day, dinner at the Saloon Café, a pleasant, trendy gay restaurant and café just down Rue Ste.-Catherine from several of the gay clothing and book shops, fits the bill perfectly. The food is good and inexpensive, the service is pleasant, the host is beautiful, and the patrons are friendly. This is the time to peruse Montréal's gay newspapers, portions of which are written in English, to see what's happening in the evenings.

At night, gay Montréal comes alive. My first night in Montréal, I went to Campus, on Rue Ste.-Catherine, where beautiful, built men dropped their clothes on stage and in private table top dances. The men of Montréal are typically darkly handsome.

After overloading at Campus, Friday night is for Sky, on Rue Ste.-Catherine, with its separate Big Time Fag Bar dance club upstairs. The dance club is dark and the dance floor is small, but so many people crowd into its limited space that you're almost forced to make acquaintances. Saturday is the night for KOX, appropriately named, a much larger dance club in what was once a Canadian post office. The music and the lasers give the club a big party feel, quite a contrast to the relative intimacy of the upstairs dance

club at Sky. Shirtless, sweaty men abound, and the DJ occasionally speaks English, to comic effect for Anglo ears.

Completing the club scene is Sunday happy hour in the early evening at Sky downstairs. Two-for-one cheap beer tends to make for sparkling conversation, or at least the impression thereof. The bar is well-lit and, frankly, cozy, so you can actually see whom you're talking with. Between the twangy accents in French and the warmth of the people, Montréal doesn't seem like a cold, northern, Canadian city at all. Instead, it seems to have a lot more in common with the towns of Southern France—the warmth, the vitality, the *joie de vivre*.

My visit slowly wound its way down to my café au lait with Christian on Sunday morning, until that, too, came to its natural conclusion. As Christian walked me back to my hotel, his hand firmly holding mine, a lone taxi whizzed by on the empty street. We exchanged quiet pleasantries in soft-spoken French at the entrance to my hotel, neither of us wanting the night to end. I knew that my plane would be leaving in less than six hours, yet I continued the parlay, watching the frosty air from our breath mingling in the space between our faces. Then, beneath the watchful eye of the doorman, Christian kissed my cheeks in the French style, first one, then the other, until midway through the third pass our lips met and pressed, joining and opening.

Romance still exists, if you know where to find it. Try it French style, in Montréal.

Kevin Isom is an attorney in Atlanta, Ga. His stories and columns have appeared in the United States, Canada and France.

