

Ottawa Is a Capital with Class

It is a rather serious responsibility to be the capital of the second largest nation on earth, but this well-designed, safe and tidy city on the border between the provinces of Ontario and Quebec also knows how to enjoy itself immensely. With a population of 861,000 and a regional population of 1.1 million, Ottawa is large enough to offer everything a visitor could wish to sample and small enough to access it with ease. Named after the native Algonquin phrase, “to trade”, Ottawa’s trade today is people within a multi-cultural, bilingual atmosphere (English and French) offering plenty of joie de vivre in any language.



National capitals are expected to have the largest and most impressive museums in a country. Ottawa’s museums are no exception with some of the most innovative architectural designs and displays anywhere in the world. During my week there in March 2011, I absorbed the contents of just a few - the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Canadian War Museum and the Museum of Nature - each worthy of half a day, before moving from monumental to miniature with an informative walking tour through the streets of the city core to visit studios and galleries of individual artists with a great deal of talent and loads of personality. I also made time to take in a musical extravaganza at the monumental National Arts Centre and a compelling two-person play at a miniature neighbourhood theatre, both equally rewarding in a city known for its arts and culture as well as numerous festivals.

Ottawa is also an active, outdoor city with parks galore, biking and walking trails groomed for use year round. An iconic landmark, the Rideau Canal, slices gracefully through the heart of the city. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007, it is an early 19th-century construction built primarily for military purposes when Great Britain and the United States vied for control of the region. It is the only canal dating from this great North American canal-building era to remain operational along its original line. In winter its ice is well maintained as a skater’s outdoor paradise; in warmer seasons, the canal is the focus of day cruises into the picturesque countryside. In every

season, manicured walkways along either side of the canal are always to be enjoyed along the cityscape skyline.

Foodies will find taste bud satisfaction in the city's wide range of signature eateries where cuisine is an art form, organic and fresh are a matter of pride, and the word "ordinary" rarely passes a patron's lips. Whether savouring an artfully-presented lunch in the Great Hall of the National Gallery or the inventive vegan dishes of the always-packed ZenKitchen, gourmet fare is a natural expectation among residents who love to eat out and vacationers who reap the benefit of the demand for culinary creativity.



Taking the cuisine theme one step further, why not add skills to the holiday by signing up for a class at the only Cordon Bleu International School in North America (Lcbottawa.com)? Ottawa and Paris are also the only CB Schools with 100% French chefs. For leisure chefs, full-day theme classes average \$245, and 4-day short courses (\$695) are offered year round. A mother and daughter Patisserie Delights 6.5 hour class is \$260 for two, and there is even a Summer Cooking for Teens class (\$190, for teen + parent).

There are many large and small accommodation choices in this city where visiting bureaucrats with brief cases and travelers with cameras stay with equal satisfaction. In the imposing and historic category, there is nothing to beat two city-core gems: the Fairmont Château Laurier (Fairmont.com/laurier) and the Lord Elgin Hotel (Lordelgin.ca). Each one is within easy walking distance of many of the city's finest national museums and galleries, unique eateries, exceptional shopping and must-see highlights including Parliament Hill where activities, parades and tours delight visitors.

Constructed in just three years by a railway entrepreneur and opened nearly a hundred years ago in

1912, the landmark Chateau Laurier is the size and interior design of a respectable-sized royal palace in Europe. Sadly, the entrepreneur did not get a chance to enjoy his grand vision because he went down with the iceberg-fated Titanic just before the hotel's opening. The history and the elegance of a bygone era live on proudly to this day.



Though few prime ministers of a country get to commission a hotel, that is exactly what Canada's wartime PM did with the Lord Elgin, declaring that the national capital needed accommodation on a less grand scale for government bureaucrats and middle class visitors. It opened to great fanfare in 1941, named for one of Canada's governors general who administered what was then a British colony nearly a century before. It is a welcome discovery, lavishly decorated with its own 70 years of colourful tales.

As a holiday destination, Ottawa (Ottawatourism.ca) has four distinct seasons to consider. Whether you are hooked on mega-museums, grand-scale events, art galleries and cuisine experiences or prefer cruising the Rideau Canal and exploring the region's outstanding, accessible trails and parks, Canada's capital is a dynamic destination for most ages and interests. Should my next visit dovetail with the world famous Tulip Festival in May or with the September seasonal change when autumn leaves in and around the city are at their most dazzling?

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