

# Canada's French Connection: Montreal's History of Multiculturalism

When the French first arrived in North America with designs on creating a 'New France', they observed the native tribes of the Algonquian, Iroquoian and Inuit, and built their first colonies based on the fur-trading tradition of these indigenous peoples. This was the beginning of Canada's own grand tradition of integration, of the acceptance of different cultures; a tradition that – like the language spoken by those colonizers – is still very much alive in Quebec today.

What Canada's province of Quebec represents, then, as its French mother-tongue proudly proclaims, is an area of North America that, rather than striving for identity, has instead gained identity through an amalgamation of other identities and cultures – a province that gains uniqueness by mingling great aspects from many different cultures; a province that stands singular in its multiculturalism.



A great example of Quebec's multiculturalism can be found in its largest city, Montreal, that can be seen as a city made from cities; a place grafted from lots of different cultures, from its original foundation as part of 'New France', right through its British rule and development alongside the United States, to the Montreal we see today – a city with enough influences and culture for three cities.

As well as its language, Montreal still shows the influence of the original European settlers in the part of the city known as Vieux-Montreal, or Old Montreal. Some of the buildings in this part of the city date right back to the seventeenth century, like the colonial mansion Chateau Ramezay, and the Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel – the colonial history of which runs so deep that its underground crypt is the site of an archeological excavation!

Another building of historical and architectural interest is the vast Basilique Notre-Dame de Montreal, designed by Irish-American architect James O'Donnel, whose Gothic Revivalist style again highlights the coming together of older European themes in a more modern, North American setting. It is said that O'Donnel, a Protestant, was so distraught at the idea of not being entombed in this beautiful basilica that he converted to Catholicism on his deathbed!

Today, the city's more modern take on Quebec's tradition of multiculturalism is in evidence wherever you look, and expresses itself frequently through artistic performances and festivals, from the elegant pirouettes of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens to the acrobatic barrel jumps of the avant-garde La La La Human Steps; from the world's largest gay-benefit dance festival Black and Blue, to the blue notes of the Montreal International Jazz Festival.



Other more modern sights include the Olympic Stadium built for the 1976 games – which boasts the tallest slanted tower in the world – and the Underground City, the largest underground complex in the world, which is home to many of the shopping



malls, museums and hotels in Montreal although surface dwellers are well catered for in this department too!

This majestic city, then, can boast a level of multiculturalism most cities cannot, for Montreal has not only adapted to new cultures, but its entire history, its charm, and its success have all relied on cultural acceptance.

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