

Top family attractions in Montreal



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Montreal for families

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PLACE DES ARTS: Perhaps one of the most cosmopolitan of Montreal experiences is an evening at Place des Arts, a massive performing arts centre that hosts ballet, theatre, opera and symphony orchestra. The building appropriately anchors Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles entertainment district. (Courtesy Tourism Montreal)

New York, London, Paris -- they're all delightfully foreign and fascinating for families, but far away. There's a city with an old-world/new-world feel that's equally cosmopolitan and equally family oriented, yet a whole lot closer to home: Montreal.

Here are a few of the city's top kid-friendly attractions:

OLD MONTREAL

A family visit to Montreal must include a walk -- or ride -- around Vieux-Montreal, the city's birthplace in the 1600s. Take an organized tour of this once-walled city. There are preserved fortifications still visible, and there are spots that were frequented by Canada's First Nations people some 2,500 years ago. Kids are thrilled by horse-and-buggy rides through the cobbled streets. See oldmontrealextravaganza.com and old.montreal.qc.ca.

Tip: The city's annual Old Montreal Extravaganza (Dec. 9-31) includes a Christmas market, Christmas lights, winter carriage rides, and an annual winter ball.

NOTRE-DAME BASILICA

Parents might remember Notre-Dame as the location of singer Celine Dion's over-the-top 1994 wedding, or the funeral of Pierre-Elliott Trudeau in 2000. But the church will forever live in kids' memories simply for being gigantic. At 79-metres-long and 60-metres-high, this Canadian National Historic Site definitely owns its commanding spot of reverence in Old Montreal's Place d'Armes. Inside are giant pipe organs, a spooky crypt, and a pretty, much sweeter smaller wedding chapel.

A sound-and-light show tells the basilica's story most evenings Tuesdays to Saturdays. See therewaslight.ca.

Tips: Nearby -- and at odds with all this Neo-Gothic splendour -- is Canada's first skyscraper: The New York Life building, built in 1888 to include the region's first elevator. Montreal's Chinatown is nearby, too. See basiliquenddm.org/en.

BOTANICAL GARDEN

This peaceful place counts itself No. 2 among the world's most notable botanical gardens (No. 1 is Kew Gardens in London, England). Montreal Botanical is a picturesque sweet-smelling place but -- more significant for kids -- it's a fabulous spot to run around. With 30 thematic gardens -- Chinese, Japanese, Alpine, First Nations -- there are oodles of walkways kids can explore in every season. Or consider a visit during the Butterflies Go Free annual festival in February.

Tips: An enlightening time to visit is at dusk during the Space For Life's annual Chinese and Japanese lantern festival from September to November. In a word: Mesmerizing. Combine a trip to the Garden with a visit next door to Olympic Stadium, which (weirdly) features Stadium Tower, the world's largest leaning structure.

See www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin/en.

PLACE DES ARTS

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Who do you like to travel with?

My partner

My whole family, including kids

My friends

By myself

I don't like to travel

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Tip: The most exciting aspect for children may not be whatever they are going to see on stage but the indoor walk to the show. Place des Arts hallways are filled with contemporary art, fountains and moving pictures along the walls -- not unlike the paintings at Hogwarts in Harry Potter. See pda.qc.ca.

ATRIUM 1000

At 51 storeys, Atrium 1000 is the city's highest skyscraper. Cool fact: Montreal bylaws prohibit buildings exceeding the height of Mount Royal (233 metres above sea level). On this skyscraper's ground floor is an unexpected and happy little indoor skating rink that is open year-round.

Tip: Mascot Emile joins the fun during toddler skates on weekend mornings. Rentals are available. See le1000.com.

EN ROUTE

Montreal's location 500 km east of Toronto is a humdrum five-hour drive that's doable in a day. Board a VIA WiFi-equipped Toronto-Montreal express train and you're there in about the same time but with less stress. Both Air Canada and Porter Airlines shorten the travel time with daily commutes between Montreal's Trudeau and downtown Toronto's Billy Bishop city airports.

Tip: Once in Montreal, a car is not necessary. The city's underground subway (Metro de Montreal) is all-encompassing, and free for kids on weekends.

SLEEPOVERS

Arriving by train at Montreal's grand Central Station, the Hilton Montreal Bonaventure is so close it's connected by tunnel -- an easy walk for little ones. An entrance to Montreal's subway system is in the basement. And the Hilton's free continental breakfast and daily 5 p.m. Happy Hour snacks keep blood sugar levels even.

Tip: The hotel's selling point for kids has to be its year-round indoor/outdoor rooftop pool, which is heated to about 32 C, even in winter. See hiltonmontreal.com.

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