

O CANADA, O CANADA! (Part 1) Si Frumkin

I am not a good tourist. I believe that seeing one church per city is more than enough. I have already appreciated and seen the pictures of most paintings and sculptures worth seeing. I am somewhat uncomfortable in asking a total stranger, in broken French or Dutch for the location of the nearest public toilet. I like seeing stuff I haven't seen before, learning things I didn't know but I am not very fond of getting exhausted by walking for miles, sorry, *kilometers*, or shlepping suitcases full of stuff we don't even unpack.

So, when my wife told me that we were going to Canada I wasn't all that enthusiastic. "What for?" I said. "It's just like America. We can go to Pasadena or Fresno or if you want to go a little farther, we can go to Phoenix or Salt Lake City. It would be just as nice and a lot cheaper. And they take American money and speak English."

Ella didn't budge. "I have never seen the Niagara Falls and everybody there speaks English and it's embarrassing – everyone I know has been to Canada and I haven't. We are going, you will have a good time and that's that".

And so we went to Canada.

I have a confession to make – she was right. Canada wasn't what I expected it to be. And yes, everyone there does speak English – not always perfectly in Quebec – but I never had a problem asking for the nearest men's room. I should add that I have a very personal and somewhat unique system in rating foreign countries by the condition of their public restrooms. On this scale, Mexico, Russia and Israel are very close to zero, while New Zealand, Holland and Canada get top honors.

Our first city was Montreal. We had a rental car waiting for us –a 2009 Toyota Corolla – which Ella rented on the Internet at a ridiculously low price. I brought with us a little satellite navigator that knew all the streets, roads and addresses in North America – an essential gadget I highly recommend if you drive a car in a strange place. It kept us from getting lost again and again and, unlike a human being, it never complained when I missed a turn or went the wrong way.

When we went for a walk on Montreal's main street that evening I knew that we weren't in Los Angeles anymore. The sidewalks were crowded. There were blacks, Asians, Muslim women with hidden faces, bearded Sikhs and orthodox Jews – there are over 50 synagogues and 60,000 Jews in Montreal - and just about every language could be heard. I saw no police, the streets were clean, the mood was festive and I kept thinking that the scene resembled our own Universal City, the artificial "city street" where crowds come to see and be seen.

We woke up next morning with the sun streaming through the window. The weather was great – a blue sky and no clouds that followed us throughout most of our travels. We were lucky in that respect – we had rainy weather just two days out of the 27 we spent in Canada. Altogether we drove over 3,500 kilometers (about 2400 miles) – and wherever we went the natives took great pleasure in telling us that it had rained the previous week

We had breakfast at a place that offers a selection of over 50 different crepes – all of them sounded delicious – a tiny café run by young Asians. We were on our way to an institution that I have not seen in any of the cities we have travelled in the past: a sophisticated information bureau. It has a trained staff of more than a dozen people with individual computers who are ready to respond to all questions, print out maps, itineraries, book tours and more. There is a giant sign with a blue question mark that is visible from far away and throughout the city there are blue question mark signs showing the way and the distance to the nearest one.

We took a double-decker bus tour. This is something we learned to do in Mexico City a few years ago – you can get on and off at any stop and get a great overview of what we might want to visit later. We passed churches, exclusive palatial homes, the 30,000- student McGill University where classes are taught in English and a smaller university where only French is spoken, the harbor and the site of the 1976 Olympics at the St. Lawrence River, Chinatown which seemed mostly Vietnamese and much more.

We spent five wonderful but exhausting days in Montreal before driving to Quebec. We did the underground mall that stretches for 30 kilometers in a labyrinth of stores, shops, restaurants and levels (Ella shopped while I read a book and had a Starbucks *latte grande*), ate in sidewalk bistros, cruised the river and admired the Olympic village – Habitat - created by a young Israeli architect in 1976.

After Montreal we still had 20 days left – to fall in love with Batisse, the gold-horned goat of the only French-speaking regiment in Canada, discover Wilno – a town founded by Poles, see the Russian-Jewish district of Toronto, discover the shortage of manicurists and surplus of churches, cruise 30,000 islands, get soaked at Niagara Falls and much more - so look for my future columns.

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