

Montreal welcomes travelers with festival energy, circus magic and boundary-pushing digital art

By Jen Rose Smith

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All through the Montreal winter, life happens on ice. Whether they're neighborhood rinks or Zamboni-smooth arenas, skating rinks are a social hub: Well past midnight on a recent weekend, a jubilant crowd was gliding around the newest addition, Esplanade Tranquille, a rink of more than 16,000 square feet that opened Feb. 21 in festival district Quartier des Spectacles.

DJ tunes and cannabis smoke drifted over a bundled-up crowd celebrating the annual Montréal en Lumière winter festival. Daredevils in hockey skates raced between couples canoodling in French and English. It was a très Canadian evening.

Slated to become a park and entertainment venue in warmer months, Esplanade Tranquille is one of the new attractions calling tourists back after Canada's more than 16-month closure to international leisure travel. (U.S. tourists must be fully vaccinated to enter Canada, with testing requirements lifted for those who are vaccinated from April 1.)

"I think we've finally turned the corner," said Yves Lalumière, president and CEO of Tourisme Montréal. "Everyone is working hard now. Every booking is an important one."

The recovery has been slow. February hotel occupancy was just 33.1 percent, according to preliminary results from global hospitality data and analytics company STR, compared with 62.1 percent for the same month in 2020. For two years, Montreal's tourist-magnet festivals have been scaled back or canceled altogether. As they return in 2022, Lalumière wants the world to come with them.

“The DNA of the city is the festival scene,” he said. In addition to Montreal classics [Just for Laughs](#), [Osheaga Music and Arts Festival](#) and [Montreal International Jazz Festival](#), in August, the inaugural [Lasso festival](#) will bring country stars such as Dierks Bentley and Luke Bryan to Parc Jean-Drapeau. For the second year running, the [Montréal Cirque Festival](#) expands to a satellite location at circus arts center Tohu, which shares a Saint-Michel campus with Canada’s National Circus School and [Cirque du Soleil’s](#) international headquarters. After a kickoff on May 28-29, [Destination Tohu](#) will host free and ticketed circus events this summer from mid-June through the first weekend in September.

Circus is serious business in the city. “Montreal is called the home of nouveau cirque,” said trapeze artist Guillaume Blais, co-founder of circus nonprofit [Le Monastère](#). “Not only do we do acrobatics and flexibility, but almost every performer does theater, dancing, music. It’s very multiskilled.” Some circus artists and technicians left the profession amid the pandemic, Blais said, but those remaining are keen to perform.

[Le Monastère](#) stages [circus cabarets](#) in a 19th-century Anglican church, where a new show is slated to open the last weekend of April. Montreal’s [Cirque Kalabanté Productions](#) is unveiling “[Afrique en Cirque](#)” to Guinean djembe rhythms April 13 at Tohu. Last month, [Cirque Éloïze](#) debuted cosmos-themed circus cabaret “[Celeste](#)” in Fairmont the [Queen Elizabeth](#) hotel, with tickets available through June 4. On May 12, [Cirque du Soleil](#) brings back touring production “[Kooza](#)” to its Old Port location, where it will run through Aug. 14.

New additions also abound in Montreal’s thriving digital-art scene. With three galleries and two light exhibits, the 21,000-square-foot [Oasis Immersion](#) digital-art museum opened February 2021 on the ground floor of the Palais des Congrès. The current show, “[Recharger/Unwind](#),” runs through April 18. Inside, Canadian artist Sabrina Ratté’s “[Floralia](#)” imagines a futuristic archive of extinct plant species; Maotik’s interactive “[Flow](#)” is inspired by fluctuating tides.

Featuring kinetic laser installations, Japanese artist Shohei Fujimoto’s show “[Intangible Forms](#)” runs through April 10 in converted Griffintown coal plant [New City Gas](#). In 2021, the nonprofit [ox Society](#) opened Canada’s first non-fungible token, or NFT, digital-art gallery downstairs at New City Gas, with free tickets available online. (Private, 45-minute tours are also free, and particularly helpful for the “What’s an NFT?” crowd.) Outside the building, visitors wander a labyrinthine open-air installation by gallerists [Station 16](#), whose recent undertakings include a [Westmount](#) gallery and an [NFT project](#) of its own.

Ask Montrealers about the city’s creative history, and you’ll quickly arrive at [Expo 67](#): The world fair’s legacy is throughout the city, including the Buckminster Fuller-designed geodesic dome over the [Biosphère](#) and brutalist model community [Habitat 67](#). Also built for the expo was 614-room hotel [Marriott Chateau Champlain](#), whose 38-story grid of arched windows give wonderful — and subtly fish-eyed — views across downtown. (It’s known as “the cheese grater,” because those windows look ready to shred some fromage.) Sleek renovations completed in 2021 respectfully modernize the 1960s interior, with playful nods to original designs by Quebecois architects Roger D’Astous and Jean-Paul Pothier.

New in June 2021 is the 193-room [Humaniti Hotel Montreal](#), billed as a “smart vertical community” for the integration of residential units, hotel rooms, commercial space and dining. Artwork is scattered throughout the downtown property; stop by the outside courtyard to see artist Marc Séguin’s bronze-and-aluminum “H Anima.” Hip short-term rental purveyor Sonder has added 251 units in Montreal since March 2020, [including a 53-unit location](#) in the perennially cool neighborhood Plateau Mont-Royal.

As we enter spring, hopes are high for the recovery of Montreal’s battered hospitality industry. The city is open, and so is the border. Now, many are betting U.S. tourists are once again ready to cross.

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PLEASE NOTE

Potential travelers should take local and national public health directives regarding the pandemic into consideration before planning any trips. Travel health notice information can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s interactive map showing travel recommendations by [destination](#) and the CDC’s [travel health notice webpage](#).