



You've Come a Long Way, Baby!

CANADA TURNS 150 NEXT YEAR
AND OTTAWA IS GETTING IN THE SWING

BY MONICA FRIM

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The Canada 150 tulip

Ottawa



The Centre Block of Parliament Hill

Good Lord, what was Queen Victoria thinking?

Why would she choose for a capital city a wild and wintry lumber settlement on a desolate patch of swampland, with few settlers other than boozy raftsmen who swaggered about the whisky-doused taverns and brothels that bordered the Ottawa River? Many loggers were Irish gang members called shiners, who roamed the muddy streets with knives and swords, terrorizing French-Canadian logging rivals as well as the few citizens who tried to eke out a respectable life among the scamps and scoundrels of Bytown, as Ottawa was called before 1855.

Brown's Inlet beside the Rideau Canal



Winterlude's ice sculptures at night

Probably the Queen was not amused. But in 1857, when she declared Ottawa the capital of the Province of Canada (then consisting of today's Ontario and Quebec), her choice at the confluence of three-rivers—the Ottawa, Gatineau and Rideau—turned out to be a stroke of genius. Queen Victoria may not have realized just how cold the winters of Ottawa got, but she indubitably recognized the area's potential as a commercial and transportation hub, located at what was then considered a respectable distance from the United States. This was important in the aftermath of the War of 1812 when the US was still considered a threat. Today Ottawa is a mere hour's drive from the US border and Americans are welcomed with open arms—as in limbs, not muskets.

As for the weather, Ottawa's inhabitants have patterned themselves after their hardy forefathers who learned quickly when life gives you ice blocks, carve them into whimsical sculptures and have yourself a party. Add skating rinks, sleigh rides, snowslides, snowmen and maybe a little Crown Royal whisky, and soon it will grow into the biggest winter festival the western hemisphere has known, complete with art displays, figure skating shows, dogsled- and ski-races, parades, fireworks and other forms of entertainment. It's called Winterlude and spread in parks

all across the city and surrounding towns. Two thousand truckloads of snow are brought in for the February festival. It's hard to believe that Ottawa would suffer from a dearth of the white stuff, but apparently the massive ice and snow exhibits in Jacques Cartier Park need more than nature's stockpile. In Confederation Park, south of the Parliament buildings, a Crystal Garden of ice sculptures adds glam to the festivities, especially at night when the illuminated figures take on a prismatic glow.

When the snow melts millions of candy-colored tulips burst through parklands and public spaces, looking for all the world like giant lollipops in leafy repose. The most brilliant concentrations are at Major's Hill and at Commissioner's Park on Dows Lake, the headline locations of the annual Canadian Tulip Festival. In gratitude for Canada's help during World War Two, the Dutch government gifted Ottawa with 100,000 tulips after liberation. Princess Juliana added a personal gift of 20,000 tulips to thank Canada for having declared her hospital suite "extraterritorial" so that her Ottawa-born baby, Princess Margriet, could maintain Royal Dutch status. The gift just keeps on giving as the Royal family continues to send tulips each year.

For Canada's 150th birthday, a unique species of tulip—white with licks of red resembling the maple leaf

on the Canadian flag—has been developed. Appropriately named the *Canada 150*, about 300,000 Canada 150s will join next year's bevy of colorful blooms.

In any season, Ottawa's feature drawing card is its walkability. Prime attractions—government buildings, museums, galleries, convention center, parks and promenades, international eateries and assorted shops and boutiques—are within a snowball's throw of each other. Visitors of every stripe—from culture hounds and history buffs to gourmands and outdoor enthusiasts—will find their druthers within steps of their hotel in the downtown core.

Situated alongside the Rideau Canal next to Canada's parliament buildings is Ottawa's most iconic hotel, the Chateau Laurier. Named for Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Canada's Prime Minister at the time of the hotel's opening in 1912,



Tulips on Major's Hill

the Chateau Laurier was built by the Grand Trunk Railway specifically to give clout to the old loggers' town turned capital city. Laurier considered the hotel integral to his plan to turn Ottawa into "The Washington of the North."

Like many important buildings in Ottawa, the Chateau Laurier was built in the Scottish Baronial style, which borrowed from medieval castles and French Renaissance chateaux as part of the neo-Gothic trend that was popular in 19th century Canada. Its commanding presence on the banks of the Rideau Canal next to Parliament Hill and only steps

from the ByWard Market, National Museums and Shaw Centre makes it a favorite among visitors and locals who come for high tea in Zoé's Lounge or a meal in Wilfrid's Restaurant. It's here the elite meet—politicians and the journalists who follow them, celebrities and international heads of state.

It's a five-minute walk from the Chateau Laurier across the canal to Parliament Hill where visitors can amble among the grounds, ascend the 302-foot Peace Tower that dominates the neo-Gothic government buildings with their copper-clad roofs and turrets, or tour the Centre Block that houses the Senate, House of Commons and Library of Parliament. In summer, the Changing of the Guard takes place daily at 10:00 a.m. At night, images are projected onto the walls in a spectacular outdoor Sound and Light Show. But the best day of the year for fanfare and flourish is Canada Day, July 1, when Parliament Hill is abuzz with free concerts, the Mounties' Musical Ride, Snowbirds' stunts and phenomenal fireworks.

Between the Hill and the Hotel, the Rideau Canal slices through the heart of the city all the way to Dow's Lake, part of the 125-mile waterway that links the Ottawa River to Lake Ontario. This is Ottawa's most renowned recreational strip and world's longest naturally frozen skating rink. Stretching for 4.8 miles, or roughly the size of 90 Olympic size pools, this is the king of rinks, lording over 220 lesser outdoor rinks, with refreshment booths and toilet facilities along its entire length.

When the ice melts, skaters turn to kayaks, canoes, paddleboats or stand-up paddle boards, and larger boats can continue through the locks where the canal meets

the Ottawa River. Joggers, walkers, skateboarders and cyclists follow along the adjacent path, stopping for picnics or to simply lie in the grass and laze.

The canal wasn't always a pleasurable route. It was built after the War of 1812 under the supervision of Lieutenant-Colonel John By for the more utilitarian purpose of safely transporting troops and supplies to Kingston and Montreal. Progress was slow and fraught with disasters. During construction, between 1826 and 1832, about one thousand canal workers died, most as victims of a malaria epidemic.

Beside the canal locks, Ottawa's oldest stone building and former Commissariat now houses the Bytown Museum. Inside artifacts and stories of Ottawa's colorful past begin with the arrival of Colonel By, who also laid out plans for the eponymous Bytown needed to house the early canal workers and ensuing lumbermen. The museum is reputedly haunted by the ghosts of By and his assistant General Duncan McNab. Beware of electronic mishaps and moving dolls.

Ottawa still retains most of By's original street layout, but with today's ByWard Market having turned yesterday's sleaze into Ottawa's spiffiest tourist-drawing card. Now the market district boasts fashionable boutiques and fascinating foodstuffs where locals shop and dine as much as visitors. In summer, the outdoor patios of pubs on Clarence Street are packed to the curbs with city folk there to be seen, and visitors there to experience Canadian tipping al fresco. But the must-try restaurants are concentrated on Murray Street, aka

The emblematic roof of the Library of Parliament



Skating on the Rideau Canal



The locks of the Rideau Canal



The ByWard Market



The Fairmont Chateau Laurier

High Tea in Zoé's Lounge. Each diner receives her own 3-tiered stand laden with desserts, dainty sandwiches and scones.



Guides of The Haunted Walk of Ottawa

Gastro Alley. It is said that the ByWard Market boasts so many eateries that one could eat three meals a day for three months, each at a different establishment and never have the same meal twice. But if you don't have time to test this hypothesis, two standout eateries are Beavertails (no, not the animal... the sugary fried dough for which President Obama made a special stop during his first official visit to Ottawa in 2009), and Play Food & Wine. The latter serves small plates of surprising combinations of locally grown foods and pairs them with diverse wines. Unconventionally divine!

A good way to tour the ByWard Market is with a guide from C'est Bon, a company that offers hands-on cooking classes as well as gourmet food tours. You'll amble through fresh produce stalls, specialty cheese shops and the upscale grocery stores that fuel Ottawa's toniest kitchens and restaurants. Discover foodstuffs you may have seen on restaurant menus but would never find in your neighborhood grocery store—fiddleheads, ramps, sunchokes and others. Ottawa has more farms within its borders than any other city in Canada, with producers working in

partnership with restaurants and retailers in an initiative called Savour Ontario.

If you'd rather take in the darker side with tales of murder and mayhem of Bytown's rougher days, or search for the spirits of troubled souls who reputedly haunt many buildings, The Haunted Walk of Ottawa offers a variety of tours through the market area and elsewhere in the city. Ostensibly, the spookiest tour is the company's Ghosts and Gallows walk, which includes a visit to the former Carleton County Gaol, where Patrick Whelan may have been wrongly convicted yet hanged for the murder of one of Canada's founding fathers, D'Arcy McGee. It's supposedly one of Canada's most haunted buildings, featured on *Creepy Canada* and *The Girly Ghosthunters*. Today the jail functions as the HI Ottawa Jail Hostel, but its ghastly 8th floor and death row cells are off-limits to overnighters. Presumably, the antics of inmates' ghosts are not conducive to sleep.

Ghost stories run rampant in Ottawa and some of them feature quite respectable people and places. The Chateau Laurier, Earncliffe (the British High Commissioner's home which once belonged to Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir

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The National Gallery of Canada appears dwarfed by Louise Bourgeois's giant spider sculpture, *Maman*

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John A. MacDonald) and Laurier House are some of the swankier places whose deceased owners haven't quite been able to let go.

One of the most famous ghosts is that of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Canada's longest serving Prime Minister, who inherited Laurier House from his predecessor, Canada's first francophone Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his wife, Zoé. Original furnishings, including a crystal ball owned by Mackenzie King, are on display and can be viewed by the public in summer, including the bedroom in which all three died, though not at the same time. Could



The entrance to The National Museum of History evokes a turtle head, native symbol of Mother Earth



Laurier House. Former home of Prime Ministers Sir Wilfrid Laurier and William Lyon Mackenzie King



The Prime Minister's Official Residence at 24 Sussex Drive overlooks the Ottawa River.

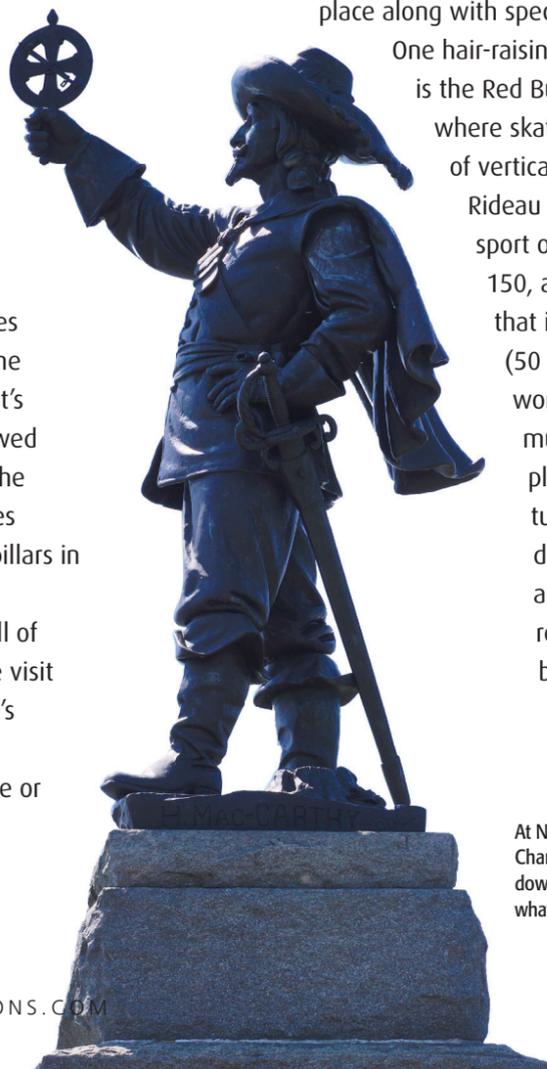


The Embassy of the United States

it be that Mackenzie King's belief in spirits and séances, which he held in the house, could actually have given him a political advantage? Given that American president Ronald Reagan was known to consult astrologers, it just may be that at least two of the world's most powerful men received a little help from beyond.

Ottawa is full of fascinating artifacts and the stories behind them. Twenty-nine museums showcase a variety of subjects such as history, science, nature, technology, aviation, agriculture, dinosaurs, currency and art. In many cases the architecture of the buildings is as captivating as the exhibits inside. This is especially true of the city's two most iconic museums, the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of History, perched on opposite shores of the Ottawa River. The glass and granite gallery houses the largest Canadian collection, while the history museum's Grand Hall holds the largest collection of indoor totem poles in the world. There's not a corner in the structure, a concession to the architect's belief that spirits hide in corners. Viewed from above or from across the river, the museum's roof resembles giant canoes turned upside down and held up by pillars in the shape of paddles.

It would be a challenge to visit all of Ottawa's attractions in a typical single visit but one can get a synopsis of the city's cultural and heritage landmarks with either (or both) an Ottawa River cruise or



At Nepean Point, 17th century explorer Samuel de Champlain appears to be holding an astrolabe upside down. One explanation is that the sculptor didn't know what an astrolabe was.

a Hop-On, Hop-Off bus tour. Afterwards you can go back and visit the attractions that you found most appealing—unless they happened to be the Prime Minister's residence or the ambassadorial mansions of Rockcliffe Park.

As Ottawa prepares to take center stage for the nation's 150th birthday, it seems as if the entire city is aspiring to revamp, refresh and refurbish. Cranes brood over the city and webs of scaffolding enfold many historical buildings. Restaurants plan specialty menus, hotels create celebratory programs, and businesses forge new relationships with organizations to initiate special 150 projects. Signature events and celebrations will take place along with special exhibits at museums and galleries.

One hair-raising activity scheduled for March 2017 is the Red Bull Crashed Ice world championships where skaters hurtle down a massive ice track of vertical drops and hairpin turns above the Rideau Canal locks. It's billed as the fastest sport on skates. Other events include Ignite 150, a series of epic stunts and gatherings that includes a gourmet dinner 164 feet (50 metres) in the air. Underground, a world first interactive sound and light multimedia fantasy voyage will take place in an unfinished light rail transit tunnel. New initiatives are in continual development during the countdown and beyond. Ottawa is expecting a record number of visitors and it's beefing up the stage.

Queen Victoria would be proud.



Parliament Hill as seen from the Ottawa River.



Rideau Falls on the Ottawa River