

Travel: Nonstop

Toronto's world stage is packed for summertime visitors

Canadian city offers a multicultural smorgasbord of things to see and do

By Stephanie Citron



Summer is here, and you're ready to get away and play. But where can you go that's intriguing and exotic, yet close enough that you don't waste a precious day getting there?

How about a quick jaunt to one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities, which you can reach from BWI-Marshall Airport in under two hours?

We're talking about Toronto, easily accessible via Air Canada's 26 weekly nonstop flights from Baltimore.

From the bouliques in Greektown (aka The Danforth) to New Wave design stores in Cabbagetown, from swanky boutiques in Leslieville to bubble tea kiosks in one of the area's three Chinatowns, Toronto's multicultural vibe pulses from its array of ethnic neighborhoods.

With nearly half of its population born abroad, it's not surprising that the city publishes information for residents in 30 languages. For travelers, that means practically every neighborhood around town is a cultural enclave of authentic eateries, independent boutiques, diverse dialects, and eclectic music and art.

Located on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, Toronto's landscape is made up of old-world European architecture and modern skyscrapers interspersed with bucolic parks and bordered by 29 miles of coastline featuring sandy beaches, bustling marinas and waterfront entertainment venues. Two major tributaries, the Humber River and Don rivers, flow through the city; each has a vast infrastructure of forests, parks and walking trails throughout the urban center. For visitors, Toronto is easily navigable on foot or by its excellent public transit, including a clean, efficient subway system and charming streetcars.

Especially in the summertime, the city's best attractions are as diverse and pioneering as its culture. From city center, look up 116 stories and you'll spot adventurous thrill-seekers waving as they traverse the edge of the soaring CN Tower. Below the streets you're roaming is PATH, the world's largest underground shopping complex. In between is a perpetually evolving smorgasbord of world-class festivals and performances, international music events, artist exhibitions, open-air cafes and street performers.

Spend an afternoon meandering through the galleries, clothing and home design shops of Queen Street West, Toronto's art and design district. Sample homemade fare in the Distillery District, which hosts food festivals on summer weekends. And if you're able to plan ahead, next summer Toronto will be hosting the Pan American and Parapan American Games (toronto2015.org). In preparation for the visiting crowds, the Union Pearson Express, an express rail service connecting the region's busiest transportation hubs, will launch in spring 2015 (upexpress.com).

Summer fun

By June, Canadians are raring to venture outdoors. Daytime temperatures hover pleasantly in the 70s, with gentle, breezy nights. Summertime spawns innovative festivals, fairs and outdoor extravaganzas, and Toronto puts on some of the best in the world. This year the city will be hosting two globally renowned events, WorldPride and Taste of Toronto.

Taste, the epic eating event that began in London 10 years ago, is making its first foray into North America with its premiere in Toronto this summer. It features the city's top eateries and renowned chefs showcasing specially created menus, interactive master cooking classes, performances, kitchen table discussion groups and tastings. (Taste of Toronto, July 24-27, Fort York National Historic Site, tasteoftoronto.com.)

WorldPride 2014, also premiering in North America this summer, features events and entertainment celebrating activism, education, and the history and culture of global LGBT communities. This year's festival goes through June 29 and spotlights Toronto's longstanding support of human rights, diversity and tolerance. (worldpridetoronto.com)

The Science Of Rock 'N' Roll is a new interactive exhibition at the Ontario Science Centre, exploring the physical effects that rock music has on the brain, psyche and body. Exhibits depict the ways in which technology helped rock evolve into a multibillion-dollar business and a lifestyle choice. (Ontario Science Centre, 770 Don Mills Road, ontariosciencecentre.ca)

The Toronto Zoo's new zip line ride opens midsummer and will enable visitors to soar over its award-winning Tundra Trek at a maximum speed of 30 mph. This is the only zip line that takes its riders forward and backward in tandem and over tundra animals including arctic wolves, polar bears and reindeer. (The Toronto Zoo, 361A Old Finch Ave., facebook.com/TheTorontoZoo)



Don't miss

EdgeWalk at CN Tower claims to be the world's highest full-circle, hands-free, open-air walk along a 5-foot-wide ledge at the top of the tower's main pod 116 stories above the ground. Visitors are attached to a trolley-harness system and have the freedom to lean back over Toronto with nothing but air and breathtaking views of Lake Ontario beneath them. (CN Tower, 301 Front St. West, cntower.ca)

Toronto Islands: Visitors can take the ferry, canoe or kayak to the parks, beaches and amusement park on the Toronto Islands, where good-natured signs read "Please walk on the grass." Many of the venues, including a flying-disc golf field, artist studio space, bicycle paths and music events, are free. (Ferry departures every 30 minutes, 8 a.m. to 11:45 p.m., 9 Queen Quay West, toronto.ca/parks/island)

Neighborhoods

Kensington Market's Jewish families sold food and wares from stands in front of their homes in the 1920s. Today, the neighborhood is a maze of narrow streets and alleys filled with vendors of ethnic foods, vintage wear and handcrafted items, and enlivened by multicultural music streaming from splashily colored Victorian houses. Bounded by Dundas Street, Spadina Avenue, Baldwin Street and Augusta Avenue. (kensington-market.ca)

Toronto's largest Chinatown is perpetually buzzing with activity and the pungent aroma of sesame oil. Laden with dumpling and noodle spots, fish markets, exotic fruits stands and Chinese tchotchke shops, it's a feast for the senses. Spadina Avenue between Queen Street West and College Street. (toronto-chinatown.info)

Distillery District, an internationally acclaimed pedestrian-only village, is home to many of Toronto's hottest designer boutiques, artisan shops and galleries, performance venues, award-winning restaurants and summertime weekend food festivals. Most venues are housed in restored red-brick, Victorian-era buildings of the Gooderham & Worts distillery. Mill Street, between Parliament Street and Cherry Street. (thedistillerydistrict.com)

West Queen West is full of emerging designers, artists, custom clothiers, home furnishings and antiques shops, and cafes featuring creative cuisine. It encompasses colorful Trinity Bellwoods Park, abuzz with fascinating, fashionable people, friendly dogs and organized drum circles. Queen Street West, between Bathurst Street and Gladstone Avenue. (westqueenwest.ca)

Roncesvalles Village (Little Poland) is where you can get Eastern European fare, including handmade perogies, tangy sauerkraut and borscht. The streets here are a throwback to the shtetl offering butchers, bakers, Canada's oldest movie houses and furniture makers. Roncesvalles Avenue between King Street and Dundas Street West (roncesvallesvillage.ca)

Church-Wellesley Village, Toronto's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender district, offers bustling streets flanked with galleries, theater companies, bars, coffee cafes and small shops. Church Street from Wellesley south to Alexander Street. (churchwellesleyvillage.ca)

Dining

In a city filled with hundreds of innovative chefs on a quest to reinvent Canada's traditional and ethnic dishes, and with dozens of eateries opening each month, choosing just one can be overwhelming. Even the airport offers exciting eating, with nine new restaurants this summer, including The Hearth by celebrity chef Lynn Crawford, Twist by chef, TV host and recording artist Roger Mooking, and Asian Kitchen by "Iron Chef" Susur Lee.

Starfish Oyster Bar & Grill It's worth a visit just to watch the restaurant's assortment of oysters being shucked by the official World Oyster Opening Champion, Patrick McMurray. The menu changes daily to incorporate daily fresh catches. (100 Adelaide St, starfishoysterbar.com)

Canoe Restaurant This is ranked one of Canada's top restaurants. Executive chef Anthony Walsh has established a new regional cuisine by incorporating the country's vast indigenous bounty, including an innovative vegetarian and vegan menu. Located atop the TD Bank Tower, the panoramic view of the city isn't bad either. (66 Wellington St. W., 54th Floor, oliverbonacini.com/canoe.aspx)

Pomegranate Surely there are few dishes as aesthetically alluring as Persian fare. Pomegranate's is as fragrant, colorful and complex as its ingredients. Qeymeh is a tangy stew with tomato, yellow peas, lamb, dried lime and cinnamon. The Morasa Polo incorporates carrots, blueberries, almond, pistachio, orange peel and a braised lamb shank over basmati rice. Desserts are simple, designed to cool and cleanse the palate. (420 College St., pomegranaterestaurant.ca)

If you go

Getting there

Flight time is about 1 hour, 45 minutes from Baltimore. Air Canada offers 26 nonstop flights a week from BWI-Marshall Airport into Toronto Pearson International Airport. Fares starting around \$240 round-trip.

Lodging

Fairmont Royal York, 100 Front St. W., fairmont.com/royalyork. A Toronto landmark, the posh four-diamond hotel is located in the heart of downtown and connected to the underground city. If you're a foodie- and who isn't? - check out the Shop With Chef Package and explore his prized culinary haunts on a unique shopping and tasting tour.

The Omni King Edward Hotel, 37 King St. E., omnihotels.com. A century ago, this opulent, art-filled environment was Toronto's first luxury digs and has remained a posh contender. If you're into Old World high tea, dress up and step into the scene here from 2:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays through Sundays.

Thompson Toronto, 550 Wellington St. West, thompsonhotels.com. Set in the city's most eclectic arts district, all 102 guest rooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows with sweeping views of the city. The rooftop lounge features a 40-foot infinity swimming pool filled with beautiful people..

Tips

Insiders will advise you to avoid the single-ride fare on Toronto Transit (TTC), which includes the subway, streetcar and bus. Instead, purchase a day pass and enjoy unlimited rides. The big deal happens on weekends and holidays, when a day pass provides unlimited travel for two adults traveling with up to four kids. Go to ttc.ca/Fares_and_passes

Pedestrian Sundays is a fabulous event where the streets of Kensington Market close down to cars and showcase the wares of local businesses, artisans and live entertainment. The last Sunday of every month. Go to pskensington.ca

Don't miss Heritage Toronto's plaques and markers placed around the city commemorating key people, places and events which have shaped the city. Go to heritagetoronto.org/heritage-exploration-map