

## March Break: The great indoors

Toronto and Montreal have the world's largest underground cities

**Laura Robin**

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With all due respect to T.S. Eliot, I think we can agree that March really is the cruellest month. And March break is the cruellest of holidays.

When it seems that every other family is heading off for a fabulous fun-filled week in Orlando, what's there to do around here? You can plan a ski holiday, but lately, you run the risk of it being a washout. Count on outings for soft spring days, and you could be assaulted by sleet and stinging winds. Or mired in mud.

We have a solution.

One that frees you from winter jackets, mitts and boots. One that involves not one thought about the weather, or where you are going to park. And one that costs far less than a trip south. We're going underground.

When Montreal's and Toronto's downtown systems of underground passages and shopping centres were first built, they were heralded as the height (or depth?) of modernity, the realization of Leonardo da Vinci's vision of the city of the future. But four decades later, while they are far more extensive and useful than ever, these labyrinths, which now include street-level passages as well as skywalks, have been left mainly to the office worker. They're used mostly to get from subway to desk to Tim Hortons, on well-worn routes used by the same people every day.

That's a waste.

Consider this: You can get on the train in Ottawa and never need your coat again. After a traffic- and weather-worry-free ride, you can step off in the Toronto or Montreal train station and, five minutes later, check into the grand old Royal York or sexy Queen Elizabeth -- both connected right to the stations, both with indoor pools and welcoming to families. If you're willing to walk a little farther, still without going outside, you have a choice of six other hotels in each Toronto and Montreal, with new ones, such as a Ritz-Carlton in Toronto, under construction.

Pools, room service, restaurant meals and in-room movies -- this might be holiday enough for many winter-weary families. But from your hotel home base, you can go skating indoors, take in an NHL game, admire live



CREDIT: MALCOLM TAYLOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Seth, 3, his sister Mackenzie, 9, and parents Michelle and Steve Yates set off to explore Toronto, without coats or boots. The city's Skywalk takes you from Union Station to the CN Tower.

butterflies, visit an art gallery or see the view from the tallest buildings in the country -- or even the world! -- without driving, parking or putting on boots.

This is a walking holiday of a different type, and a real break for kids and their parents.

Canada -- quite fittingly when you consider our climate -- has the largest underground cities in the world: Montreal boasts 32 kilometres of connected areas under its downtown, while Toronto recently made the Guinness Book of World Records for "Largest Underground Shopping Complex" for its 27 kilometres of underground retail space.

Did you know that you can walk all the way from Toronto's Air Canada Centre (home of the Maple Leafs and Raptors), which is south of Union Station, to the bus depot on Dundas (about 20 above-ground blocks) without once coming up to face the elements? Or, in Montreal, several kilometres from the malls on St. Catherine Street to the edges of Old Montreal?

Even most locals don't know how far they can go.

"You could put most Montrealers down here and they'd have no idea where they are," said Pierre Seguin, a Montreal tour guide. He was standing in the newest tunnel, a sinuous curve of brown brick and black granite that's worth the walk just to see the passageway, never mind the spectacular indoor courtyard it leads to. It now links the north-south system that includes the train station and the stores and movie theatres on St. Catherine to another north-south system a half dozen blocks east, which connects the Convention Centre to Place des Arts.

You might picture these passageways as dark and devoid of natural light, but newer links, such as the ground-level one that leads to Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall are bathed in sunlight, and offer floor-to-ceiling views of gardens outside. And the passageways will take you to some of the best views in both cities: the top of Place Ville Marie, in Montreal, or a spectacular eighth-floor view of Toronto's old and new city halls, from a cafeteria in the Bay.

Under both cities, the underground mazes started small and have grown piecemeal. In Toronto, it began in 1900 when T. Eaton Company on Yonge Street built a tunnel to its bargain annex. Next, connected to the train stations, came the grand railway hotels in both cities (which, because of alternating rounds of renovations, exchanged the title of Commonwealth's largest hotel for a few decades).

Place Ville Marie was Canada's first underground shopping centre in 1962. Now, Toronto's underground shopping malls are said to add up to the size of the West Edmonton Mall, with 1,200 shops and services. Montreal has 930 retailers connected to its system, as well as arts centres, a modern art gallery and two giant venues for trade shows.

If you want food courts, the choices could drive you crazy, with literally hundreds eateries under both cities -- everything from Swiss Chalet and sushi to Jimmy the Greek and Basha Lebanese. But the "indoor cities" (the preferred term now to underground city), also connect to some of the highest end eating in both cities: Bymark, Canoe and 360 degrees in Toronto; Toque, The Beaver Club and Altitude 737 in Montreal.

In both cities, the walkways are owned and controlled by the owner of the property above -- which means that they range from low-rent food courts to spectacular spaces with art on the walls and art in the architecture. The piecemeal system also means that if you want to get from A to B, you might have to go through M, Q and Z. A trail of breadcrumbs is not a bad idea. You

also have to go up and down continually: 480 steps up and 569 steps down in the main part of the Montreal maze alone.

In recent years, though, the systems have become easier to navigate. Toronto adopted the colour-coded PATH system in 1987 (red means south, blue north, and so on), and has been putting up co-ordinated signs and even ceiling-mounted compasses to lead you through the maze. Montreal also adopted a new name for its system: RESO, with the Metro arrow symbol in the O. In the newer parts, RESO signs and even map boards help point your way.

A University of Montreal research group has been set up to disseminate information on the system and tomorrow, a race is even being held: it's probably the only five-kilometre run in the world that's entirely underground.

Many areas under Montreal and Toronto, though, have poor or non-existent signs. Without familiar landmarks or even the sun to guide you, the mazes are indeed confusing. Maybe that's why, outside of office hours, you're likely to get the underground cities almost entirely to yourselves.

"There's a rush of people going to their offices in the morning, and again, on weekdays between 4 and 6 p.m., but on weekends and evenings, they're very quiet; it's mainly just the hotel trade and other tourists," says Michael Saunders, manager of Toronto's PATH system. "I know I often walk in it at night because it's just so calm and peaceful."

Saunders, like spokespeople for the Montreal system, won't swear that all parts of the underground system are always safe, but he says, "I've never heard of a big issue with crime." He said groups often hold walks in the underground system on weekends, because it's so much less congested than the streets above (not to mention less snowy/rainy or hot).

Go prepared -- with a good map and comfortable shoes -- and the tunnels will take your family on a great March break scavenger hunt where you can find everything from bookmark-making workshops and blue morpho butterflies to Canadian Idols and singer Rob Thomas of Matchbox Twenty.

In fact, you might enjoy one city's amazing maze so much you won't be ready to go home. You can get back on the train and go straight to the other. Just be sure to have a jacket waiting when you finally return to Ottawa.

Laura Robin is the Citizen's travel editor.

## MONTREAL

Getting a map: Most maps you pick up, even official ones, do not show all the latest links in Montreal's underground system. The best map is found inside the free booklet called Montreal Shopping 2005-2006, available in many stores and hotels, and at the tourist information centre at 1255 Peel St. To get a free copy by mail, call 1-877-BONJOUR (266-5687) and ask for 822. The map is on pages 16 and 17.

Getting a deal: Montreal's Sweet Deal lives up to its name: Stay one night at a hotel (and most on the underground network are part of the promotion that goes until the end of April) and get the second night for half price. So you can stay at the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth for as low as \$199 for the first night, and get the second night for \$99.50; the Hilton Bonaventure is offering first nights as low as \$180, second nights for \$90. On top of those deals, you get a gift from Canadian Maple Delights, passport coupons to the casino worth up to \$40 and a booklet with more discount coupons. See [www.tourisme-montreal.org](http://www.tourisme-montreal.org)

## WHERE TO SLEEP:

- The Fairmont Queen Elizabeth has the advantage of location, right over the train station. Consider its "Busy Beaver Family Getaway" package, which starts at \$299 per family. That gets you one night's accommodation, two in-room movies with chips, popcorn or pretzels, a welcome gift for children and Montreal colouring book and quiz, night-time snack, Metro map and 12 tickets and a family pass to the Biodome, Botanical Gardens and Insectarium. See [www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com) or call 1-800-441-1414.

- The Hilton Montreal Bonaventure is just a five-minute walk, all indoors, from the train station and offers a unique oasis 17 floors above the city. The Japanese gardens and duck ponds aren't as wonderful to see in winter, but your kids will get a blast out of swimming outdoors in winter. See or call 1-877-699-9938.

- Other hotels on the underground network with indoor pools (and most participating in Sweet Deal Montreal) include Marriott Chateau Champlain (the one that looks like a giant cheese grater), Hotel InterContinental (attached to the most beautiful indoor courtyard), Delta Centre-Ville, The Hyatt Regency and Hotel Gouverneur Place Dupuis.

## Where to eat without going outside:

- In your room: The food courts under Montreal have some amazing offerings of all different ethnicities: why not let family members select their own specialties (Basha Lebanese outlets are reputed to be particularly good), then have a picnic in your suite. In the train station, Les Halles des Gare has an outlet for one of Montreal's best bakeries, Premiere Moison (how about an almond croissant for breakfast, \$2.45?), a florist and an SAQ. You might not want to take the toddlers into the Queen Elizabeth's esteemed Beaver Club for dinner, but some of the Beaver Club's specialties, including spectacular desserts, are available for take-out in the hotel's La Gourmandise Boutique. The hotel also has a room-service menu for kids.

- NooBox: In the Convention Centre, this is a scenic and spectacular 20-minute walk underground from the train station. An informal fast-food place, but a step up from most food courts, you sit on high stools and enjoy your (very good) Pad Thai or Singapore Noodles out of folded white cartons, with chopsticks. Entrees \$6.95 to \$10.95. [www.noobox.com](http://www.noobox.com) or 1-514-868-6678.

- Takara: Unpretentious but good Japanese restaurant tucked away at the back of Le Cours Mont-Royal, about a 10-minute walk from the train station (all the malls, from the Bay building, through Les Ailes, the Eaton's Centre and Simon's connect, but you've got to find the right level - mostly its one below street level, on the Metro level, but one level up from the basement food courts). For a group, try to reserve one of the tables where you sit on the floor. Dinner for two about \$70. 1-514- 849-9796

- Altitude 737: OK, you probably don't want to take your kids to this ultra-trendy fusion dining room and lounge. But if you get a babysitter, it's the ultimate height of the underground city. On the top floor of Place Ville Marie, above the original underground mall, see the view from 737 feet up. 1-514-397-0737

- Revolving restaurant: The Delta Hotel has Montreal's only revolving restaurant, on its 30th floor. It's only open for dinner on Friday and Saturday evenings, but has a Sunday brunch (\$34.95 per person, but half price for kids under 12). 1-514-879-4777

Top 5 things to see in the indoor city (and they're all free):

1. The courtyard in the World Trade Centre (Centre de commerce mondial de Montreal): Stunning, peaceful oasis with water flowing over a black granite slab, lines of fig trees and an impressive a statue of a reclining goddess. The lines of brick in the floor mark where the fortifications around the old town once were. Don't miss the piece of the Berlin Wall near the back. Get there by heading south from the Square Victoria Metro station (which you get to through a series of passages from Place Bonaventure). You'll come to a cool 360-degree interactive information station on the Insectarium, Planetarium and Biodome, then turn left into the most attractive tunnel under the city.

2. Murals in the train station: Even if you've rushed by them before, these stylized blue and grey murals done by Charles Comfort in the 1940s are worth a closer look. The one on the west wall shows Canada west of Montreal: can your kids spot the totem poles, oil derricks, wheat sheaves and wine-making illustrations and identify which provinces they depict? Then cross the station to the east wall to see symbols of Canada's east and north.

3. L'Atrium Le 1000 de La Gauchetiere: Montreal's tallest building has some amazing surprises down low: indoor skating year-round, with a DJ on Saturday nights (\$5 to skate; \$5 to rent skates.) Don't miss going upstairs to the front lobby to see the laser clock that's calibrated to the one at Ottawa National Research Council, then turn around to the large, curved window that perfectly frames the view of the dome of Mary Queen of the World Cathedral. Get there by heading south out of the east end of the train station, continuing through the ground floor of CN headquarters, then going down the stairs or escalator, which will take you to tunnels to Place Bonaventure and 1000 de La Gauchetiere. See [www.le1000.com](http://www.le1000.com)

4. Convention Centre (Palais des Congres de Montreal): Even if there isn't a trade show on that you want to see, this is a cool building to visit, with its Lifesaver-coloured windows on the outside and 52 hot-pink tree trunks (called Lipstick Forest) inside. In the tunnel connecting it to the World Trade Centre, stop at the murals that show a cross-section of this part of Montreal: the buildings above and the layers of car tunnels, Metro tunnels, sewers and pipes that run underground. Can your kids spot where they're standing?

5. Place des Arts: If you continue north, underground, from the Convention Centre, you'll pass through Complexe Guy-Favreau (where you can visit the YM-YWCA) and Complexe Desjardins, a shopping centre with a 30-metre fountain. Finally, you'll get to Place des Arts, with five theatres and home to the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Contemporary Art. The museum is free for kids under 12, and free to everyone on Wednesday evenings (adult admission is usually \$8). But even if you don't go inside, visit its lively new gift shop, with MoMA-like offerings, just outside the entrance.

Special stuff March 11 to 19:

- Butterflies Go Free: At the Botanical Garden from Feb. 23 to April 30. "Let our blue morpho butterflies chase away your winter blues," says Tourism Montreal. Thousands of tropical butterflies will flutter around the main greenhouse. Admission to the Botanical Garden and Insectarium is free for kids under five, \$4.75 for kids five to 17 and \$9.75 for adults. See [www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin](http://www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin)  
[http://www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin/en/propos/calendrier/hiver\\_2006.htm](http://www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin/en/propos/calendrier/hiver_2006.htm) To get there without going outside: You can't -- quite. Take the Metro towards Honore-Beaugrand and stop at Pie IX -- then it's a 12-minute walk to the gate.

- Hockey games: March 11, you can see the Canadiens play the New York Rangers. March 13, the Canadiens face Tampa Bay Lightning, March 16, they play the Hurricanes and March 18 it's the Habs vs. Penguins. All at the Bell Centre, on the underground system (see [www.centrebell.ca/eng](http://www.centrebell.ca/eng)) To get there

without going outside: Follow the walkways from 1000 de La Gauchetiere through the Bonaventure Metro station and Windsor Station to the Bell Centre. Tourism Montreal notes though that while this passageway is usually opened before events at the Bell Centre, it's closed after. So, to get back, you have to take the metro from Lucien-L'Allier to Bonaventure. You'd also have to take this route if Windsor Station (which is a private property) is holding a function and closed to the public.

- Rob Thomas of Matchbox Twenty plays at the Bell Centre Tuesday, March 14. Tickets are \$39.50 and \$49.50. See [www.centrebelle.ca/eng](http://www.centrebelle.ca/eng) To get there without going outside: see above, under hockey.

- Bjorn Again is described as "the ABBA-endorsed interactive concert." Friday, March 17 at the Bell Centre; tickets \$39.50 and \$49.50. See [www.centrebelle.ca/eng](http://www.centrebelle.ca/eng) To get there without going outside: see above, under hockey.

## TORONTO

Getting a map: You can download a map of the PATH system at [www.toronto.ca/path](http://www.toronto.ca/path) -- but, depending on your printer, it can be difficult to decipher. To get an excellent glossy, pocket-sized version of this map, call the PATH manager, Michael Saunders, at 1-416-392-1005, and he'll send you one for free. Many concierges in hotels and office buildings along the PATH can also provide them.

Getting a deal: CityPass is a pocket-sized booklet of passes that get you into six of Toronto's most popular attractions for about \$47 (\$29.75 for youths) -- or less than half what all the tickets would cost if purchased individually. It's good for nine days from first use. On the website -- [citypass.com](http://citypass.com) -- you can only buy it in American funds (\$41 U.S.), but you can buy it with Canadian money at the ticket window of any of the attractions: the CN Tower, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Royal Ontario Museum, Casa Loma, the Science Centre and the Toronto Zoo.

### Where to sleep:

- As in Montreal, the old railway hotel -- in this case the Fairmont Royal York -- has the corner on location. It's connected by tunnel to the train station, making checking in and getting back a breeze. The Royal York is offering a special Lord of the Rings package, starting at \$221 per person, which gets you one night's accommodation, full breakfast and tickets to Lord of the Rings at the Princess of Wales Theatre. See [www.fairmont.ca/royalyork](http://www.fairmont.ca/royalyork) or call 1-866-8GET2TO.

- Two hotels connected to the PATH system have those groovy indoor/outdoor pools that will give your kids the thrill of swimming outside in warm water in winter: The Sheraton Centre on Queen Street and the Hilton on Richmond Street.

- Other hotels on the PATH system include Cambridge Suites Hotel, on Richmond at Yonge, the InterContinental on Front Street and the new Suites at 1 King West (at Yonge).

### Where to eat without going outside:

- In your room: The Royal York has the usual room service choices, plus a children's menu. There's also A Night At The Movies, which includes an in-room film, pizza, chicken wings, Haagen-Dazs ice cream bars and four cans of soft drinks. Total price: \$59.

- Canoe: On the 54th floor of Mies van der Rohe's TD Tower (built in 1967),

this top-rated restaurant has a million-dollar view and prices to match (expect to pay \$100 for lunch for two.) It's a splurge, but everything from the attentive service, the house brand wines and the \$5.50 pots of tea is extraordinary.

- ByMark: On the ground floor of the PATH system, this modernistic showpiece, formerly a food court, has a restaurant, a bar and three private rooms. Sample dishes from Mark McEwan's kitchen: a \$36.95 hamburger, \$39.95 for roasted Irish organic salmon and \$52.95 aged steaks. But you can just have a drink in the bar and it has such non-alcoholic treats as a root beer float.

- Richtree : In BCE Place, which itself is worth a visit for its soaring interior arches (see On the PATH), this family restaurant is the former Movenpick Marche. It's like the one at the Rideau Centre except the food is tastier and the food stations are manned by chefs. Bonus: the food is available to go, so you can take it back to your room too.

- Rainforest Cafe: This is a bit of a schlep: you have to take the subway to Yorkdale Mall (it goes right in, so you still leave your coats in the hotel). Kids will love the atmosphere, which includes live birds, lifesize models of apes and other jungle animals, the sound of thunderstorms, and other theme-park-like features.

- Benihana, a traditional Japanese restaurant at the Royal York, is family-friendly. It has a children's menu where the top price is \$12.50, and it even teaches the kids how to count from ichi to joo (one to 10) in Japanese.

Top 5 things to see on the PATH (not all free):

1. The CN Tower: Officially the tallest building in the world at 533.33 metres. Going up on the high-speed elevators cost \$14.50 for kids and \$21.50 for adults. Or, for \$31.99 (all ages) you can have the Total Tower Experience, including a motion simulator ride, a movie about the construction of the tower, and a ride to the Skypod at the very top. You can also eat at 360 degrees, a restaurant at the top which has the world's highest wine cellar. If you have a main course there, the ride to the top is free.

2. The Hockey Hall of Fame: Already a shrine for hockey fans, on March 13 a new "NHL Zone" exhibit opens, with mascots, autographs, Q&A sessions and even a replica of the Montreal Canadiens dressing room. Interactive exhibits keep kids (and dads?) entertained for hours. \$12 for adults and \$8 for kids; see [www.hhof.com](http://www.hhof.com). The entrance is off the PATH system at the lower level of BCE Place.

3. The Air Canada Centre, accessible through Union Station, near the GO Train entrance. Young sports fans (and their parents) can take free throws at a basketball net or shoot plastic pucks at a model of a Toronto Maple Leaf goalie in the Fan Zone. There are many events at the ACC during March Break (see below) and if you're fascinated by the complex building, there are tours on Saturday, March 18 on the hour from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Price is \$12 for adults and \$8 for kids under 12. Call 1-416-815-5982.

4. Be amazed by the architecture. Three prime examples are Union Station, with its magnificent arched ceilings and old-fashioned railway elegance; BCE Place, designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava with soaring, glassed-in arches that let in natural sunlight; and Toronto's Old and New City Halls, which are visible from the City View Cafe on the eighth floor of The Bay. Watch the skaters outside New City Hall or marvel at the ornate stonework and gargoyles on the old.

5. The museum at the CBC Building, at the west end of the underground city

past the St. Andrew subway stop and Simcoe Place. It includes such nostalgic items as the Friendly Giant's props, and you can watch TV clips of old shows: CBC coverage of Hurricane Hazel, an old Sunday episode in which Hunter Thompson is confronted by a Hell's Angel, and a young Lorne Greene introducing the network in its first broadcast.

Special stuff March 11 to 19:

- Hockey: The Leafs play Tampa Bay on Saturday, March 11 and Boston on Tuesday, March 14. See [www.theaircanadacentre.com](http://www.theaircanadacentre.com) To get there without going outside: A tunnel at its east end connects Union Station to the Air Canada Centre.

- Canadian Idols: Winner Melissa O'Neil and finalist Rex Goudie perform at 8 p.m. on Thursday, March 16, at Massey Hall. Tickets are \$35; see [www.masseyhall.com](http://www.masseyhall.com) To get there without going outside: You can't quite, but very close: it's about 20 steps east of the Eaton Centre (take the Queen Street exit from the subway and you'll come up on the east side of Yonge.)

- March Through Time: On a drop-in program at Historic Fort York, children three to 12 can dress up, cook in an old-fashioned kitchen, march like a soldier and listen to stories. Admission is \$20 for a family. For more information about this and other drop-in March Break programs at Colborne Lodge (in High Park), Mackenzie House (two streets east of the Eaton Centre and where kids can make a bookmark using an 1845 printing press) and Spadina Museum (next door to Casa Loma), see [www.toronto.ca/culture.camps](http://www.toronto.ca/culture.camps)

- Playing With Time: At the new exhibit at the Ontario Science Centre, high-speed photography and time-lapse videos allow you to discover changes beyond normal perception. Admission's \$8 for children older than four, \$10 for teens and \$14 for adults. How to get there: Take the subway, then a bus. (Full directions at [www.OntarioScienceCentre.ca](http://www.OntarioScienceCentre.ca))

- Basketball: The Raptors play Indiana on Sunday, March 12, Detroit on Wednesday, March 15 and Milwaukee on Friday, March 17. See [www.theaircanadacentre.com](http://www.theaircanadacentre.com) To get there without going outside: See hockey, above.

- Barney Live: At the Intimate Theatre at the Rogers Centre (formerly Skydome), Friday March 10, Saturday March 11 and Sunday March 12. Tickets are \$22, \$29 and \$36; see [www.rogerscentre.com](http://www.rogerscentre.com) for details, [www.ticketmaster.ca](http://www.ticketmaster.ca) for tickets. To get there without going outside: You can't quite: follow the skywalk from Union Station to the Convention Centre South; it's a short walk west, past the CN Tower.

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