

# Getting Off (the Island)

By Mari ve MacGREGOR

Sometimes I just need to get off. It can be so barren here, so calm, so neutral. There is a peacefulness here. A state of being that is so sure of itself and its people; sure of its past and future. An infinite life. A constant. This is a great state of being to grow up in, to retire to, even to visit. Sometimes the whole world seems a distant isle while we are at the centre.

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But at this age, the age of young adulthood, where hormones and ideas and energy surge out of every part of our bodies, we need to get off. I needed to get off. So I went to the most dirty, eccentric, erotic, adventurous, inconstant city I know. Montreal.

La belle ville de Montreal. The most English-savvy, French-proud city in Canada. A place where the air is cloudy, the merchants are greedy, and the bohemians overflow from the buildings. And

damn, do they have good baguettes. Je suis allée avec mon chum, et on a vu toute.

We spent 10 days wandering the streets and poking our noses into everything. We walked the length of the infamous Saint Catherine's street, where you'll find your pick of sex toy stores and peep shows. There's also St. Denis, where you'll find Weedstock, a pothead accessories store; Sucre Bleu!, a candy store; and Tokyo, the best four-floor bar in town. But these are not the only things these streets had to offer.

There were shows upon shows of art; all kinds, every night. Dance, still life, music, theatre, and comedy. Contemporary, illegal, twisted, explored, and indulged. There is an entire underworld in Montreal with its own separate society of starving, semi-schizophrenic make-shifters.

How I want to be a part of that! Living off next to nothing and spending days in rehearsal or production and sweating blood and spilling guts into some kind of creation that would mean something to someone. Meaningful art connection to random people. And oh, reaction. Buzz. Criticism. Yes.

Montreal buzzes. It quivers on the edge of the people who adapt themselves there. The men are smoother. The women are sassier. Even the animals look stylish. And everyone has a cell phone.

We got caught up in the art, the history, the shops, the food, the sights, the activity. But then, I started to feel out of place. I would look around and there wasn't a single familiar face. Five days had passed and no one was anyone whom I'd seen before. A rushing herd of unknown faces. An infinite life. A constant.

It occurred to me how much I missed being in a crowd and recognising people.

When I head downtown in Charlottetown, I'm surprised when I don't know at least ten people. My heart lurched, and I began to feel the inevitable pull. The island was starting to call me back.

As the remainder of my trip wore on, more aspects of Island life began to jump out at me while I was studying the potential life for myself in Montreal. Waitresses won't outright harass you for a tip on PEI. "Do you want to add anything to the total on the debit?" "No thank you." "Well did you leave

anything on the table?" She glares at me. The food took half an hour, the place was nearly void of customers, and the poutine wasn't all that great. And she wanted a tip. Bitch.

I didn't like the total lack of connection between people either. There is something special about PEI in respect to large families and family ties. My cousin is dating your brother. My brother's friend's sister is best friends with a person in my class. My mom knew your mom and aunts and uncles growing up, and now we work together. Sometimes these ties are so long and complex it can take hours to figure them out. But they are there. They are always there. It is something you can depend on. I missed the community strength.

Another thing was the pace. Women in stilettoed boots would be running to their next meeting with dry cleaned outfits in their arms and a cell phone pasted to their ear. Men with brief

cases would plough through you, if not thwack you with the corner of the case. Everyone was in a rush. No one left home early enough, I suppose. It was almost as if people were on fast-forward.

Do they know how beautiful their city is? Have they ever sat on a park bench and watched the squirrels run in their jagged way? Have they taken the time to skate outdoors near the St. Laurent, to take in the splendour of their ancient churches, or to simply explore their own streets? I wonder if Montrealers know their own town as well as the tourists do.

As much as I want to and probably will move to Montreal some day soon, I know that the force and the culture of PEI will

always taunt me back. There is something sweet about the air, characteristic about the roads, cosy about the towns that I've

become so totally accustomed to that it will never leave me. The Island has a great acceptance of its people.

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What Islander has never gone swimming in Cavendish? What Islander doesn't know what goes on at a ceilidh? Who doesn't know where to get lobster? Who doesn't know all the highschool sports teams? Who doesn't know Anne? Ok, so not all of us like the cold water, or the sound of fiddlin', or the taste of lobster, or know the rules of rugby, or have read Anne. But we all

