Ottawa – Worth Putting on the Map

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Special to Clark Norton

**Ottawa, ON –** In 1857 Queen Victoria selected Ottawa to be the capital of what eventually became Canada. Her motive in picking a site so far north was said to be a fear of American invasion.

It seems to have worked. According to a survey conducted for the Association of Canadian Studies a few years ago, less than half the American population could identify Ottawa as Canada’s capital. Hard to invade a place you can’t find on a map.

Much like Schuyler sister Peggy in the hit musical “Hamilton”, who quickly fades to obscurity, overpowered by the radiant light thrown off by siblings Angelica and Eliza, Ottawa often plays third-fiddle to more glamorous nearby cities like Toronto and Montreal.

Which is too bad – Ottawa has a lot to offer. For those looking for post-pandemic travel options that don’t require venturing outside North America, the city is accessible and relatively safe. And, if you are American, your dollar is worth about $1.35 Canadian!

Ottawa has been my home for 15 years. This after something of a nomadic existence that included stops in places like San Francisco, New York, Nashville, Warsaw, Colchester, Madison, Washington, D.C. and Toronto. I came here to take up a job. I stayed because it proved to have the right balance between occasional excitement and overall tranquility.

The tranquility is partly a function of size – the city itself has about 900,000 inhabitants. Ordnances have limited high-rise buildings and civil service salaries and pensions have created a solid economic base. The result is a very livable place.

The excitement part of the equation might come as a bit of a surprise, even to most Canadians. After all, for years Canadian comedians have touted the city as the place “where fun went to die.”

But there is much to do and see. Let me share some of my favorites.

**Museums –** As one might expect of a national capital, Ottawa has a number of museums. What sets them apart is their content and, in many instances, their architectural flair.

**Canadian Museum of History**, designed by renowned aboriginal architect Douglas Cardinal, has a stunning Grand Hall evocative of a massive overturned canoe. Inside you will find exhibits depicting Canada’s rich and varied human history, starting in The First People’s Hall. Of particular interest are the depictions of the lives and artifacts of the indigenous inhabitants of Canada’s west coast, including the Haida.

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**The Canadian War Museum**, designed by Canadian-Japanese architect Raymond Moriyama, utilizes textured concrete walls and a roof that is reminiscent of a WWI bunker. The current building was opened in 2005 and houses all manner of exhibits relating to Canada’s considerable military contributions over the years. Most Americans are surprised to learn that Canada was involved far longer, both in World War I and World War II, than their southern neighbors – in aggregate, almost five years longer. All of this and more can be experienced viewing the exhibits, including a claustrophobic WWI trench and an impressive amount of military hardware arrayed across an expansive display space.

**National Gallery of Canada** is the nation’s art museum. It was designed by another great Canadian architect, Moshe Safdie, and opened in 1988. Safdie, working in glass, steel and concrete, took as his inspiration the nearby spires of Parliament Hill, but substituted a more airy, modern aesthetic for the Parliament’s Centre Block gothic treatment. Inside visitors will find a rich display of Canadian art from various periods, including Ontario’s Group of Seven and B.C.’s Emily Carr, as well as prominent 18th and 19th century Quebec artists and representation by indigenous artists, including the Inuit of the far north. Outside, those suffering arachnophobia may be alarmed by a gigantic spider sculpture. (Oddly, a smaller replica can be found on the campus of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.)

**The Museum of Nature**, which depicts fauna both ancient (dinosaurs) and contemporary (moose), is worth a visit, especially if you have kids or grand-kids in tow. Speaking of dinosaurs, the building also once housed Parliament when Canada’s Parliament Building was destroyed by fire in 1916.

**Festivals:** Ottawa isn’t much for professional sports – there is a pretty bad NHL team; a pretty good CFL football team; and a long-departed Triple A baseball franchise – but makes up for it with cultural activities. There are a number of theaters, French and English, plus any number of festivals, from Jazz to Blues, to Tulips. The best known is probably **Winterlude**, which runs through three weekends in February. Most activities are held on and around the Rideau Canal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is billed as the world’s largest skating venue.

**Outdoor Attractions:** Ottawa has much to do and see in the great outdoors. As mentioned, there is the **Rideau Canal,** built to connect Lake Ontario to the Ottawa River (and, ultimately, Ottawa to Montreal, the St. Lawrence River, and the Atlantic). Boat tours are popular and fun and allow you to see the city from a different vantage point. **The Byward Market** is also popular, especially in the summer. In addition to being an outdoor farmer’s market, there are numerous restaurants and bars in the area. Plus there’s a Beaver Tails shop, serving up a fried dough concoction with your choice of topping – it was a big hit with President Obama when he visited.

Also outdoors is **Gatineau Park**, located across the river in Quebec. Its hilly terrain is great for hiking, cycling and, in the fall, for viewing stunning foliage. In winter there are extensive cross-country skiing trails to explore.

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**Hidden Gems**: Everyone has heard of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, but you probably haven’t gotten up close and personal with the horses. You can do so at the **RCMP Stables and Visitor’s Centre.** Tours take place every half hour during the summer (and on Tuesday and Thursday during winter months) and are free. Another place worth a look is the **Central Experimental Farm**, which features ornamental gardens, an arboretum and an **Agriculture and Food Museum**. The complex sits on 65 acres a little south of the city’s downtown.

In short, Ottawa offer much to do in a very pleasant, uncongested setting. It’s the perfect place to chase away those COVID blues. Plus you’ll be able to correctly identify the capital of Canada, should a pollster ask.

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**IF YOU GO**

Ottawa can be reached by air from several U.S. cities, including Boston, New York, Washington, D.C. and Chicago. My choice as a place to stay is the **Chateau Laurier**, one of Canada’s classic French chateau-style railway properties. The **Westin** and **Lord Elgin** are also centrally located and good choices. The best times to visit are the summer, autumn and winter. Spring comes late and is often a sloppy mess – for that reason I would steer clear of the May **Tulip Festival**. There are several good dining options in and near Ottawa. In the city itself, **Beckta** is a consistent award winner known for its eclectic offerings, extensive wine list and high service levels. For those seeking a bit of political history (and pretty good Italian fare) there is **Mama Theresa’s** – you can state at photos of various luminaries while waiting to be seated. If you hanker for French-Canadian cuisine, your best bet is **Les Fougeres**, located about 20 minutes away in Chelsea, Quebec.

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