

Season of darkness and lights

Where to go to enjoy Christmas lights



By Katharine Fletcher

December's darkness is cheered by the season of twinkling, colourful lights. Regardless of whether you celebrate Christmas itself, this is the month to explore the National Capital Region and beyond at dusk. It's not just Parliament Hill which is bathed in light.

Beyond Ottawa, the Chutes Coulonge (northwest of both Shawville and Fort Coulonge) as well as Fairmont Le Château Montebello, east of Gatineau, make fantastical destinations.

What's awaiting us?

Christmas Lights Across Canada

Since 1985, the National Capital Commission (NCC) has cheered us by lighting the capital. This year, from December 12 to January 7, Ottawa is ablaze – with more than 200,000 LED lights.

In its efforts to decrease energy consumption while illuminating 20 NCC managed sites (including Parliament Hill) and up to sixty others along Confederation Boulevard, the NCC is gradually switching to LEDs.

The result? A fantastical nighttime display. *Tip:* This year, why not capture the colourful lights reflected in the snow with your digital camera?

Although Parliament Hill is beautifully illuminated, so is the War Memorial and tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Surrounding deciduous trees sparkle, offsetting the drama of the memorial's soft lighting.

Going for a twilight or nighttime stroll has never been so pretty.

Confederation Boulevard: 7.5 km Ottawa-Gatineau walking loop

This flag-lined grand boulevard makes a contiguous circuit from Ottawa's Parliament Hill, across Portage Bridge to Gatineau, through that city, then returns to Ottawa via the Alexandra Bridge.

Bundle up and go for a windy walk. Tip: in my experience, it never seems to be warm crossing these bridges in December, so dress cozily! However, the beauty of the lights along with both daytime and nighttime views are well worth the brisk pace you'll set.

Photography tips: Two of the best views of the Parliament Buildings are on this walk. One is on the Ottawa side, from the small park directly behind the Supreme Court. The other is from the Canadian Museum of Civilization: walk between its two buildings, to the top of the flight of steps descending to the Ottawa River. Here you'll get a glorious view of the Library of Parliament.

For a map, go to www.canadascapital.gc.ca or use my book, *Capital Walks: Walking Tours of Ottawa*.

Fairmont Le Château Montebello

Hands-down, I think the Château Montebello (www.Fairmont.com) is one of the most romantic places to stay anywhere – and it's only an hour's drive east of Ottawa.

Commencing at twilight, lights illuminate the Château – the largest log “cabin” in the world – which commands a stunning view of the Ottawa River. Winter sunsets add an additional glory to your appreciation of December lights.

Here on the resort's private grounds, enjoy curling, a sleigh ride – or go dogsledding, cross-country skiing, swimming, or ice fishing. Absolutely don't forget to take your book because after such activities, you'll want to curl up in a comfy chair and read, basking in the heat of a crackling wood fire.

That would be beside the Château's splendid stone chimney. It forms the centrepiece of the star-shaped hotel, whose rooms stretch out along wings extending from this core. While sofas and leather chairs beckon downstairs, the second floor has tables for backgammon, chess or cards.

And then there's the extravagance of fine dining... Of course, you don't need to stay overnight to indulge in the fine local cuisine. Reserving a meal allows you to go early and curl up by the fire after a lingering stroll to the river...

Happy Holidays!

Wherever you go, whatever you do, celebrate this season of light by exploring our region's colourful "back yard" playground.

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