IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

Un Séjour au Québec

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Report from the International Conference for French teachers

Canada, unlike its southern neighbour, is one of those places that keeps a low profile and features rarely in our media so, when the opportunity arose to attend the four-yearly conference of the *Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Français*, held in Québec at the end of July, I was curious to visit both Anglophone and Francophone regions.

Vancouver is now a direct destination to Canada from Auckland. We found it an attractive, user-friendly city with its mountain backdrop. A long drive to the Rockies gave us an insight into the scale of the country. The distances are huge. The scenery is grandiose, whether mountainous or flat.

Although the whole of Canada is ostensibly bilingual, with signage in both French and English (except in Quebec, where English is less obvious), there was little evidence that French was actually spoken by anyone other than native speakers, and I was interested to discover there are sizeable communities in other provinces such as Manitoba and Alberta. There were a lot of other languages spoken however. As in New Zealand, immigrants of a wide range of ethnicities abound and their communities are large enough for them to maintain their identity and language. The indigenous First Nation Canadians were notable by their scarcity, although there are numerous shops selling their crafts and souvenirs.

Our first port of call in Québec was Montréal, with approx 1.8 million inhabitants. Now, here is a city that is truly bilingual. I was fascinated to eavesdrop on conversations between locals which featured frequent code-switching. The majority of *Montréalais* with whom we came into contact spoke both French and English with apparent native-speaker competence. As an English speaker, I found it a challenge to engage locals in French conversation possibly because of the difficulty I was experiencing attuning my ear to *québecois*. It is a humbling experience for someone who thought she was a competent communicator in a language to be faced with a barrage of French that is frustratingly hermetic. (I knew what to expect, though, as I remembered having done a brief stint as a tour guide for a group of rural *Québecois* in the early 1980s and finding it so exhausting that I went to sleep with the microphone in my hand on the return journey from Milford Sound to Queenstown.) Before long, I began to identify certain differences, of which the most obvious are vowels which sound rather stretched in comparison to those of Metropolitan French and consonants such as *d* which is pronounced more like *dz*. The long *ee* sound, familiar to metropolitan French *i*, on the other hand is shortened in *québecois* to more like the English as in *it*. Thus *dix* sounds like *dziss*.

Noted for its climatic extremes, Québec responds by adapting its architecture to the seasons. Montréal has an extensive parallel city underground. There is plenty of scope for getting lost in the labyrinth of malls which allow life to continue as normal whatever the temperature outside. One surprising feature is that they are not interconnecting, making it necessary to brave the elements as you pass from one to the other. It has a comprehensive underground railway network. Not all of its architectural features could be described as inspired, as the most typical inner-city residential building consists of rows of attached houses with pairs of doors accessed by

stairs that are reputed to be the cause of many a broken leg in winter when they ice over and trap mounds of snow.

Montréal prides itself on its wide range of cultural events. We arrived in the middle of the bilingual *Juste Pour Rire* (Just for Laughs) festival which featured many performances by stand-up comedians both local and international. They were just about to host the huge *FrancoFolies* music festival. Making sure there is a full calendar of cultural events is an effective way of keeping seasonal blues at bay.

One of the highlights of our Montréal stay was meeting a young *Québecoise* who had emailed me to enquire about becoming a teacher in New Zealand. I'd told her, much to her surprise, that as I was about to visit Montréal, we could perhaps talk about it in person. We had a stimulating discussion about language teaching and I was impressed by her extensive pedagogical training and insight. It was clear that New Zealand and Canada are on a very similar pedagogical wavelength and that she would be a most welcome addition to our French teaching community. I feel it would be salutary for New Zealand French teachers and learners to experience a wider range of French as it is spoken in different Francophone territories. Far from being outposts of Metropolitan France they offer fascinating insights into different cultures which, through the vagaries of history, have ended up Francophone.

We realised something big must be happening in Québec City (population approx 500,000) as we tried to buy a train ticket there. It transpired that Paul McCartney was to perform that day at a huge, free, outdoor concert offered by the city as part of its 400th anniversary celebrations. Forced to accept the fresh salmon steak and fancy dessert of first class, we arrived with half of Montréal just in time to witness this somewhat controversial event. I had read an article in the paper defending the choice of McCartney at what some felt should have been an all *Québecois* occasion. It seems that the feathers of seal-hunters had been ruffled during a previous visit by McCartney to Québec and it was felt by some that he shouldn't be welcomed back. The tone of the article suggested that it was time for Québec to move on from this separatist xenophobia and indeed we captured no impression from any of our contact with *Québecois* that independence is still high on the agenda, in spite of the ubiquitous *Je me souviens* inscribed on all *Québecois* number plates.

The concert, held on a balmy summer evening, was attended by 240,000 spectators who stood and danced for hours in front of a series of huge screens, thrilling to Paul's rendering of *Michelle* and his smatterings of schoolboy French. It was simply *inoubliable*.

Another memorable 400th anniversary event was an hour-long spectacle designed by *Québecois* Robert Lepage, of *Cirque du Soleil* fame, which was projected nightly onto a long wall of massive silos in the port. It vividly depicted the history of Quebec in four stages, by sea, by land, by rail and by air. There was no commentary, just sound effects and music. I was captivated for the whole screening. It reinforced for me the power of images, a resource we tend to under-utilise in the French classroom.

Québec, attractively perched on a hill overlooking the St Laurent, has a sizeable and much-visited historic quarter some of which is surrounded by ramparts. The most notable landmark is the Hotel Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac, which dominates the skyline.

Built by Canadian Pacific Railway in the late 19th century, it has equally grandiose counterparts at Banff and Lake Louise, in the Rockies. The oldest area of narrow little streets is situated around the port and can be accessed by funicular or a steep descent on foot. It was hard, from the perspective of the summer, to visualise the city blanketed, often for months on end, in metres of snow. A fur saleswoman, experiencing a seasonal lull, was happy to expound on the harshness of the winter climate and street signs also attest to this.

In July, though, the mood was festive, with lots of young street performers drawing crowds. There is no lack of wonderful little restaurants and cafes serving fine cuisine both local and ethnic, a welcome respite from the ubiquitous North American franchises with their bland fare served in industrial quantities.

From the language point of view it may be surprising to learn that Québec City is essentially monolingual. This was a bonus from my point of view as at last I was compelled to come to grips with some of the distinctive features of *québecois*. Far from being a corrupted version of Metropolitan French, it has maintained certain historical features which its parent has lost. Locals are proud of their language which has become the vehicle for a rich array of literature, poetry and song lyrics. The majority of *Québecois* I spoke to have never been to France and showed no particular affiliation to it. In fact the traffic seems heavier in the opposite direction. This is less surprising if one bears in mind the 400 year old history of French settlement. *Québecois* identity has had more than twice as long to develop as New Zealand's and few would claim that we still identify closely with Great Britain.

The reality of different Francophone identities was the main theme of the FIPF conference at which there were hundreds of delegates from France, Francophonie and the rest of the world. Catering for different categories of French teachers, FLE (*français langue étrangère*), FOS (*français sur objectifs spécifiques*) and French as a first language, it was held at the huge Palais des Congrès, spread over five days and three floors, with dozens of presentations taking place simultaneously. This kept me busy in the evenings, assiduously studying the abstracts for the next day's offerings, marking many more than it was possible to attend. Herein lay an administrative problem, as frequently I would turn up at the appointed time only to find that the presenter was absent. Unfortunately, as it was all too often my first choice, by the time I had orientated myself for my second or third, the presentation was nearly over. I never got to the bottom of this mystery but understand it is not a rare feature of large international conferences, certain presenters adhering to the notion that once the abstract has been published in the programme contractual obligations have been met.

Among the highlights of the conference for me, which I intend to share with you in more detail via the www.french.ac.nz website and in future PD sessions, were:

- Presentations of various sections of TV5.org (*apprendre le français, enseigner le français*) featuring teaching materials based on authentic footage ;

- Insight into the application of Web Two tools to French teaching, including the question of assessment ;
- Canadian research into the teaching of listening, including matrices and strategies to eliminate comprehension-inhibiting stress ;
- Virtual exchanges ;
- Exploiting the learners' emotions (using surreal art reproductions and poetry) ;
- Contrasting results of immersion and traditional French instruction in Anglophone Canada – identification of effective and ineffective strategies.

The elaborate three-course sit-down lunches, featuring desserts to die for, provided opportunities to meet French teachers from a wide range of countries and discuss common issues. With most nationalities more generously represented than the two-strong New Zealand contingent, there was a lot exchange taking place in languages other than French. Interestingly enough, practically none of it was in English, as the Anglophones, to their credit, made the most of the opportunity to immerse themselves in French.

Conclusions to be drawn from my stay in Québec? I can't comment on rural life but my encounter with its two main cities left me with an impression of dynamic, highly cultured Francophone communities which deserve to be discovered.

[Editor's Note - I took a group of 22 students to Montreal in 2002. It was an amazing experience. We timed the visit to coincide with the Festival Saint-Jean on June 24th (*La Fête Nationale)* of Québec. The amount of French spoken blew us away and we discovered a truly francophone city. In the *Auberge de Jeunesse* where we stayed staff refused to speak English and encouraged students by insisting on making them ask for everything they wanted in French. The *Métro* was a great introduction to using the metropolitan *Métro*, and the food was really French. I can recommend it as Francophone destination].

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