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Warming up to Winter-peg

Behind city's genuine sense of modesty
lies a vibrant cultural

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

WINNIPEG—It's Canada in winter, the season when – outside, perhaps, of Québec City with its Carnival and mad Red Bull skaters – many of us wish our home and native land was shut down and moved to Mexico.

Only my wife and I are headed in the other direction. Our neighbour on the plane from Toronto greets the idea that we are travelling to Winnipeg for our anniversary for fun (we can't even claim the recession made us do it), with incredulity. So does the famous television director and the celebrated economist and the unassuming newspaper book editor, all of whom were born and raised there.

But it is exactly because of such interesting and cultured types, and because of the pleasure I had on a previous visit to the Fort Garry Hotel, perhaps the best large hotel in the country, that we have booked our four-day trip.

Auguring well for our bit of Canadian winter madness, for 10 days preceding our departure the 'Peg appears to stalk us: Stuart Maclean's CBC Radio show, *The Vinyl Café*, plays music from *The Weakerthans* and the *Be Good Tanyas*. My daughter discovers and likes my old *Crash Test Dummies* CD.

An excited Canadian friend working at the BBC World Service telephones to say that Winnipeg's Miriam Toews, author of *A Complicated Kindness* and now *The Flying Troutmans*, is headed to London.

A Toronto producer friend drops off a DVD of *My Winnipeg*, an extraordinary documentary portrait of the city by one of its most celebrated sons, the director Guy Maddin. Its style is Northern and wintry and it is filmed in black and white, a sideways homage to the decade of the 1930s that killed the economy and the aspirations of this city in "the heart of the heart" of the continent.

Perhaps the Depression and the Dust Bowl's rude halting of the city's destiny is why a touching modesty is integral to the character of the Winnipeggers we meet and all the others who were stunned that we were making the journey at all.

The effect of that sudden economic crash was that the heart of the city, the Exchange District – with its stately and handsome turn-of-the-century office blocks, their lavish cornices, sculpted bronze gates and four-storey painted advertisements fading into their exposed brick walls – was



JON SNIDAL PHOTO

Winnipeg's Exchange District, with its stately buildings, is the city's commercial and cultural centre, with shops, restaurants, galleries and theatres.

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stuck in a magnificent, glorious, moment in time.

The Exchange District is the Prairie's Titanic beached in a Manitoba graveyard, the city that had it all and was never meant to sink, but did.

It is Canada's old soul (the Fort Garry Hotel has a ghost) – a used city as reassuring, in its peculiar way, as that slightly uncomfortable armchair from grandfather's study. It's unwieldy, it doesn't match, but you'd never, ever, let go of it because it means too much.

That modesty: You realize, after a while, that it has less to do with Winnipeggers underestimating just how fascinating their city is than their knowing, in some quiet part of their being, that if they do the modern thing and share it too much, then they may well lose the conditions that make it such a singular and ultimately liveable city.

One of the striking aspects of our visit was realizing how important affordability is.

Winnipeg has a very rich and substantial cultural life – plenty of clubs, theatre, the rejuvenated Forks district, museums, and the beautiful Centennial Concert Hall, home to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra.

We were lucky enough to catch the last night of the New Music Festival there, and what was remarkable was just how many young people were in attendance – something I rarely see in Toronto, where tickets are three or four times the price.

Thrift is a part of the culture, which is not to say that you can't spend money here, but that the city's used aspect is also an invitation for fun and discovery.

At Antiques & Funk, on the same block as the dance studio where Richard Gere and J-Lo filmed *Shall We Dance?* my wife and I bought three vintage Hudson's Bay coats.

And Aqua Books, on Garry St., is one of the craziest, most amusing and well-ordered second-hand bookstores I have ever frequented.

Upstairs, in what had been a Chinese restaurant (the panelling and the décor and the kitchen still there) the owner, Kelly Hughes, maintains three studios for writers-in-residence, and the old dining room, complete with stage and fainting couches, is reserved for readings. Walking tours are popular (and a good idea) in the city, and readers can pick up a brochure here for Hughes' 'Book Walk' too.

Affordability, of course, is also about space, and the restaurants and hotels and occasional shops of the Exchange District have plenty of it. At Mirlycourtois, on the second floor of a Princess St. warehouse, I ate one of the best French meals I have had in Canada, and I needed to put up neither with pretentious waiters nor bad-tempered chefs working their shtick nor a rude emptying of my wallet to have it.

Sarah ordered coq au vin, a dish I am generally afraid to taste (or even make) as it reminds me of a cherished moment I had, when I was but eight, at Chez Allard, one of the most celebrated restaurants of Paris's Left Bank, with my late father Mordecai who had started writing in that city.

So fragile, some memories are, but I tasted my wife's rooster, and it was moist and savoury (the eponymous chef, Bernard Mirlycourtois, acquires his birds from Manitoba or, in a pinch, from Québec), its sauce dark and delicious. Perfectly cooked, just as my Northern pike in a beurre blanc with capers was.

Mirlycourtois, it turns out, moved to Winnipeg from France in his early 20s.

When I asked him why he stayed, he said "for the fishing." Manitoba, he went on, had everything he could possibly want – good produce, great hunting and, in a couple of months, morels.

Mirlycourtois is right. At Scot McTaggart's Fusion Grill on the Academy Rd. – near St Mary's Academy and the architecturally striking synagogue opposite (a lot of the city's rich cultural legacy has to do with its having had such an important Jewish population) and the many splendid mansions of Wellington Crescent on this, the Saint Boniface side of the river – we had a similarly pleasing experience also depending on locally acquired produce.

True to its name, the Grill's menu was an inventive fusion of new Canadian, but also Manitoban, recipes.

The white truffle perogies with duck sausage in a walnut cream sauce were particularly good. Of course, reliable providers of imported foods are as important as suppliers of local ones and the Canadian East Coast oysters here, as at Mirlycourtois, were also excellent.

The other outstanding meal, of course was a lot of the reason we came: the Sunday brunch at the Fort Garry – a munificent spread of breads, meats, smoked fishes, egg dishes, fruits and desserts stretching out of the hotel's beautiful Palm Room bar and into the lobby (a jazz duo playing from the first floor balcony) that was so lavish and generous it is best described as marvelously preposterous.

On the top floor of this independently owned railway hotel (explaining why it has such an appealing and familiar, rather than dull corporate feel) is an extraordinary hammam, a Turkish water spa, that my wife has previously tried – she insists it is one of the most remarkable spas in Canada and the United States and knows about these things – was unfortunately closed for refurbishment until March 26, when the full three-hour experience of the Ten Spa will once again be available.

Instead, I tried the Indigenous Hot Stone Massage at the Riverstone Spa, a short walk away at the Forks – so named because these rehabilitated railway lands that now include a covered market, a Children's Museum, the Manitoba Theatre for Young People, bars, restaurants and the Inn – lie at the junction of the Rouge and Assiniboine rivers. (The Museum of Human Rights will be built close to here.)

It is also possible to rent skates, as we did, at the Mini Donuts Factory and skate along the dozen kilometres of the River Trail – less tended and popular, but arguably, now, the longest river skate in the country.

If authentic discovery, rather than easy conversation about some proven trendy destination is what you want, then here is a city that absolutely must be visited.

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