

Saint-Laurent Boulevard - “The Main” Montréal, Quebec

Out-of-town visitors and Montréalers alike all feel the pull of The Main.

There is the culinary Main—where you go for a rib steak (Moishe’s), smoked meat sandwich (Schwartz’s), and a “steamie” (Montréal Pool Room) and the retail Main, for bargain hunters and hip young dressers.

There is the cultural Main—for tango, salsa and African dancers, film and theatre goers.

The Main that offers attractions of an earlier time—burlesque clubs, steam baths, social clubs and park squares—can also be found. And finally, there is The Main, a great walking street, bustling with people, business and life.



Photo: J.C. Hurni / PUBLIPHOTO

The Main—officially called Saint-Laurent Boulevard or Boulevard Saint-Laurent—is the oldest, most important north-south thoroughfare in Montréal.

The Main was cobbled together from streets that date from the French and British periods. In 1672, a stretch of what would become The Main was located within the old city walls; it was called Saint-Lambert Street. When Montréal's fortifications were strengthened, the Grande Porte Saint-Laurent provided the single route out of the walled city; it was not much more than a narrow path, called Saint-Laurent Road. In 1792, the British officially recognized Saint-Laurent Road as the division between the east and west halves of the city. The neighbourhoods would become Plateau Mt-Royal, where the French settled, and Mile End, home to the English. The street became known as Saint-Laurent du Main, then The Main.

Until the mid 19th-century, the steep escarpment at Sherbrooke Street divided the lower Main, a neighbourhood of skilled workers, businesses

and middle-class residences, from the rural area of orchards and farms above.

In the late 19th and early 20th-centuries, immigrants flooded into Canada through Montréal. Saint-Laurent Boulevard pulled them like a magnet. The Main's factories, affordable housing, groceries and stores, and community institutions welcomed each group in turn. First the Jews from eastern Europe, then Italians, Portuguese, Poles, Greeks, Chinese, and Latin Americans, and more recently Africans and people from the Caribbean moved to The Main and made their mark.

The Main is a street of industry, retail business, and culture. For more than sixty years, it was the heart of the garment industry. Although most of the factories along The Main have closed, the Balfour, Cooper, and Vineberg buildings have been transformed to artists' lofts and media centres.

The street is also home to Radio Centre-Ville (which broadcasts programs in seven languages) and several newspapers including a Yiddish language paper, *Les Nouvelles Chinoises*, and *La Presse*.

In the 20th-century, city governments undertook more projects of urban renewal which disturbed the vibrant street life of the lower Main. Buildings were demolished in order to widen east-west thoroughfares and push through the Ville-Marie Expressway.

Through it all, The Main has carried on.

In 1996 Parks Canada gave official recognition to Saint-Laurent Boulevard as a national historic site, important because of how it has functioned as a gateway for immigrants to Canada. The Main is a place that embodies the immigrant experience and also the commercial vitality and very history of Montréal.

For more information, follow these links:

http://www.historicplaces.ca/rep-reg/affichage-display_e.aspx?Id=1813

http://www.pc.gc.ca/culture/proj/main/intro_e.asp