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FRUGAL TRAVELER; Toronto: Melting Pot With a Dash of Disco  
By JESSE McKINLEY

WHEN temperatures in Manhattan reached the Venusian mid-90's in early May, I found my thoughts migrating, gooselike, to the cooler north: Canada.

Sure enough, both Toronto and Montreal were expecting sunny skies and temperatures in the 70's. But I found even more inviting news on the financial pages. The United States dollar is trading remarkably high, at 67 cents to the Canadian dollar. In short, I could cool off without taking a bath.

I chose Toronto over Montreal for a couple of reasons. First, there was the language factor; my grasp of French, Quebec's preferred tongue, is roughly that of a 3-year-old Parisian.

Then there was the lure of the night life. Fueled by an Internet boom, Toronto has been burnishing its image as Canada's most cosmopolitan city, trumpeting a scene full of moneyed hipsters.

Finally, there was Abba. Home to one of the world's liveliest theater scenes -- in the English-speaking world it ranks behind only New York and London in sheer numbers of productions -- Toronto is currently playing host to the North American premiere of "Mamma Mia!," a musical based on, no kidding, 22 hit songs from Abba, the eminent Swedish supergroup. The show, which has been a huge hit in London and expects to travel to Broadway in 2001, is just the latest big musical to hit Toronto, following in the footsteps of shows like "Ragtime" and "Show Boat." "Mamma Mia!" promised disco. I couldn't imagine anything better -- or potentially worse.

I found a \$180 round-trip fare on Air Canada with a two-week advance purchase on cheaptickets.com. I arrived on a Friday afternoon and found a rental car easily enough, and cheap enough -- \$42 a day.

The car proved something of a luxury (indoor parking was around \$15 overnight); Toronto is a surprisingly walkable town, with most of the major attractions situated between the downtown area, on the shores of Lake Ontario, and the so-called midtown area, less than two miles north near the Ontario Legislative Building in the lovely Queen's Park. The city also has an efficient subway and trolley system.

In many ways, Toronto is a city with an amazing power to remind you of other places. Part of this it owes to its architecture, which can swing from Victorian town houses to modern skyscrapers in the space of several blocks. But perhaps a more potent force in this *deja vu* is the city's vibrant ethnic population. Toronto is a city with three major Chinatowns, a couple of Little Italys and large communities of Asian, Greek, Portuguese, Polish and Indian immigrants.

That diversity manifests itself in a terrific variety of restaurants and stores, from the chock-a-block Chinese restaurants along Spadina Avenue to the city's Greek town, along Danforth Avenue, where Greek flags adorn the street lamps (and where I had a delicious meal at Avli, a warm and cozy room with a taverna feeling, from a menu featuring "recipes of our foremothers").

This profusion of ethnicities may be cause for another distinctly Torontonian characteristic: hybrids. In my three days I encountered a restaurant that specialized in Polish-Canadian food, a Portugese-Italian grocery and a club called Fez Batik that advertised itself as a restaurant-bar-lounge-marketplace-tea house-smoke shop-candy store-gallery-coffee club. Oh, yes, and it has a resident psychic as well, apparently in case the other attractions bore you.

MY first encounter with the city's appealing pride in its ethnic diversity was on Yonge Street (pronounced "young"), an appropriately named mishmash of clothing stores, cafes and restaurants frequented by students at the nearby University of Toronto.

I stumbled into Richardson's Tartan Shop, devoted to the fashions of the Scots, a community that played a major role in the founding of Toronto, including the building of many of its banks and churches. Richardson's, founded in 1944, is a true eyeful. I have never seen so much tartan. There were tartan vests and tartan hats and tartan pants. There was also ample floor space given over to such Scottish fixations as golf, swords and books full of family crests. When I asked a sales clerk if they had anything that wasn't plaid, she pointed to the candy rack.

I left and had a tasty meal of pasta at the Brownstone Cafe, one of the dozens of cheap, casual eateries along Yonge Street. Here, and in fact everywhere I ate in Toronto, I found big portions and small prices. An entree and a drink cost around \$9.

The gray skies had gotten even darker in the late afternoon, and when the wind started blowing I felt a long-forgotten sensation: a chill.

I retreated to my bed-and-breakfast, the Inverness, an oh-so-quaint (there were teddy bears everywhere) but very affordable four-room establishment near High Park, on the western flank of downtown. (Bed-and-breakfasts are cheap, generally \$40 to \$65 a night, and plentiful in Toronto.) I settled into a good-sized second-floor room (which had comfy quilts on an antique queen-size bed and a big whirlpool) just before it began to rain.

Rain is not quite the right word; it was as if Lake Ontario had been dropped onto Toronto.

It was sometime during this torrent that the entire house went black, cast into darkness by downed power lines. I went to fetch a candle from my host, and nearly died of fright. Let's just say that if teddy bears are slightly ominous in the daylight, when you see one in a darkened bed-and-breakfast during a lightning storm, it looks downright homicidal.

I fled to Little Italy, on nearby College Street, which as the name implies also caters to a young crowd, with a swath of music clubs and bars. I was meeting some friends, and I knew I'd found the spot when I saw the boot of Italy outlined in Christmas lights along the street, where things were quite lively at 10:30 p.m., despite the storm.

We had dinner at a place called Teatro, whose name fit my arty pretensions. Inside were young, beautiful black-on-black fashionistas. The menu, or "programme" as it was called, ran toward the run-on, with a lengthy description of the day's fish special: "Freshly chopped tuna tartare tossed with endive, romaine hearts and mini capers topped with a grilled scallion vinaigrette and lemon drizzle." I had to stop for breath while reading it.

The food was good, though, and with a drink the bill came to only \$26 a person (endive, capers and drizzle included). And by the time we finished, the rain had stopped.

Saturday dawned brighter; not only was the sun out, but the lights were back on. And for once, the forecasts were right: the temperature hit 72 that afternoon and stayed there.

The plan for the day was a shopping spree aimed at exploiting the exchange rate. To that end I headed to two of Toronto's main commercial strips: Queen Street West and the Kensington Market.

Queen Street is a modest looking two-lane boulevard that runs east-west through the heart of downtown. Its eastern flank is dominated by two hubs of activity: the impressive City Hall at Nathan Phillips Square, a futuristic edifice made of two towering semicircular office buildings, and the Eaton Center, a massive, blocklong mall with a soaring open-air atrium.

The western end of Queen Street takes on a much different character, with shorter town houses and buildings and a funkier, more inviting vibe. The streets here, cut by trolley tracks, are narrow and the sidewalks wide. It is the city's prime shopping street for young people, with dozens of quirky boutiques, designer outlets, antique stores and thrift shops.

Art supply shops are also in abundance, evidence of the area's reputation as an artists' haven. The street also has a variety of bohemian restaurants like the Swallow, where a sign reads "No Smoking -- Anything," and where breakfast of eggs Benedict, fresh orange juice and coffee came to \$8.50.

It can take a while to walk down Queen Street, primarily because stores keep catching your eye. There's Iodine, for instance, a medically themed beauty boutique, which sells everything from bath salts in test tubes to chic hot water bottles. Its friendly owner, Julie Nadalin, is the one dressed as a nurse.

From Queen Street, I headed north to hit the Kensington Market, a kind of outdoor swap meet complete with overflowing fruit stands, fishmongers and vintage clothing stores sporting distressing names like Asylum.

One of the treats of Kensington Market, however, is Tom's Place, a designer discount store devoted to the ancient art of haggling. Most of the clothes have no price tags, so when you find something you want you ask the owner, Tom Mihalik, how much it is. He says \$50, for instance. You say \$30. He says \$35. And you say "Sold."

It was the most fun I'd ever had buying a dress shirt.

Kensington Market is bordered on the east by Spadina Avenue, the main strip for the city's Asian population. Locals say it's hard to get a bad meal in Chinatown. Pho Hung, a Vietnamese restaurant, had specialties like fried frog and snail vermicelli soup peppering a menu of more traditional fare. I chose something tame: a hot wonton soup (\$3.50) and an iced Vietnamese coffee (\$1.65).

On my last two nights I stayed in the Hotel Victoria, a simple, centrally situated modern hotel downtown. The lobby was small and tasteful; the room was large and clean, with a full bath and a large TV. The price was higher than at the Inverness (\$84) but there wasn't a teddy bear in sight.

I headed out for a night on the town. In Toronto most of the clubs are along a six-block stretch between Spadina Avenue and York Street.

The bars and clubs here are about five to a block, and on this Saturday night, long lines streamed out every door. I tried a couple, paying a \$3 cover at Fez Batik (the multi-hyphenated club described above) and a \$6.70 cover at a dance club called the Plastique Lounge. I didn't stay long at either, but can report that mixed drinks don't seem to top \$5.

The most interesting place I found had a secluded entrance on an alleyway off Peter Street. The club is called This Is London and, appropriately, has a staff outfitted in British bowler hats and trench coats. Inside, the two-level club throbs with house music, and crowds crush next to 50-foot-long bars and champagne-and-cigar counters. But the most impressive element of this dance hall is, apparently, the ladies' room.

A female employee described it: a huge room on the third floor with floor-to-ceiling mirrors and enough lotions, lipstick and low lighting to make a starlet blush. Best of all, there is a full-time stylist and makeup artist who will give any customer a complete makeover.

There is one drawback, however. "Many women don't want to leave," my guide said.

SUNDAY, I decided, would be devoted to more meditative pursuits. Toronto has two fine museums: Royal Ontario Museum at Bloor Street and Avenue Road, a sprawling classic-looking structure that has an enormous collection of dinosaurs, mummies and a nifty new earth sciences gallery. Better yet, the last hour of every day, and Fridays after 4:30 p.m., admission is free.

Another major museum where aesthetic edification can come cheap is the Art Gallery of Ontario. The museum's general exhibit, which includes the world's largest public collection of work by the British sculptor Henry Moore, is free, though there is a suggested donation. I gave \$4 and spent an hour looking at Moore's large plaster casts of reclining women and other abstractions.

The final stop on the art tour was the most anticipated, and most exclamatory: "Mamma Mia!" My father had once told me to avoid any show short of "Oklahoma!" with an exclamation point in the title, but I was excited nonetheless.

The performance was nearly sold out, but I snagged a \$17 seat by going to the box office a few hours before curtain. It was billed as having an obstructed view, but it wasn't too bad -- very far left in the first row of the balcony. (Other bargain hunters should visit the T.O. Tix booth in Eaton Center, which sells half-price tickets to many shows.)

The theater, the immaculately restored Royal Alexandra, was packed. The crowd quieted as the lights went down, and the cheesy jokes and cheesier music seemed at first as if they might not play in proper old Canada. But as soon as the first big chorus number, "Money, Money, Money," began, the audience erupted into applause.

I found myself applauding, too. I had come to Toronto seeking something cool. But sometimes fun and cheap can be just as good.

The bottom line in a cosmopolitan city

I spent an average of \$139 a day on meals, lodging and entertainment during my three-day stay in Toronto. Prices have been calculated at 67 cents to the Canadian dollar.

I rented a Chrysler Cirrus through Thrifty, (800) 331-9111, for \$42 a day including taxes.

#### Information

For general information about the city, call Tourism Toronto at (800) 363-1990; on the Internet, [www.torontotourism.com](http://www.torontotourism.com).

#### Places to Stay

The Inverness, 287 Humberside Avenue, (416) 769-2028, is a four-room bed-and-breakfast in a 1923 house with fireplaces and terrazzo floors; \$64 for a double with private bath, \$50 with shared bath.

Hotel Victoria, 56 Yonge Street, (416) 363-1666, fax (416) 363-7327, is a straightforward downtown hotel with 66 rooms. Standard double with private bath, \$84.

### Places to Eat

Avli, 401 Danforth Avenue, (416) 461-9577, serves Greek food. A dinner of tzatziki (yogurt-cucumber dip), rabbit onion pie and baked fava beans came to \$20 with a glass of wine. Dinner nightly, lunch Monday through Saturday.

Brownstone Cafe, 603 Yonge Street; (416) 920-6288. Oven-baked pasta with zucchini, peppers, onions and chicken, \$6. A glass of house wine is \$3.35. Open late morning to late evening.

Pho Hung, 350 Spadina Avenue; (416) 593-4274. Wonton soup and iced Vietnamese coffee cost around \$5. Open 9:30 a.m. to around 10 p.m. daily.

Teatro, 505 College Street; (416) 972-1475. An antipasto of tuna tartare cost \$10, a main course of pan-seared scallops, \$11; dinner was \$26 a person with a beer. Dinner only.

The Swallow, 1544 Queen Street West, (416) 535-1811, is open 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday and Monday. Brunch all day; dinner ("urban comfort food") is also served. Eggs Benedict, juice and coffee, \$8.50.

### Shopping

Richardson's Tartan Shop, 546 Yonge Street; (416) 922-3141.

**Tom's Place, 190 Baldwin Street; (416) 596-0297.**

Iodine, 867 Queen Street West; (416) 681-0577.

### Night Life

Fez Batik, 129 Peter Street; (416) 204-9660. Open for lunch, dinner and drinks from noon, usually until 3 a.m. Live music, usually Wednesday through Sunday; cover about \$3 and up starting 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Monday.

Plastique Lounge, 128 Peter Street; (416) 506-9481. Open Friday and Saturday, 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. Cover, \$6.70; women are admitted free. D.J. music.

This Is London, 364 Richmond Street West; (416) 351-1100. Saturdays only from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. \$13.40 cover; D.J. music.

### Museums

Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park; (416) 586-8000. Open Monday to Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Friday 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., Sunday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. From July 1 through Aug. 31, \$10 for adults, \$23.50 for a family of two adults and two children 17 and under; before July 1, \$8 and \$20 respectively. Free admission the last hour of every day and Friday after 4:30 p.m.

Art Gallery of Ontario, 317 Dundas Street West; (416) 979-6648. Open Tuesday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Wednesday 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Thursday and Friday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Closed Mondays. Suggestion donation \$4.

### Theater

Royal Alexandra, 260 King Street West; for tickets, (800) 461-3333. I bought an obstructed-view seat for "Mamma Mia!" at the box office on the day of the performance for \$17.

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