

Cultural capital

A new non-stop flight from the UK brings Ottawa into play as a year-round city-break destination, discovers **Joanna Booth**

What does Ottawa have in common with Canberra, Wellington and Ankara? Yes, they're in the Forgotten Capitals Club. These rather bijoux centres of government tend to get overlooked in favour of bigger, glitzier cities. But with Air Canada relaunching a direct flight from Heathrow this year after a five-year hiatus, Ottawa has come into play as a long-haul city break choice, or – sitting right on the provincial border – as a gateway to a wider adventure in both Ontario and Quebec.

The route has been so popular that Air Canada recently extended the seasonal summer service to operate year-round, with three flights a week from November 2 to March 27, 2026, rising to four flights a week next summer.

Ottawa's location, where three rivers meet, has always been key. The Indigenous Algonquin peoples have lived and traded in

the region for more than 6,000 years, and the construction of the Rideau Canal and the railway gave the city a boost in the mid-19th century. Yet Ottawa hasn't traditionally been front of mind for tourists, who have flown into Toronto or Montreal, often bypassing the capital altogether.

The direct air link with the UK is just one aspect of Ottawa's expanding appeal, with new public projects and private developments underway. The popular ByWard Market area is welcoming two new properties – an AC Marriott this year and a Moxxy in 2026 – plus this summer a Hard Rock Hotel with a casino opened by the airport. And Adisöke, set to launch next year, will be not only a new public library but also a space for exhibitions and events showcasing Indigenous stories and Canadian heritage. So if clients want to experience the nation's culture in one conveniently bite-sized city, open their eyes to Ottawa. ➤

Parliament Hill and the Ottawa River

PICTURE: Shutterstock/f11photo

DESTINATIONS

CANADA | OTTAWA

TRIED
&
TESTED

LE GERMAIN HOTEL OTTAWA

Close to ByWard Market and within an easy walk of the National Gallery and Parliament Hill, this hotel's 115 rooms and suites are luxurious but understated, with oversized, monochrome prints of city scenes creating visual impact. Light-drenched restaurant Norca serves à la carte breakfasts and delicate, beautifully presented dishes at dinner that profile the best of Canadian produce – think venison tartare and birch-cured scallops. Doubles start from £175.

germainhotels.com



POLITICAL POWER

Ottawa's parliament buildings will look strangely familiar to British visitors. Built in the same Gothic Revival style as our Houses of Parliament, its Centre Block and Peace Tower – two metres taller than Big Ben's tower – are currently shrouded in scaffolding and undergoing a major renovation that will last until 2032. It's nevertheless worth a wander around the site, which has panoramic views over the Ottawa River.

Guided tours of the Senate and Commons are still available, but my highlight was the Immersive Experience, which has a small exhibition and atmospheric and informative multimedia show that guided me through the history of not only the building but also of Canada's government, and showcased the spaces that will be redeveloped as part of the nation's most expensive heritage project.

HISTORIC HEFT

Clients can tick off seven of Canada's nine national museums – including Nature, War, Science and Technology and Aviation and Space – while they're in Ottawa, but shouldn't miss the



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: National Gallery of Canada; Museum of History; ByWard Market

PICTURES: Ottawa Tourism/Brendan Burden, Taylor Burk Photography



most-visited, the Museum of History. Located just over the river in Gatineau, the curvaceous, flowing building designed by Canadian architect Douglas Cardinal is worth the trip alone. But don't miss what's inside: a well-explained whistle-stop tour through Canada's human history. Treasures include a soaring forest of totem poles in the Grand Hall and a fascinating collection of artefacts, stories and a reconstructed traditional village in the First People's Hall.

INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES

Canada's Indigenous communities aren't a thing of the past. I encountered living First Nations culture at Mādahōki Farm, on the city's outskirts. After being welcomed with traditional dancing, I learnt not only about the significance of the performances, but also of the beautiful outfits, with feather headdresses and intricate beadwork, then met the equine members of the Mādahōki team. Ojibwe spirit horses are critically endangered, and the farm's two pregnant mares are part of a wider effort to preserve this ancient breed with its signature striped legs, small stature and furry ears and whiskers. Visitors can meet the horses, goats and bunnies, plus there's a children's play area and a scenic trail where you can learn about traditional medicine.

CREATIVE CENTRES

For Canadian art, the vast National Gallery is the place to go. The imposing glass and granite structure has great views of Parliament Hill, and inside you'll find Canadian landscapes from all provinces, particularly evident in the maple leaves

and mountains by the early 20th-century artists known as the Group of Seven that are on display.

It's also home to one of Canada's strongest collections of Indigenous art. I loved graphic Coast Salish works, brightly coloured Métis paintings and an audio-visual work by Inuk artist Taqralik Partridge, evoking the sense of being surrounded by a herd of caribou. Guided tours lasting 45 minutes cost only £1.60 and really help identify the highlights for those short on time.

FOODIE FLAIR

ByWard Market is Ottawa's go-to for gourmets – a downtown hub with a farmer's market surrounded by restaurants and bars. Here, clients can pick up anything from Canadian cheeses and maple syrup to seasonal treats such as fiddlehead ferns and pickled wild garlic. It's also home to the original BeaverTails store, where the famous flattened pastries can be topped with classic cinnamon and sugar or something more unexpected – the more daring can even try the ones wrapped around a hotdog. **TW**

Getting
THERE

Air Canada flies three times a week from Heathrow to Ottawa during winter and four times

in summer (starting from March 28, 2026). Return fares for the seven-hour flight start from £540 in Economy, £1,580 in Premium Economy and £2,540 in Signature Class.

aircanada.com