

Oh, Canada

Enjoy Ottawa like a local with the firework-filled festivities of Canada Day, writes Jenni Doggett

A scarlet-moustachioed Charlie Chaplin is debating with a towering Mountie where they should watch the fireworks. It could only mean one thing - I was in the nation's capital, Ottawa, to celebrate Canada Day along with nearly 40,000 creatively costumed Canadians.

The action is centred on several high-spirited shows on Parliament Hill, featuring everything from local electro pop to Inuit throat singers.

I edge closer to Charlie and the Mountie just as they conclude that the best view for the evening's fireworks would be Major's Hill Park, where the Ottawa River meets the Rideau

Canal. So I bin my guidebook and decide to follow the locals for my remaining days in Ottawa.

▶ SEE IT LIKE A LOCAL

Ottawa's grand architecture, neo-Gothic spires and inspiring modern museums make for a multitude of dramatic views. If you're lucky enough to stay in the fairytale turrets of the Fairmont Château Laurier, you've got the best view in town over Parliament Hill and the Unesco-listed Ottawa Locks.

But local folk frequent Copper Spirits & Sights, the rooftop bar at the Andaz Ottawa Byward Market. It's the highest patio in the city and the perfect venue to



White-water rafting on the Ottawa River is a thrilling way to explore the city, racing through rapids

sip cocktails while watching the sunset over the capital's copper-topped domes.

Tucked away on the Rideau Canal, Tavern on the Hill offers less lofty but equally exquisite views across the Ottawa River, Notre-Dame Basilica and the

National Gallery of Canada. Or grab a gourmet hotdog at sister business Tavern on the Falls while the Rideau Falls roar away below.

If you want to bypass the bagpipes and bearskin hats of the main tourist spots, urban white-water rafting on the Ottawa River offers a different perspective. It's a thrilling way to explore the city, racing through rapids and getting your feet thoroughly wet. Rafting makes a refreshing change from tourist boat tours, and the trip ends with extraordinary views of the Canadian War Museum that wouldn't be possible from land.

Try Ottawa City Rafting or family-run Owl Rafting for longer excursions. →



FAR LEFT: Urban white-water rafting

LEFT: Byward Market

➔ GO OUT LIKE A LOCAL

Spend a real night at the museum with Nature Nocturne. Once a month, the Canadian Museum of Nature comes alive after dark. Glamorous young things dance the night away beneath a giant, quivering jellyfish suspended from the ceiling. A cocktail-frocked teen pauses to read about narwhals and a pack of lads explore the interactive brain room. It's an inspired use of the space – and possibly the coolest night out in Ottawa.

If you really want to party like a local, you could do worse than a Saturday night at The Laff, as it's affectionately known. Short for Chateau Lafayette, it's Ottawa's oldest bar and dates back to 1849.

"My name is Lucky Ron and I've been playing here every Saturday since they hired me, and I'll be playing here every Saturday till they fire me," says Lucky Ron, a local institution. His act hasn't changed in more than 30 years. The audience is lively, merrily joining in with his country-and-western standards and calling out pantomime banter. The familiarity is part of Ron's charm. Some regulars have never missed a show.

From The Laff to the laughs at YukYuks Comedy Club late-night show, housing an even rowdier crowd. The mostly local comedians give a unique perspective on the city and I leave feeling a lot less like a tourist, almost as if I'm in on the jokes – although a couple did pass me by, not knowing the local slang.



At Nature Nocturne, glamorous young things dance the night away beneath a giant, quivering jellyfish

For a slower pace and a mellower atmosphere, Bar Robo in Chinatown is popular with all ages. Hipsters and grandpas murmur over icy local brews, while Manouche gypsy jazz band Django Libre provides the tunes.

BELOW: Ottawa Locks



PICTURES: EXPLORE DAVID JACKSON; OTTAWA TOURISM

▶ EAT LIKE A LOCAL

Most folk know about BeaverTails, Ottawa's original doughy treat. But the real inside info is that Ottawa is the country's shawarma capital. Thanks to a large Lebanese population, shawarma shacks are common. The Shawarma Palace is generally considered the best option, having served enormous home-made portions for more than 20 years. Alternatively, soak up the booze in the wee hours with worse-for-wear locals at the 24-hour Elgin Street Diner. Chips, gravy and cheese curds make up the alcohol-absorbing poutine – a staple in Canada.

For a more refined dining experience, several Ottawans



→ recommended I visit Play Food & Wine downtown. The restaurant serves a select menu of small plates with suggested wine pairings. Seconds had to be ordered of the octopus tostadas.

ByWard Market is famously the heart of foodie Ottawa, so escape the over-priced tourist chains and assemble a picnic from the gourmet shops. The House of Cheese specialises in hard-to-find domestic and imported cheeses: try Old Grizzly from Alberta and Bleu D'Elizabeth if you're feeling bold. Canada in a Basket sells Canadian-made gourmet foods. Peruse beautifully packaged jars of pickled fiddleheads (ferns) and chokecherry jelly, then buy your maple syrup like a local, in a can, from the Maple Country Sugar Bush stall. And for a sweet treat, try red rapture ice cream at Sweet Jesus, an experimental ice-cream shop on Clarence Street.

▶ ADVENTURE LIKE A LOCAL

Ottawa has more than 100 miles of bike pathways and it's unquestionably the best way to get around the city like a local. Find your bearings on a trip with Escape Bicycle Tours (from £27), or just rent a bike for the day and explore.

Cycle to Dow's Lake and try kayaking with local families or seek out some of the cooler neighbourhoods, away from touristy downtown. The Glebe, Westboro and Hintonburg are home to unique cafes and cool boutiques.

For stronger cyclists, a trip to Quebec's vast Gatineau Park is a must. Visit the park's prettiest photo opportunity Pink Lake or climb King



LEFT: Rideau Canal



During Winterlude, folk can skate on the world's longest natural ice rink, the Rideau Canal

Mountain. For a gentler workout, hundreds of residents gather for free yoga on Parliament Hill at noon every Wednesday throughout the summer.

After all the exertion, the Nordik Spa-Nature in Chelsea, which claims to be the largest of its kind in North America, is a welcome treat. Hidden away in a fragrant forest, the series of waterfalls, saunas and pools create a delightfully surreal sanctuary and the ideal respite

from the Canada Day crowds.


I float smugly through the afternoon before my flight home, watching glossy black squirrels in the trees and inhaling the woody scents of the saunas.

▶ PARTY LIKE A LOCAL

With festivals celebrating everything from buskers to tulips, it seems Ottawans love a party. Canada Day is the crowning event but there is something to suit everyone's tastes. Jazzfest and Bluesfest take over downtown for a few weeks every June and July, and feature a spectrum of acts including smaller local groups such as the Bank Street Bonbons as well as the likes of Bryan Adams, Herbie Hancock and Alison Krauss.

Hogman-eh and Winterlude cover the winter months, when folk can skate to work on the world's longest natural ice rink, the Rideau Canal.

There are festivals to celebrate dance, dragonboats and animation, while locals also hit the streets for Glowfair, Pride and Brewfest, burlesque, hockey and hoedowns.

It's a great way to meet people and eavesdrop on the best location to watch fireworks or, at the very least, meet a Mountie. 

BELOW LEFT: Bluesfest

BELOW: Nordik Spa-Nature



Getting there

Air Canada offers the only non-stop service from Heathrow to Ottawa. Economy return fares start at £561, including one checked bag and taxes. aircanada.com