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Toronto; A crazy quilt of culture and ethnic enclaves, Canada's largest city makes a comeback after SARS

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Destinations & Diversions

Toronto — It's late Saturday night at the splendid Le Royal Meridien King Edward and about the only face that graces the grand 1903 glass-domed lobby is a portrait of a young Queen Elizabeth II, gazing serenely into the marble-columned expanse.

The King Eddy, once the first choice of celebrities and bluebloods alike, is attractive, dignified and pleasant. It's just that there isn't a lot going on at the moment.

The setting could be a metaphor for the tourism scene in Toronto. Canada's largest city is clean, safe and efficient, a British city run with Swiss precision, locals boast. But a series of events — a harsh winter, SARS, the August blackout in northeast North America — decimated tourism this spring and summer, causing the area to lose about \$337 million in revenue. Now civic and industry leaders are questioning whether clean, safe and efficient is alluring enough to entice American tourists.

The civic soul-searching itself is a sign that the nadir has passed. With the fever broken, a revitalizing patient is on the road to recovery, thanks, in part, to hotels, theaters, sports venues, museums and others that have banded together with let's-put-on-a-show enthusiasm. A public-private coalition, the Toront03 Alliance, formed in June to create events and travel packages that would jump-start tourism. (Its first blockbuster was a Rolling Stones concert in June that attracted 450,000.)

"In a funny way Toronto is one of the best-kept secrets in North America," says David Pecaut, who spearheaded the Toront03 Alliance. "Twenty years ago, visitors discovered it because it was safe and a great, urban experience. Now we also have great nightlife and restaurants and this great multi-ethnic character."

New developments include the opening of The Distillery entertainment and arts district. The musicals *Chicago* and *The Producers* hit town this fall. Two high-style boutique hotels, which brighten a somewhat predictable lodging scene, have opened.

Current enticements include theater tickets with a hotel stay and dinner for as little as \$123. There also are family-friendly packages like the one that drew Korinne Jackman Meeks, her husband and two small sons in August. For about \$300, the suburban Washington, D.C., family spent four nights at a downtown hotel, the kids got free admission to 13 attractions, including the zoo and the excellent Ontario Science Centre, and they moved around town on public transportation for about \$8 a day.

"It's a great place for families because it's safe," Meeks says. "And there's a different mind-set there. There's something about it that isn't overbearing."

Indeed, considering its size and sophistication, Toronto lacks the in-your-face attitude of comparable big cities. On a brilliant Saturday morning in early September, freelance writer and tai chi enthusiast Mike Brassard pauses at his post selling T-shirts commemorating International Taoist Tai Chi Society Awareness Day to expound on the essential difference between Canadians and Americans.

"(The U.S.) was born of revolution. Canada was born of administration. The U.S. conquered the West. We surveyed it." Those calmer origins have molded a character that is "understated, polite, humble," he says.

Hundreds of his tai chi cohorts, most of them Caucasian, have gathered in the sprawling Nathan Phillips Square in front of City Hall to engage en masse in the flowing, slow-motion moves of the Asian discipline. It's an amazing sight that draws nary an onlooker, even as the devotees prepare to move to the streets for a whirl around downtown's Financial District on flatbed trucks. Two Scottish bagpipe bands in full regalia stand at the ready, presumably to lend an added multicultural kick to the proceedings.

Not that it's really necessary. Toronto is surely North America's most ethnically diverse city. About 44% of the area's residents are foreign-born. Downtown neighborhoods hopscotch from the red-and-yellow storefronts of Chinatown (one of four in the metropolitan area) to the green-and-red sidewalk cafe umbrellas of Little Italy to the blue-and-white restaurant awnings of Greektown to the dazzling rainbow of sari-clad women on the streets of Little India. Joanne Kates, restaurant critic for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper, keeps this statistic posted at her desk: 13 ethnic groups in Toronto have more than 100,000 members each. Among them are 435,000 Chinese residents.

"That tells you everything," she says. "(The United States) has a philosophy called the melting pot. We have a philosophy called the mosaic. Even if you've been here 30 years, you take enormous pride in your heritage. You're not expected to melt."

That notion has nurtured diverse neighborhoods and helped create a lively restaurant scene.

"This is a wonderful dining town," Kates says. "You can get better French food in Paris and better Italian (food) in Italy, but the variety of ethnicities and the general excellence in each category is only rivaled by New York."

Scenes from a weekend are a multinational visual feast as well.

In Chinatown, just west of downtown, Shirley Lum, who operates A Taste of the World walking tours, flicks open her "follow me" umbrella, and with a "Welcome to Chinatown, eh?" shepherds the group through streets clogged with Cantonese-speaking shoppers. They stop to sample moon cakes at a bakery and drink tea at an herb shop. They ponder the exotica of the vegetable stands and market windows (where Lum relates a particularly disturbing childhood revelation made while playing with a piece of pork intestine on her plate). By the time they enter a cavernous Hong Kong-style restaurant amid waitresses pushing clattering carts laden with 150 types of dim sum, they decline the chicken feet and stick with mainstream fare like dumplings.

In Cabbagetown, named for impoverished 19th-century immigrants who planted vegetables in their front yards, a Sri Lankan singing group takes the stage at a street festival in the now-gentrified neighborhood (which reportedly has the largest collection of Victorian houses outside San Francisco).

And in The Distillery District, the Samba Squad dance troupe leaps into action on the cobbled streets as a video crew records the action. The historic district opened in May in the rambling 1832 Gooderham & Worts Distillery, at one time North America's largest. Closed in 1990, the complex of 44 brick Victorian buildings has been re-outfitted to house a mix of retail shops, high-end galleries, theaters, restaurants and artists' workshops. (During its 11-year hiatus, the spot was a film location for 900 or so productions, including Chicago.)

The developers paved the streets with 500,000 bricks salvaged from Cleveland's streets, stripped the building interiors to their raw essence and invited one-of-a-kind enterprises to set up shop. Among them: an organic brewery, a glass-sculpture gallery (check out the \$734,000 Dale Chihuly piece) and lots of artists' studios open to view.

"Every area that's cool started with students and artists. They bring creativity and vitality and before long Banana Republic and Starbucks move in and you lose the edge that made the place great," developer John Berman says of his company's no-chains-allowed policy.

The district will eventually house four live theater spaces building on Toronto's reputation as a great theater city. With 200- plus shows between September and May, it's the world's third-largest theater market behind New York and London.

And this season, theater impresario David Mirvish, whose productions of *The Lion King* and *Mamma Mia!* have been running for 3 1/2 years, is preparing for his busiest ever.

"There's a real tradition of going to the theater in Toronto," he says.

That's due in no small part to Mirvish and his father, Ed, who operate three theaters staging big-name productions. As the owner of the flashy discount emporium Honest Ed's, the elder Mirvish was already a Toronto institution when he ventured into show business in 1963. The Royal Alexandra Theatre, a 1907 gem in a battered neighborhood, was slated for demolition. He bought it and began staging plays.

Today, the neighborhood known as the Entertainment District boasts theaters, clubs and restaurants. Live music spills out of rehabbed warehouses and factories late into the night.

And Toronto's identity continues to evolve with a number of skyline-altering projects now underway, including a new opera house, a major expansion of the Royal Ontario Museum and a major redo of the Art Gallery of Ontario by Toronto native Frank Gehry.

"Toronto is on the way to becoming the creative city," David Mirvish says.

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