**Running Away to the Circus in Montreal**

By Sarah Deveau

“Hep!”

At the call of the muscular man standing 70 feet below, I stepped off the platform and grasped the trapeze bar even more tightly as the rush of air cooled my sweat-drenched skin. Heart racing, I swung out over the safety net, valiantly trying to pull up my lower body and wrap my legs over the bar at the apex of my swing. Again and again I failed, dropping into the net only to be reattached to safety ropes and sent up the ladder to try again. On my last, aching attempt to execute the basic maneuver, shins battered from slamming into the bar and abs and shoulders screaming from the strain, I finally managed to swing my legs through and over. Exhilarated, I released my hands and swung upside down in joyous exhaustion.

It was the perfect end to my brief fantasy of running away to join the circus in Montréal.

Bejewled elephants, straw floors and painted clowns are the images that spring to my mind when I think of the circus. The younger generation however, has a vastly different idea of what a circus is, due, of course, to the legendary circus company Cirque du Soleil.

Since its inception in 1984, the Canadian company has led the world in the creation of the contemporary circus. If I was to immerse myself in circus culture for a weekend, I needed to travel to Montréal.

Is there any city in Canada more perfectly suited to act as home to the chaotic, passionate nature of the saltimbanque, the circus artist? The landscape, architecture, and people of Montréal are as mercurial and spectacular as any piece of Cirque storytelling.

My trek began at L’école de cirque de Verdun, a recreational circus school. “Children and adults can train in acrobatics, balancing on objects and the trampoline, plus much more,” explains instructor and camp coordinator Steve Primeau. I had hoped to attend a class and try my hand at the aerial straps or silks, but the gym was overrun with more than 70 children attending a two week long day camp.

My next stop was at La TOHU. A sprawling complex founded by EnPiste (the national association of circus arts), the National Circus School and Cirque du Soleil, it has become one of the world's leading gathering places for circus arts training, creation, production and performance. La TOHU borders the Saint-Michel Environmental Complex, the largest urban landfill site in North America, and features guided tours of the Terra Cirqua exhibit and a unique round theatre where local and touring groups perform and rehearse. Here I viewed an incredible collection of circus memorabilia, including children’s toys, antique and heritage artifacts, and circus-inspired decorative arts on display from the private collection of European collectors Pascal Jacob and Christian William.

I hoped to catch a glimpse of a performance while touring the complex, and wasn’t disappointed. I gaped as students of the National Circus School performed a silent aerial dance on the smooth cement of the building’s exterior, suspended by ropes and harnesses 200 feet in the air. Only 100 students from around the world attend the internationally renowned after school programs for pre-teens, high school program and the three-year circus arts diploma.

Tatiana Weltzien-Straath is 19 years old, and a first year student in the school’s post-secondary program. “We’re pushed by our teachers and peers, but mostly by ourselves, to the limit of our artistic and physical capacities,” says the Calgarian. “Each day these expectations are become higher as we continue to train and explore the abilities of our bodies and minds. That dedication to such rigorous training will prepare me to enter into the world of circus arts as a profession."

No visit to Montréal is complete without taking in the spectacle that is Cirque du Soleil. At the Grand Chapiteau on the waterfront I sat transfixed by Amaluna, Cirque’s latest offering preparing to tour Canada this summer. The show tells a coming-of-age love story with themes of renewal, rebirth and balance, and the performer’s grace made elaborate feats look effortless. I’d soon discover it was anything but.

The following morning I finally had the opportunity to try my hand at the acrobatic arts, as best as a middle-aged soccer mom could. I visited Trapezium, a unique indoor recreational trapeze gym offering classes for flyers wanting to learn the basics or hone their skills, and their bodies, in this rigorous sport.

Owner and instructor Simon Fortin has been obsessed with acrobatics in its various forms since he took a flying leap off a balcony at age six, breaking his nose but not his passion for flight. At Trapezium he teaches amateurs and professionals alike, helping them master the basic moves and progressing to more complicated routines. His instructors are professional trapeze artists, and are part of circus troupes that perform around the city.

“Quote from Simon about how Trapezium allows regular people to experience or live a little piece of the circus,” says Fortin.

My trip ended before I had a chance to visit the third annual Montréal Complètement CiRQUE, a huge circus arts festival organized by La TOHU and running annually July 5 – 15, but I’m thinking of heading back to take in Falla 2012 the first two weeks of August. This carnival festival, produced at La Tohu, includes music from international performers, family activities, and or course, elaborate circus performances.

**IF YOU GO**

**Getting There:** Air Canada offers four direct flights from Calgary daily.

**Where to Stay:** Downtown, the Montréal Marriott Chateau Champlain offers exceptional views of the city through half-moon windows and is ideally situated within steps of the metro, Bell Centre and Underground Pedestrian Network.Or, splurge and stay in a romantic Old Montréal chateau inn at the decadentHôtel Pierre du Calvet.

**When to Go:** The Montréal Circus Arts Festival: Montréal Complètement Cirque, runs July 5 – 15, 2012, bringing together acrobats, clowns, jugglers and other performers from around the world.

**Where to Eat:** Obviously no trip to Montréal is complete without a visit to Schwartz's for a smoked meat sandwich, but if you’re taking in a Cirque du Soleil performance, be sure to visit the 19th century warehouse that houses Taverne Gaspar, just steps away from the Big Top, to enjoy savoury tarts and local craft beer. Or stop by Bistro Cocagne in the Latin Quarter for an upscale French bistro experience at the hands of chef Alexandre Loiseau.

**Resources:** tourisme-montreal.org is Tourism Montréal’s official tourism website. Check it out for packages, destination information and festival and event listings.