Looking towards Toronto

Peter Mintz /OTMP

Most Europeans would be hard pressed to specify the cultural features that distinguish Canada from its southern neighbour. Joanne Shurvell, a Torontonian living in London, explains why.

Facts & Figures

Population: 5.5 million (Greater Toronto)
Language: Over 150 languages spoken
World's Second Tallest building: CN Tower, 553.33 metres
One of the world's longest streets: Yonge Street, 1,896 km

When I moved to London from Toronto, Canada in 1996, it was somewhat of a culture shock. The Queen of England may be Canada's head of state, but English-speaking Canadians have more in common, culturally, with their American neighbours to the south. While fiercely protective of their culture, Canadians are exposed to and fascinated by all things 'American' from television, film and music, to food and football... and worried about being overwhelmed by their larger neighbour to the south — the U.S. has almost 10 times the population of Canada.

Identity Issues

Canada's struggle to protect its cultural identity dates back to the 1920s, when the introduction of commercial radio broadcasting brought concerns over the number of American programmes on the air. The first "Canadian Content" (Cancon) rules, establishing quotas for Canadian content, were passed in 1958. They have evolved over the decades, but currently, 35 percent of all music aired on radio and 60% of content on television must be Canadian.

Despite these rules, many of the most popular programmes and musicians in Canada are American. Still, Canadian musicians — including Leonard Cohen, Diana Krall, Leslie Feist, Nelly Furtado, and Rufus Wainright — have managed to gain international fame. Whether these artists have found world-wide recognition because of the Cancon rules at home is a matter of ongoing debate.

Perhaps because of the greater distance, the British, while they do have a love/hate relationship with all things American and a fascination with American culture, do not seem to feel as threatened by the USA, and there are no British content rules in place. When I am in London, I feel like I am in a distinctively British or European environment; but in Toronto, I often feel that I

could be in an American city like New York or Boston. Despite being Canada's largest city, Toronto feels small, especially in comparison to New York and London, but it has become more cosmopolitan in the past decade with the growth of cultural events like the Toronto International Film Festival.

Oh, You're American

To most Europeans, Canadians sound like Americans. Even after 13 years in London, it is still always assumed that I am American from the moment I start speaking. While Canadians may sound 'American', our language is a unique mixture of American, British and purely Canadian words and pronunciations. In fact, there is a bestselling Canadian English dictionary that includes 'Canadian' words such as *washroom (restroom* in the US; *toilet* in the UK), *loonie* (a Canadian one-dollar coin) and *pogey* (unemployment insurance). Canadian English has also been influenced by French, the country's other official language. Under Canada's Official Languages Act, French and English have equal status in federal courts and institutions. All packaged goods must be labelled in both official languages, and all government offices and signage must be in both French and English. French-Canadian words like *tuque* (a woolly hat, usually with a pompom or tassel on top, from *toque*) and *poutine* (French fries covered with cheese curds and gravy) have been widely adopted by Canadian English speakers.

Canada is officially bilingual, but if you grew up in English Canada in the 1970s as I did, you didn't have much contact with French unless you travelled to Quebec. Less than 2% of Toronto's population speaks French, and although French was taught in high school, it wasn't compulsory when I was a student. I went on a French school exchange as a teenager to Rimouski, Quebec, but I found that the Parisian French that I had been taught at my Ontario school was not useful when trying to communicate with my new Quebecois friends. Quebecois French can be confusing to those who only know French from school studies!

Climate & Land

British people laugh when I say I moved to England for the climate, but anyone who has experienced the bitter cold, and seemingly endless Ontario winters will understand what I'm talking about. The mild rains of London are a joy in comparison to Toronto's bitter -30C winds! There I make good use of the heated underground tunnels connecting shopping malls and offices. Toronto does have superb outdoor activities for the hardy, like ice-skating by Town Hall or the picturesque Harbourfront.

Toronto, which takes its name from a Huron word for 'trees standing in water', has few pre-19th-century buildings. It is dominated by the lake and by skyscrapers, especially in the downtown core, with the tallest building being the 553.33 metre tall CN Tower. Mirroring Lake Ontario and the vast landscape of Ontario, everything in Toronto is larger than in European cities – the cars, the buildings, the gardens. In London, my flat has kindly been described as a 'bijou' — in fact, it is minuscule, and has no balcony, let alone a garden.

The 'Torontonians'

One of the aspects of Toronto that I miss the most is the vibrant multiculturalism of its districts like 'Little Italy', 'Little Portugal', 'The Danforth' (Greektown) and Chinatown. London and New York are both full of people from all over the world, but there is something unique about the way Torontonians embrace different cultures.

The 5.5 million people living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) include over 200 ethnic groups and nationalities speaking more than 150 languages. Toronto is an excellent illustration of Canada's 'cultural mosaic', a term used to describe its mix of ethnic groups, language and cultures. While immigrants to the United States are encouraged to assimilate quickly and become part of the cultural 'melting pot', in Canada, immigrants are encouraged to maintain their culture and their ties to their homelands. Some claim that the mosaic concept encourages immigrants to remain segregated in certain areas or 'ghettos' but in my experience, both 'new' and 'old' Canadians seem a very content lot.

Canadians are known worldwide as a friendly bunch, and like Americans, any shop assistant or waiter greets their customers with a smile. I've noticed that service has improved in restaurants and shops in London over the years, but I still find it surly in comparison to Toronto. Another advantage in Toronto is its egalitarian class structure. Pretty much everyone is considered 'middle class' — and not in the affluent British sense of the term. As a Canadian living in London, I can't really be placed into the class structure.

Cabbagetown

I used to live in a Toronto neighbourhood called Cabbagetown, supposedly because poor Irish immigrants who fled the famine in the 1840s could only afford to eat the cabbages they grew in their front gardens. The area slid into decline during the Depression of the 1930s and remained a slum until the 1970s. When I moved there in the late 1980s, Cabbagetown was thriving once again; a wealthy area dominated by impressive Victorian houses with beautiful gardens. Its Necropolis Cemetery is the resting place of notable 19th-century Canadians like William Lyon Mackenzie, the first mayor of Toronto, and Anderson Ruffin Abbot, the first Black Canadian physician. Although Cabbagetown is surrounded by some fairly rough neighbourhoods, I still feel safer there than I do in New York or London.

London or Toronto?

My British friends often ask me if I'll go back 'home' to Toronto eventually, and I think the answer is no, because my life is in London now.

However, while I am happy to live in London and take advantage of all it has to offer, and of its close proximity to the great European capitals, I am still proud to consider myself a Canadian living abroad. ■

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