

# I walked to Montreal from Ottawa

## Pilgrimages leave daily in summer

By Jane Beall, Citizen Special, The Ottawa Citizen, September 27, 2008

**It was that record-breaking week of heat in June and we'd already walked 14 km since 6:30 a.m. with no breakfast in sight. Sweating and dazed from the glaring sun, five of us, pilgrims that we were, would have sold our souls for a cold glass of orange juice. As I was feeling on the verge of collapse, Hudson (Qué) came into view and then a restaurant : a blessed sight.**



**St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal**

Have you ever considered walking to Montreal? I mean walking to Montreal from Ottawa? It's a 12-day proposition. Montreal is 230 km away. I know. I did it.

I became a member of the pilgrims of the *Chemin des Outaouais* only a few days before I began the walk, when a space unexpectedly came open. Like pilgrims of many faiths have done for centuries, the group I joined walked from Notre-Dame Cathedral in Ottawa to St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal.

Canada's *Chemin des Sanctuaires* got its start when Denis LeBlanc, a retired Québec provincial police officer, was walking for 70 days on France's *Chemin de Paris* and Spain's *Camino Francés* pilgrimage to Santiago in 1995. He began to ponder whether the idea could be transplanted to Québec. The next year, he mapped out a route from St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal to Ste. Anne de Beaupré near Québec City. He then bicycled the route, meeting local church groups and eventually setting up local committees to house pilgrims. By 2000, the *Chemin* was ready and the first pilgrims were on the road.

The part of the pilgrimage from Ottawa to Montreal was organized later by Rudy Latreille, a retired Treasury Board employee who had enjoyed four pilgrimages in Europe. For the past three years, a group of six pilgrims has left Ottawa every day from late May through June. Unlike in days of old, modern pilgrims walk for many reasons in addition to spiritual renewal.

They walk for their health, for time away from jobs and responsibilities, and, in my case, to connect with a longtime friend, Paula Dugdale, with whom I've shared other walks -- in the Himalayas and in France.

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We shared an apartment in 1966 when we were both new teachers in St. Lambert, Qué. Our granddaughters were born within days of each other while Paula and I were hiking in the French Alps four years ago. So, when a space opened unexpectedly in Paula's group, I decided to go along, even though I'd missed all the preparatory walks in the Gatineau Hills.

In the context of Spain's *Camino de Santiago*, with its 113,000 pilgrims a year and 800-kilometre route, Ottawa to Montreal perhaps doesn't seem such a big deal -- though you can couple it with the 350-kilometre part from Montreal to Ste. Anne de Beaupré. Personally, I'm saving that for another lifetime.

My group left the Notre-Dame Cathedral on a warm and muggy June morning at 6 a.m., after an optional Mass and breakfast. Since there are pilgrims just a day behind and another group a day ahead, and facilities are set up to accommodate exactly six, you have to keep walking -- or, if calamity strikes, as it did to several of our group, you take a Greyhound bus home. There is no option to rest for a day along the way.

Some participants know one another ahead of time, but others meet their fellow walkers only on the morning they depart. Paula had got to know one woman in our group during preparatory hikes, but a woman and a man from the Montreal area were strangers to us and to each other. The sixth person in our group had to pull out at the start when she found she could not jam her swollen feet into her new hiking boots. She's planning to try again next summer. This left us at five : four women and one man.

Each morning, we started by consulting our Guide du Pèlerin, a great little guidebook given to each pilgrim at the start of the trek. This, and a Carnet du Pèlerin, a passport that we had stamped or signed at each night's stop, are covered by a \$60 fee to join the *Chemin des Outaouais*. Our guide contained information we'd need each day : our route, addresses of volunteers who would provide us with water at rest stops (one even searched us out in his car with bottles of ice cold water when we were late arriving), locations of restaurants, pharmacies and grocery stores, and short inspirational sayings. My favourite was "Lève-toi et va vers toi-même," which I roughly translated as "Get up and walk towards yourself."

Then we'd hoist up our backpacks, or, in my case, load up my push-cart contraption, attach our official pilgrims' tags, and be on our way. (I used a cart instead of a backpack because I had suffered whiplash in a car accident when I was 20 and, to avoid headaches, I've been pushing or pulling my belongings ever since. My husband cobbled together my cart out of children's bicycle wheels, aluminum bars and a plastic tub the day before we left. It added to the spectacle we made.)

You leave Ottawa on bicycle paths that take you to Orléans, then you take a ferry across the Ottawa River to Masson (Qué.). The route to Montreal skirts the river, mostly on the Québec side. We walked to Thurso, Plaisance and Montebello before crossing the river again, taking a ferry to L'Original (Ont.), walked to Chute-à-Blondeau (Ont.) and returned to Québec. First Rigaud, and (by ferry again) Oka, then Sainte-Marthe-sur-le-Lac, Laval and, finally, Montreal. Wherever possible, the route follows picturesque secondary roads and passes through provincial parks. We saw muskrats, a mink and many species of birds.

We spent our nights everywhere from a kindergarten classroom and empty (and spooky) community centre basements to wonderfully welcoming nuns' residences in Masson and Plaisance, where they greeted us with hot face cloths and afternoon tea. Each venue costs a nominal \$10. When we walked, especially through villages, we received lots of looks and comments, most positive. At some restaurants, for example La Binerie in Thurso, we were given a special pilgrims' price (15 % off) and we paid a reduced pilgrims' fee on the ferries.

We did, however, have one not-so pleasant encounter, quite humorous in hindsight. When we were walking through an area of mansions near Hudson, Qué., an aggressive, barking black lab suddenly tore out of his tree-lined and extravagantly cobbled driveway, roaring across the road in our direction. Just as I was wondering whether our pilgrim status would protect us in this situation (or whether I should pick up a rock), a woman in a very expensive car rounded the corner at quite a clip, narrowly missing the animal. Obviously a dog lover, she slowed down and opened her window. It was bad enough that we were beggars, she yelled, but to live this life at the expense of our innocent dog, almost killed because of our stupidity, was unforgivable. Then she was off again, at speed.

Our average was 19.5 km a day, with a brutal 26 km day in the middle. That day separated the men from the boys. I'm afraid I joined the boys, with a lot of whining as the temperature soared past 30 and the last 3 km went straight uphill to Notre Dame de Lourdes in Rigaud.

We often lost track of time. With no phones, radios or TVs, our days were filled by rising before dawn, finding breakfast and long hours walking through beautiful Québec countryside. Our guidebook listed homes where volunteers were expecting us at lunch. At these stops, we would fill our water bottles, use the facilities and, on their shady lawns, eat the lunches we'd packed the previous evening.

For suppers, if kitchens were available, we'd sometimes cook. Other nights we went to nearby restaurants. Many times, when we were just too tired to walk another step, we'd order in : pizza in Plaisance, barbecued chicken in Rigaud, Greek food in Laval.

Sometimes, early on in the pilgrimage, we played cards and read books in the evenings. On Day 3, in Thurso, we were housed in a brightly lit church basement with a well-equipped kitchen. Using supplies we bought at the local grocery store, we sautéed a large lake trout in butter and enjoyed a huge salad and a bottle of French wine. We laughed and talked until 11 p.m. and I was still awake at 1 a.m.

The next day's walk began at 6 a.m. and covered 19 km. I had learned my lesson; from then on, most nights we were all asleep by 9 p.m. Despite some nights on narrow iron cots or even foam mattresses on the floor, we usually slept the sleep of the dead after so many hours on the road.

As we walked along, we tended to change partners every few kilometres to laugh at someone else's jokes or to commiserate with another's misfortunes. Three of us were anglophones and two francophones; we'd switch back and forth from halting French to halting English.

The unusual heat took its toll. The man from Montreal, a veteran of many pilgrimages including Spain's *Camino*, developed a rash. Rudy Latreille, the pilgrimage organizer, drove out to take him to an all-night pharmacy in Gatineau. The diagnosis was the cause of much hilarity among our group : a severe case of "diaper rash." After bravely struggling with this for several days, the unfortunate man also developed ulcers on his feet and had to take a bus home to Montreal.

Several days later, a woman in our group was also forced to abandon us when a large blister developed on her heel and just kept getting bigger despite our ministrations. Boarding the bus back to Ottawa, she vowed that the longest pilgrimage in her future would be the one between her couch and the fridge.

This meltdown in our group was unusual. Normally 85 to 90 per cent of pilgrims complete the trip, including a woman in her 80s who pushed her belongings in a baby carriage.

We three remaining pilgrims found the final days the most difficult. Fewer of us meant fewer distractions. Even so, we were a bit sad to reach Montreal and join the world again.

At noon on Day 12 -- with Paula and I taking turns pushing and pulling my cart on which we had loaded her backpack, and Michelle from Montreal trudging behind -- we made our final assault, seemingly heaven bound, to St. Joseph's Oratory. As a foolish 15-year-old in a Montreal Catholic school, I once climbed the 10 million concrete steps (I swear there were that many) on my knees, and I still suffer nerve damage from that folly. This time, we climbed the steps on our weary feet. We entered the oratory out of breath. Our pilgrimage was completed with an enthusiastic blessing from a priest who seems to spend his days blessing pilgrims from around the world.

Paula and I bid a fond farewell to Michelle, whose partner was waiting for her in the oratory parking lot, and celebrated with a gourmet lunch at a nearby restaurant. Fabulous smoked salmon sandwiches, gourmet coffee and a chocolate confection called L'Opéra reminded us that reaching the end of the road does have its rewards.

Anticlimactically, we then walked from metro station to metro station before finding one with a wide enough entrance to accommodate my cart. We finally took the metro to the bus terminal and, after much acrimonious discussion from officials and bus drivers, a kind driver pulled my cart apart and stuffed it into the luggage hold of a bus bound for Ottawa. Paula and I dragged ourselves into our seats and slept all the way home to Ottawa and our waiting families.

**Jane Beall** is retired local high-school teacher who says she's still dreaming about doing Spain's *Camino de Santiago* some day.

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### **If You Go**

**Who it's for ?** Anyone interested in spiritual renewal, seeing lovely areas, meeting some generous Québécois or sustained exercise. All are welcome regardless of religious affiliation.

**When ?** Pilgrimages leave daily from Ottawa from May 25 through June 18. Spots start filling up from January 15 for the next summer.

**Cost ?** I spent less than \$450, which covered \$60 membership, 11 nights, the bus trip back to Ottawa (\$23.36 for seniors) and meals.

**Information ?** Call (819) 777-6023 or see [www.chemindesoutaouais.ca](http://www.chemindesoutaouais.ca)

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### **The Pilgrimages**

- **Notre-Dame Cathedral in Ottawa to St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal :**  
12 days, 230 km. Groups of 6 leave from May 25 to June 18.

- **Within Montreal :**  
6 days, 65 km. Groups of 4 leave daily in June.

- **St. Joseph's Oratory to Ste. Anne de Beaupré :**  
18 days, 360 km. Groups of 4 leave daily in June.

- **Rimouski to Québec City and to Ste. Anne de Beaupré :**  
21 days, 400 km. Groups of 4 leave daily in June.

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