

Canada by Train

6,351km separate Halifax on Canada's Atlantic coast from Vancouver, on the country's Pacific coast. Why take the train? Because travelling by rail is far more romantic than by plane. It's hypnotic to watch the scenery go by past your window. Going by train slows you down, allows you to discover this big country gradually. It's a flexible way to travel as well. You can stop off and visit different places on the way.

1 HALIFAX TO MONTREAL (21 HOURS)

Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia, was the first piece of Canada immigrants would see when they arrived. Before boarding the train, take advantage of the sights this historic city has to offer, including the Citadel, fascinating museums and maritime heritage. Halifax also has more pubs per capita than any other city. The train has hardly left the station, when you can see the Titanic graveyard out of the window. We stop at Moncton to stretch our legs. In 2002 Moncton became Canada's first officially bilingual city. We hear about Moncton's history from one of the guides in the Dome Car. This spacious carriage has a glass roof and sides, so you can see the scenery, a tranquil landscape of forest and lakes. It is difficult to get bored aboard: there are games and quizzes, and a lot of jokes. It is easy to make new friends. There are wine tastings too. Why not try a red wine made by former ice hockey star Wayne Gretzky? At night, the rhythmic roll of the train's movement helps us go to sleep.

2 MONTREAL TO TORONTO (4.5 HOURS)

There are great views of Montreal's skyline as the train enters the beautiful station, which is linked to the world's largest underground city. Spend a couple of days in Montreal – or "Montréal", as the French-speaking Canadians call it. This vibrant city is the best place to experience Canada's bilingual heritage first hand. And you'll have to try one of Canada's national dishes, "poutine," fries with gravy and curd cheese.

The service between Montreal and Toronto is the busiest in Canada, running alongside the St Lawrence River into Ontario. This province covers a million square kilometres, with innumerable lakes. "Ontario" is a First Nation word meaning "Shining Waters," and the province has a quarter of the world's freshwater reserves. Its capital is Toronto. Peter Ustinov felt Toronto was "a kind of New York run by the Swiss," but multicultural dynamic Toronto is worth getting off the train for a few days. Climb the CN Tower and look down on the city from nearly half a kilometre up. Canadians of Italian descent are the city's second-largest ethnic group after the British! While you're here, take a detour to Niagara Falls – it's only a two-hour train ride.

3 TORONTO TO WINNIPEG (3 DAYS)

From Toronto the train now gradually heads into the vast prairies that make up so much of Canada. One night two other passengers and myself black out all light sources and look out the windows at some flickering Northern Lights on the horizon. They are very faint, but still... Travelling like this creates bonds. And gives you time to think. Crossing Canada by train is a historic voyage too. In the 19th century, before air travel, the railway played an important role in uniting this vast country. Next stop: Winnipeg!

