

The Gazette

Creepy Montreal

Our tour of halloween hotspots begins at the grave of Simon McTavish, who's been spotted Tobogganing down mount royal in his coffin

AL KRATINA
Special to The Gazette

Sunday, October 26, 2008

Paranormal research can be hazardous. The risk of tearing the veil between the living and the dead, unleashing impious spirits and blind chaos gods, is ever-present. As is, clearly, the danger of writing an article in which the first few lines read like a hyperactive Anne Rice novel.

There's also the chance that examining local ghost stories too closely might reveal mundane explanations related less to supernatural activity than bad bathtub gin. Thankfully, I'm not concerned about my round-up of Halloween hotspots, some haunted, others just plain weird. I've solicited tips from the helpful guides at Fantômes Montréal, a company that runs various ghost tours in the Old Port.

To ensure my safety, I've boned up on protective magic at Le Mélange Magique, a store that manager Robyn Stroll describes as "Canada's largest manufacturer and exporter of occult goods."

If I can just avoid Ricean references to black lace and absinthe, this list of Montreal's creepiest locations should go off without a hitch.

Mount Royal

Fantômes Montréal's Donovan King has made the story of Simon McTavish somewhat of a personal crusade, petitioning the city to restore the marker over his Mount Royal grave. Last century, McTavish was one of Montreal's richest, most respectable men. But since his death, he's been seen wildly tobogganing down the mountain in his coffin, having apparently joined some sort of drunken underworld frat.

In an unsuccessful effort to call up his spirit and share in his riches, I wore green clothing and inhaled the smoke from burning spices.

"The colour green attracts prosperity," promised Stroll, in what may have been an attempt to dress me as a stoned leprechaun "and burning an incense like bayberry or cinnamon (attracts) success."

Redpath Museum

As far as I know, McGill's Redpath Museum, built in 1882, is not haunted. But the anthropological exhibits on the top floor include a shrunken head of dubious authenticity, and a sheet made of human teeth.

Apparently, the latter was once used by Chinese dentists as advertising, but looks more like a veil Cruella DeVille would wear if she were marrying Ted Bundy.

I sensed the head was giving me a very tiny evil eye, but thankfully I had brought along a chunk of hematite, a stone used to deflect negative energy from co-workers.

Champ de Mars

"They used to hang people on the Champ de Mars," King explains. "It was a very popular pastime to bring your kids there."

I debated recreating the cruelly voyeuristic vibe by borrowing my friend's toddler and lynching her Barbies for witchcraft, but elected instead to simply dispel the site's stored negativity by burning a white candle anointed with Protection Oil. Which, if you're curious, smells kind of like cherry Nibs.

Auberge St. Gabriel

The oldest inn in North America, this restaurant is allegedly haunted by a young female ghost. But though my delicious bison steak was rare enough to be considered undead, our server had never seen the spirit himself.

He did, however, allow us to explore the third-floor dining room, where most sightings occur. We saw nothing, but I chalk that up to the large pinch of sea salt I'd purloined from our table.

"Salt is a wonderful purifier," Stroll explains. "It's natural, and it comes from the earth, and it's been used for hundreds and hundreds of years as a protector."

Chateau Ramezay

This 300-year-old building, now a museum, is allegedly haunted by a mysterious presence.

"No one's quite sure of what the ghost is," King says. "That building is renowned for having all kinds of strange noises erupting, and sulphurous smells."

Presumably, the building simply has indigestion from swallowing souls without chewing, a condition easily treated with a calming healing spell, and a lodestone kept in a red charm bag.

Corner of William and Murray Sts.

Legend has it that the headless spectre of Mary Gallagher appears at the site of her 1879 murder every seven years, creating the only instance where reporters can use the phrase "decapitated prostitute" in a human interest story.

Her next visit is expected in 2012, and those who fear otherworldly presences like hers might want to draw upon the Sixth Pentacle of Mars with dragon's blood.

St. Henri

My neighbourhood won't be creepy for long, now that an influx of hipsters and their related coffee shops and art galleries have invited gentrification.

Abandoned buildings on my street are being torn down, and a local church, burnt hollow and covered in spray-painted pentagrams, has been replaced by new construction. But for now, there are still spooky lots full of shrubbery and stone cairns that look like the Blair Witch building condominium, a (fake) bloodstained window at an airbrushing/stage makeup shop, and plenty of empty factories that smell like matches and ozone.

I wouldn't recommend walking around at night without carrying at least a few veal-skin parchments inscribed with the stronger Enochian Keys.

Dorchester Square

Generally speaking, the only disease you can catch downtown is cirrhosis of the liver, particularly near Crescent St. But before it became a city park, downtown's Dorchester Square was a graveyard used for cholera victims in an 1832 epidemic.

Those concerned the air might still carry enough infection to taint an evening's bar hopping with desiccating fluid loss would do well to listen to Stroll's advice.

"For health, you want to be wearing blue or white," she says, "(and) a blue lace agate ... will help protect against disease and keep you calm at the same time."

Dumb Supper

It's more respectful than creepy, but a Dumb Supper, like the one Le Mélange Magique will be hosting on Nov. 1, can be used to commune with lost loved ones.

"The Dumb Supper is a very traditional ritual," Stroll explains. "It's a meal held in silence in honour of the dead."

To hold your own, set a place for departed ancestors, friends or pets, and speak not a word, presumably so the departed can be heard lamenting the fact there's nothing to eat in heaven other than Philadelphia Cream Cheese and unrepentant sinners.

Katacombes

This downtown club lives up to its name, with fake skeletons and metal spinal columns keeping the atmosphere cadaverous.

My last visit was to see Watain, a Swedish black metal band playing by candlelight while screeching about dragons and black fire and other lost snippets from Gollum's diaries. As protection, I eschewed more esoteric choices and opted simply to bring a date carrying a pink Hello Kitty purse. It worked like a charm, keeping away several metal heads in fishnets and corsets who had ignored my previous advice about Anne Rice.

Watch for my new line of Hello Kitty grimoires at Le Mélange Magique this fall. The Mélange Magique, 1928 Ste. Catherine St. W. Tickets still available for Nov. 1 Dumb Supper. Call 514-938-1458 or visit www.themagicalblend.com

Fantômes Montréal will be running Ghost Hunts, where participants must locate fictional characters from Montreal's history, Oct. 29-31.

Call 514-868-0303 or visit www.fantommontreal.com