



SHORE SNORKELING  
UNDERWATER WOW

FOR NEARLY 30 years, Thomas Lew has been a diver. He's donned scuba tanks all over the Caribbean, exploring reefs and brushing up against vividly colorful marine life. It's a pastime that comes at great cost, however: Beyond the expense of getting to the tropics, Lew typically spends about \$250 per day on the air tanks, equipment rental, and dive boats necessary to get out to good dive spots. That's why he often takes a

day off from scuba diving to snorkel instead. "With snorkeling you can carry your mask and snorkel in your luggage, and some of the best snorkeling is close to shore," says Lew, a vice president at Boston-based TNT Vacations. Indeed, with no need for equipment rental or a dive boat, a spectacular day of snorkeling can cost ... nothing.

The low-key approach of snorkeling off the beach has advantages beyond the low price. The first time I snorkeled, at a Jamaican resort, I rode a shuttle bus to a dock, endured an interminable boat ride to the reef, and wound up spending more time getting to and from the dive spot than I did actually diving—after planning my entire day around the boat schedule. On a more recent trip to Hawaii,

I avoided the dive-boat rigmarole and instead went to Hanauma Bay, a short drive from Waikiki. I paid a small public-park admission fee and walked down a steep path to a wide, protected beach. Snorkeling from the beach instead of a boat saved money, but it also put me in control. I could choose the depth of the water where I felt most comfortable, and I could traverse the wide reefs at my own pace. I could also take breaks to laze on the beach. So-called "shore snorkeling" is only possible at the right kind of beaches—you need gentle surf, clear water, and something interesting to see down there. But when you choose this kind of diving, snorkeling becomes just one part of a fun day at the beach, instead of a long, pricey expedition that can consume



Shore snorkeling is the cheaper alternative to scuba diving, boasting just as much sightseeing. It's also suited for children (top). Locally, Discovery Adventures gives four-hour guided snorkeling tours off Gloucester for just \$75 per person (above).

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MONTREAL  
FULL OF CHIC CHARM

SURE, THE international, French-flavored city to our north always brims with high-end this and four-star that. But thanks in no small part to the pervasive cultural Franglais frappe, its less expensive pockets manage to roll out equal elan. That means the best deals (not to mention the most fun) are found at the many independent, subtly hip hotels and the bar-cum-nightclub-cum-restaurants that populate the city. Moderately priced and filled with locals, the latter are the most direct route into the life and energy of the city.

In that vein, the "supper club" is a uniquely *Montrealais* phenom—a little bit restaurant, a little bit dance club, with a tendency to become an all-out bacchanal on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. (Arrive for dinner before 9 p.m. if you'd rather not become party to a, well, party.) Housed in an old Art Deco bank, Time (514-392-9292, timesupperclub.com) is where everyone from college kids to fiftysomething artists grab tables for eccentricities such as agnolotti with mascarpone and asparagus in rose sauce (three-course dinners here average \$40 to \$50 per person), and then linger to rock out until 3 a.m.

Meanwhile, the minuscule brick-walled Garde Manger (514-678-5044, crownsalts.com/gardemanger) has been a local favorite for years—and not just for its funky vibe and audaciously oversized chandelier. It's also home to Food Network chef Chuck Hughes, who changes up his blackboard menu pretty much constantly while still offering his famed lobster poutine and short ribs (dinners average \$60 per person).

As in Paris, excellent bistros are

found everywhere here—although in Montreal, they cost less than half as much. Case in point: Restaurant Lemeac (514-270-0999, restaurantlemeac.com) serves up personal touches right and left, from its gleaming tin bar to those wide, pretty windows facing the expanse of Avenue Laurier. Drop in after 10 p.m., when menu prices plummet to \$25 for a starter and entree (and don't miss the soul-warming Mediterranean fish soup with Emmenthal cheese and *rouille*, or the duck confit with roasted fingerling potatoes).

Whole-animal enthusiasts find nirvana at Au Pied de Cochon (514-281-1114, restaurantaupieddecochon.ca), which gives pigs the snout-to-tail cooking treatment on its everyday menu, while other kitchens do it only when the chef's feeling daring. The results range from pickled tongue and *boudin* tart to trotters. Stay away from the pricier foie gras dishes and you'll walk out having undergone a singular dining experience for under \$40 per person.

Many of the town's boutique hotels offer a similarly high charm-to-price ratio—and unusual amenities. Take, for example, the seriously impressive contemporary art collection found throughout LHotel Montreal (514-985-0019, lhotelmontreal.com); it includes works by everyone from Warhol to Chagall to Lichtenstein. And somehow, it manages to blend seamlessly with the more formal Victorian decor (arguably because the oversized windows and high ceilings keep any of the rooms from feeling cramped). Add all of that to the coveted Old Montreal address, and it's a steal—particularly if you book in advance on the hotel's website, where superior rooms with a queen bed start at \$137.

One of the most romantic inns



within the city limits is Auberge Bonaparte (514-844-1448, bonaparte.com). The 1886 building, perched on a small cobblestoned street in the historic district, holds 30 impeccable rooms featuring huge windows and decked out with old oak doors and Louis-Philippe furniture (there's also one suite). What it doesn't have is a bloated price tag: Standard rooms average \$150 until May 1, and \$189 after that until November. The price includes breakfast, plus access to a gorgeous rooftop terrace with gasp-inducing views of *tout* Old Montreal. —Alexandra Hall

From top: Montreal's Garde Manger, home to Food Network chef Chuck Hughes, features ever-changing specials, while Au Pied de Cochon offers hearty meat dishes. Belly full, retire at the inn Auberge Bonaparte.

CHILDREN PHOTOGRAPH BY ISTOCKPHOTO; GLOUCESTER PHOTOGRAPH FROM DISCOVERY ADVENTURES

GAUDE MANGER PHOTOGRAPH BY YANNICK GRANDMONT/THE NEW YORK TIMES; AU PIED DE COCHON PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTINNE MUSCHI/THE NEW YORK TIMES; AUBERGE BONAPARTE PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT J. GALBRAITH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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most of a precious vacation day. Here are four experts' picks for budget snorkel getaways:

### Learn Local

Admittedly, Gloucester won't make any serious snorkeler's 10 best list. Like all of New England, it's plagued by cold and often murky water, even in summer. But it can be a great place to learn without stepping on an airplane. During July and August, Discovery Adventures (978-283-3320, [discoveryadventures.org](http://discoveryadventures.org)) gives four-hour guided snorkeling tours for just \$75 a person. Everyone wears a provided wet suit, which offers both warmth and buoyancy, making it easier for newbies to focus on breathing. Participants wade in from the beaches, and reach some of the beaches by kayak. "When people think about snorkeling in the Caribbean, they think white sand, blue water, and bright fish—they have those colors in mind," says Kacy Lafferty, Discovery's executive director, who's been leading snorkel tours for 17 years. "In New England we have browns and greens and reds—the underwater landscape is totally different, but there's tons of stuff to see." On an expedition out of Gloucester, her clients typically encounter starfish, urchins, striped bass, lobster, and skates.

### Stay Domestic

Florida is the most logical warm-water destination for East Coasters, with Key Largo—an hour's drive south from Miami and home to John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, an underwater park—the first choice for many snorkelers. But snorkel pros say Southern California can be a great place to slip a day of snorkeling into a larger summer vacation. (Winters can be too chilly, unless you're in San Diego.) Terry Peralta, a dive travel specialist at Turquoise Travel Adventures in Dana Point, California, suggests Catalina Island as a great destination for boatless snorkeling. "You can step into the water at Casino Point and see the kelp forest, resi-

dent giant groupers, and bright orange garibaldi fish, to name a few," she notes by e-mail. A third choice for folks who want to vacation without a passport: Puerto Rico, where there's plenty of great snorkeling just off the beach. At any of these destinations, find a local dive shop and ask for the best spots to wade in.

### Consider All-Inclusive Mexico

While travelers have deemed many parts of Mexico too dangerous to visit, Cozumel, an island off the Yucatan Peninsula not far from Cancun (and which Jacques Cousteau viewed as one of the world's best dive spots), is considered relatively safe. Lew, the TNT vice president, suggests staying at an all-inclusive resort, where you can snorkel from the beach or kayak out to reefs before donning a mask. Non-motorized water sports like kayaking and boogie boarding are generally free at all-inclusive resorts, he says, and kayaks can be an especially good way to find great snorkel spots. He recommends the Iberostar resort (305-774-9225, [iberostar.com](http://iberostar.com)), which has its own dive shop, as a great home base; as at most all-inclusive destinations, Lew says, you can rent snorkel equipment on-site if you choose. Earlier in March, various websites listed three-night stays in Cozumel (including airfare, hotel, food, and drinks) at around \$900 a person.

### Go World-Class

In its January issue, *Scuba Diving* magazine's Readers' Choice Awards named the Caribbean island of Bonaire both the world's top snorkeling destination and its top value pick. "Wade into the water almost anywhere [on Bonaire] and you'll find something interesting to watch," the magazine says. The Dutch "special municipality" is part of the so-called A-B-C islands (A is Aruba, B is Curacao) that lie north of Venezuela. Bonaire is considered a "value" destination because once you get there, costs are low: Rent a car and you can access great spots to snorkel off beaches without ever stepping foot on a charter boat. Hotels are reasonable too. One example: the Sonrisa ([sonrisabonaire.com](http://sonrisabonaire.com)), a boutique

property that TripAdvisor ranks No. 1 on the island, has rates starting at \$99 a night during the low season that begins April 15. The "value" moniker does not mean Bonaire is flat-out cheap, however. "Any of the Mexican or Dominican destinations are cheaper than Bonaire—it's expensive to get to," says Andy Reppeto of BonairePros, a Southlake, Texas, travel agency that specializes in booking trips to the island. Another downside: Infrequent flights make Bonaire best suited for weeklong stays, not quick getaways. From Boston, the best route to Bonaire is to drive to Newark and take Continental's once-a-week direct flight, which leaves on Friday evenings.

(Earlier in March, round-trip fares for May flights tallied \$573 a person.) If driving to Newark is too onerous, it's possible to connect to direct flights from Atlanta or Houston, or to fly to Aruba and hop to Bonaire on a smaller plane; generally, these options are more costly. Reppeto insists the complicated journey is worth it. "If it was easy and cheap to get to, there'd be a lot more people there, and if there were a lot more people there, it wouldn't be nearly as desirable," he says. Which means once you get your mask in the water, odds are strong the only creatures you'll be sharing space with are Nemo and his brethren.

—Daniel McGinn