Urban Trail Running
Across Canada
IMPRESSIONIVE TRAIL SYSTEMS RESIDE AT YOUR DOORSTEP IN SOME OF CANADA’S BIGGEST CITIES
By Tania Haas

You don’t have to drive hours out of the city to enjoy running in nature. Great trail options abound in the shadow of Canada’s concrete jungles. Here’s our primer.

VANCOUVER

West Coasters may argue they’re the luckiest Canadians for their abundance of trail runs – and for good reason. Urban dwellers can easily find solace on soil, even without a car. Karen Benson, a local runner and editor at Mountain Equipment Co-op, compiled this list of trails accessed by transit: Lighthouse Park, Pacific Spirit Regional Park, Stanley Park (a classic), Capilano River Regional Park, Hyannis Drive trailhead, Lynn Headwaters (part of the North Shore trails), Lower Seymour and Rice Lake.

If you have a car, Karl Woll, editor of Outdoor Vancouver, recommends his top three:

HOWE SOUND CREST TRAIL
Woll warns this trail is a full-day effort in the backcountry and requires some route finding. It is not for the inexperienced and can be extremely dangerous. That being said, it is quite possibly the most scenic route near Vancouver. “The HSCT takes you over multiple summits and provides unmatched views the entire way. Incredible views of The Lions, Howe Sound, and a seemingly infinite mountain range are a few of the perks. Sections of scrambling, coupled with the 30 km distance, make this one for the experienced, long-distance trail runner. For those wanting a shorter distance, the portion of HSCT from Cypress Mountain to St. Mark’s Summit is well worth the effort,” writes Woll on OutdoorVancouver.ca.

NORVAN FALLS
A 30-minute drive from the city centre. “At 14 km, a run to Norvan Falls is a solid outing, but the lack of elevation gain makes it much more accessible than many other routes on Vancouver’s North Shore,” says Woll. “The trail is easy to follow, carrying through the beautiful forest of Lynn Valley. A nice waterfall provides the perfect spot to rest and recharge before doubling back to the parking lot.”

SENDERO DIEZ VISTAS
“This route around Buntzen Lake takes you up a ridge which provides a fantastic view of the Indian Arm, Burrard Inlet and much of Vancouver,” says Woll. In the summer, finishing your run with a dip in Buntzen Lake is the perfect reward.

MONTREAL

Jim McDannald knows where to go when he needs an escape from campus life and bumper-to-bumper traffic. The track and cross-country coach at Université du Québec à Montréal and co-founder of Athlétisme Ville-Marie shares two of his favourite trail runs near The Plateau.

CHEMIN OLMSTED
Crushed rock paths climb up Mont Royal. The return trip from the Cartier statue up and back is around 11 km, longer if you go off the main trail. But be careful, some trails have steep terrain and require careful footwork; the drop is deadly.

PARC MAISONNEUVE
Within the park, you can run on the grass off the golf fairways from the 1976 Olympics. Traffic near the Jardin Botanique will remind you of the city’s notorious congestion.
OTTAWA

When Jason Faber, co-author of RambleOnward.ca, isn’t traveling the world, he likes to explore his hometown’s hidden gems.

WOLF TRAIL
Its gnarly terrain and elevation make it a local favourite. Its views will earn you loads of Instagram likes.

TRAIL 5 TO TRAIL 15
Faber’s long runs take him to Gatineau Park all the way up to Pink Lake, arguably the most beautiful lake in the entire park. The loop is around 33k and the elevation is over 450 metres.

As for city trails, there are plenty that seem to blur the hard edges of urban living and offer an oasis of open spaces. “My favourite would be the Ottawa River Pathway in Rockcliffe,” says Faber, referring to the posh, old neighbourhood that includes 24 Sussex Drive, the Prime Minister’s official residence. “If you head north on Sussex out of downtown and past 24 Sussex and Rideau Hall, you’ll connect with a nice running and biking path along the Aviation Parkway. The trick here is to jump down to the lower path that runs right alongside the Ottawa River and run east for miles and miles. You will totally forget that you’re in the city and before you know you know it, you’ll be on your way to Orleans. Once you hit the Aviation and Space Museum, you can cut back onto the Aviation Pathway and head south, an awesome paved trail through the trees.”
HALIFAX

When the North End Runners aren’t running the Halifax peninsula, you’re likely to find them chasing each other backcountry, close to the city’s core.

THE FIGHT TRAIL
“A 2009 fire went through this area and now it’s a haven for mountain biking and trail running on the sweet, fast mix of granite and forest,” says Damian Daniels, a member of the North End crew. “This has been developed quite a bit, with more trail added, but you can go out and run anywhere from two to 15k. It’s hard to get lost in here and is very well marked. It’s fast and is a good mix of single track, hills and open paths … and the mountain bikers are friendly.”

LONG LAKE
Ten kilometres west of the Halifax Peninsula, runners can explore their choice of single-track forest runs surrounding the lake. Look for the tracks jutting off the large main gravel recreational path.

SUZIE’S LAKE
Located behind a Costco and movie theatre complex, those in the know can experience protected wilderness in one of Canada’s largest urban parks. Runners trace the wooded trails to swimming holes along exposed granitic rocks, making for a perfect summer afternoon adventure or duathlon training day.

TORONTO

The city’s lakefront, along with its ravine and river systems, offer easy getaways from the overcrowded sidewalks and construction hurdles.

CROTHERS WOODS
Evan Wallman, founder of Toronto Trail Runners, says this 52-hectare piece of land straddling the Don River in Leaside is the ultimate refuge for urban runners. Open year-round, you’ll navigate hills, roots, rivers, and steel and wood bridges, and watch out for deer, rabbits and the odd graffiti artist.

“Crothers Woods is the ultimate refuge for urban runners.”
Evan Wallman, Founder of Toronto Trail Runners

LESLEY SPIT
You may compete for space with bird watchers on this 5k long peninsula built by lake-filling that extends into Lake Ontario with panoramic views of the city. Ontario Trails reports that close to 400 plant species have been identified on the Spit, many of which are nationally and provincially rare.

Tania Haas is a runner and writer with a passion for travel.

TOP AND BELOW
Don Valley trail, Toronto