



Once Upon a Tour

For a blast from Toronto's past, take a walk on the old side

The city's myriad history tours transport you to another era. "Our past is not boring," says Bruce Bell, whose passion for the subject has blossomed into a sightseeing business. The trick is in the telling. His popular St. Lawrence Market walking tour (W-Sa 10 a.m., \$20, 416-392-0028) couples Canadian snacks (Arctic char and blackberry jam sandwiches) with stomach-churning stories of the 19th century city. At the corner of King and Church, Bell notes the site of the asylum for "incorrigible women," who were kept naked and shackled by a grate where passersby could throw food at them.

Bill Genova, who offers 16 separate walks (M-Su 10 a.m. or 2 p.m., \$25, 416-367-0380), focuses on Toronto's diversity. His Black History tour takes you to Elizabeth and Albert Streets, near Yonge and Dundas, where local heroes of the Underground Railway lived in the 1850s. The star of Genova's Gay History walk is Alexander Wood, a gay 19th-century magistrate for whom a statue was erected at Church and Alexander. And the 8 p.m. Ghost Tour recounts Robertson Davies's vow to haunt Massey College and tells the story of a spirit in Chinatown's Bright Pearl Restaurant who was foiled by a feng shui redesign.

For a quirky alternative history of Toronto, bring your cellphone and listen to a Murrur tour; a free audio archive offers offbeat tales

of the city, told by ordinary Torontonians. Dial up the number on any Murrur sign (look out for a green ear on sites in the Annex, Kensington Market and along Spadina Avenue) and get the lowdown on the likes of 285 Spadina, once the notorious Victory Burlesque theatre, or 511 Bloor Street West, Dooney's Café, which locals saved from being colonized by Starbucks. For a map of the sites, visit www.murrurtoronto.ca.

Discover the secret city with Graeme Parry's Laneway Tour (bi-monthly from June to September, visit www.graemeparry.com/laneways). These 45-minute bike rides run through such lanes as Croft Street, named for John Croft, the only man killed in the Great Fire of 1904, and now known for its cutting-edge home design.

For a natural history of Toronto, try a tree-appreciation tour offered by Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests (\$10 each, minimum of 15 people, 416-413-9244). The English Elms tour gives a flavour of the city's colonial past: these century-old trees, foreign to Canada, were planted by British immigrants to remind them of the old country. Tree tours of your own neighbourhood can be arranged by request. Lost Rivers tours (www.lostrivers.ca) tell how Toronto's settlement was shaped by such waterways as the buried Garrison Creek and Burke Brook, which still makes a brief appearance in Alexander Muir Gardens (page 80).