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TORONTO, Ont.----A young friend just married a huge sports fan. He's the kind of guy who likes to drive around North America taking in essential sites like minor league baseball stadiums in Toledo, Ohio. She, not so much.

But the promise of travel over the next 50 years gives her a chance to shop, sightsee and check out regional cuisine.

This prevents any marriage from becoming cold steel on ice.

The Hockey Hall of Fame is the perfect place for such a deal. The hall of fame opened in 1993 at Brookfield Place in downtown Toronto. The soul of the hall is where the Stanley Cup resides -- under a stained glass skylight inside a Bank of Montreal building. Constructed in 1885, this part of the hall had been the oldest bank building in North America. The rest of the museum is adjacent to an office and retail complex and expansive food court.

Brookfield Place also is linked to the Allen Lambert Galleria, a dazzling six-story light and glass building designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, on board for the Chicago Spire.

The downtown hockey hall has become one of Toronto's top tourist attractions. My summer visit is on my mind because it is cold in Chicago. And the Blackhawks host the outdoor Winter Classic on New Year's Day before 41,000 fans at a sold-out Wrigley Field.

A Chicago angle is apparent the minute you enter the Hockey Hall of Fame.

One of the first things I saw was smiling Blackhawk Bill Mosienko, the pucks and stick from his fastest hat trick -- three goals in one game -- in National Hockey League (NHL) history. Mosienko did it in 21 seconds in March 1952 at Madison Square Garden. The only thing the exhibit is missing is the hats or fedoras fans throw on the ice to commemorate the feat.

The Hockey Hall of Fame left the Canadian National Exhibition area in 1993.

"One of the main reasons we moved was because hockey was growing around the world and happening every day," said Philip Pritchard, Hockey Hall of Fame curator and vice president of Resource Center. "We had outgrown our facilities at Exhibition Place. We had 6,500 square feet there.

"Today we have 75,000 square feet. Now we're in an ideal location. And six years after our move, the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team move their arena across the street from us. The bank building is a historical site. For guests that come through,

not only hockey fans, but architectural fans, it is unbelievable when you walk through that building." Pritchard said the hall attracts just more than 300,000 visits annually, evenly divided between Canada and the United States.

The Hockey Hall of Fame was established in 1943. It has about 7,800 artifacts and about 60 percent are on display at any one time.

I caught the 500th and 600th career goal sticks from Blackhawk Hall of Famer Bobby Hull. I got a static charge out of the wool and polycotton sweaters hockey coaches used to wear. I took a snapshot of Tommy Ivan's natty red Blackhawks sweater with black trim. He coached the Blackhawks to their last Stanley Cup Championship in 1961.

Memo to the NHL: bring this fashion exclusive back.

"The hockey sweater provided warmth as well," Pritchard said. "They are beautiful and very classy. It dates back to 1875 when the first hockey game was played. Today the coaches wear the suit and tie."

There are 300 members in the Hockey Hall of Fame. About 150 of them are players, the rest are "builders of the game," such as coaches and officials. I tracked down Tony Esposito, the Blackhawk goalie of my youth. I emulated his butterfly drops while playing pickup games on the frozen DuPage River in Naperville. "Tony O.," as he was called, was a 1988 inductee into the Hockey Hall of Fame. He donated the goalie sticks from his 50th, 60th and 76th career shutouts.

"The hall is only for the elite," Esposito said from his home in St. Petersburg, Fla. "You feel proud. I've visited the hall about 12, 15 times in the last few years. I look at things like the old sticks. How could they ever shoot with them? Back in the '40s they were straight bones not curved as today. They probably used one stick for 10 games."

Esposito played college hockey at Michigan Tech University in Houghton, Mich. On weekends he would drive eight hours to Chicago to see his older brother Phil play with the Blackhawks. After games he would head out with Blackhawk goalie Glenn Hall to learn about the game. "We'd go to Stimac's in Hillside," he said. "Glenn used to go there. We'd drink some beers and philosophize about goaltending."

The highlight of my visit to the hockey hall was having my picture taken with the Stanley Cup in the hallowed halls of the bank building. The 3-foot high silver cup is awarded every year to the NHL champions.

How cool is that?

I've never seen a World Championship baseball trophy. I'm a Cubs fan.

Visitors cannot touch the cup. Only the victors are allowed to lift the 35-pound

trophy. But then I got to wondering. Over the summer I saw former Blackhawk Chris Chelios hoist the Stanley Cup at Wrigley Field and U.S. Cellular Field (in one day, I was at both games). What cup is that? I learned that on the rare occasions the Stanley Cup leaves Toronto, an identical version is placed in the museum. Visitors are told this -- if they ask questions about the cup.

The hushed former bank vault displays origins of the cup, including the original silver and gold Stanley Cup bowl and the first cup ring given to players. "The Stanley Cup is one of the most unique sports trophies in the world," Pritchard said. "It's 115 years old. What distinguishes it is that everyone who has won the cup has his name on it. All the other sports make a new trophy for each winner."

The Stanley Cup was donated to hockey by Lord Stanley of Preston, the former governor general of Canada. There are 12 women who have their names engraved on the cup.

As with all good museums, the Hockey Hall of Fame is ramping up interactive exhibits. Inside a faux-ice rink surface complete with rink boards and a scoreboard, fans can take slapshots at life-size video projections of former Blackhawk goalie Ed Belfour and others.

Or you can be a goalie and have Hall of Famers Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier shoot on you through shooting projections. In the free TSN (Toronto Sports Network) /RDS (Reseau des Sports) Broadcast Zone I sat in as a Lloyd Pettitesque play-by-play announcer to call historic goals from Bobby Baun and Bobby Orr. I e-mailed my play-by-play to my home account, where it was alive for a couple of weeks.

"Interaction is one of the main parts of the Hockey Hall of Fame," said Pritchard, who has been at the hall for 20 years. "It's different than museums of the past where you visualize everything. Today it's all computers and technology."