



Cold Comforts

Don't like winter, eh? These Canadian outings will inspire you to break out of hibernation mode and enjoy the snap of the season.

BY SARAH TUFF DUNN

Squeak, squeak, squeak. That's the sound of my boots crunching through the fresh snowfall. It's a clear, crisp mid-February morning, and I'm gearing up for a day of backcountry skiing at Mont-Édouard in Québec.

I take in the frosty air, pause to gawk at sun-drenched ice chunks on the St. Lawrence River, and wonder what surprises the day will bring. A breakfast of *croissants au chocolat*, crêpes with local maple syrup, and cups of steaming coffee at the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu has me fueled and fired up to explore the wonders hidden in the hills of Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean.

These are a few of the sounds, sights, and smells of the season when Québec chills to its arctic core, opening a slew of adventure opportunities: cross-country and backcountry skiing

in the mountains near the Fjord-du-Saguenay, snowshoeing and winter running in the streets of Montréal, and ending the day with a refreshing soak in a thermal-fed spa.

A lover of winter sports, I'd grown bored by the standard routine of skiing the mountains near my Vermont home and struggled to get motivated to venture outside. So, I've crossed the border to learn how my northern neighbors embrace *l'hiver*.

Something's Afoot in Montréal

My winter wanderings begin in Montréal, where Le Saint-Sulpice Hôtel in the Old Port district provides a perfect base camp for exploring the city on foot. On a Friday evening, it's numbingly cold, but city dwellers seem undeterred, simply ducking into a watering hole to warm up before heading back outside to move their bodies



Winter wonderlands, Montréal and Québec attract visitors looking to ski and skate, party at winter carnivals, and relax in charming inns.

some more. It's Igloofest — an enormous annual celebration of electronic music and dance — and the *pom-pom toques* (as French Canadians call winter hats) are bopping amid crystalline castles on the frozen St. Lawrence.

On Saturday morning, I lace up my sneakers and go for a run. I want to see some of the city's famous landmarks while getting in a workout. I begin nervously prancing over the snow-covered cobblestones but find my footing as I pass the Notre-Dame Basilica, the Montréal Science Centre, and the Place Jacques-Cartier. Winter running in a snow-covered city, I discover, is a great way to explore an unfamiliar locale while tuning in to its cultural rhythms.

Later that day, I meet tour guide Thom Seivewright, who drives me from the hotel to Mont Royal Park, a 470-acre mountain greenspace designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the creator of New York's Central Park. "Mont Royal Park is a winter wonderland," Seivewright says. "It allows you to escape the city while never leaving it. As you cross-country

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ski or snowshoe on the triple-peaked hill, you'll catch glimpses of the city below through the trees. I absolutely love this mountain and can't help but feel lucky to have something so unique at my doorstep."

At a pavilion by Beaver Lake, where families are ice skating and playing hockey, we rent snowshoes and are soon clomping happily along the trails. The breathtaking views of the city remind me to use the snowshoes gathering dust in my garage when I return home.

Sliding and Gliding

Mont Grand-Fonds is known as one of the little gems of the many ski areas sprinkled throughout Québec. At first glance I'm underwhelmed: The lifts look slow; the runs look short. But my guide, Yves — a bearded bon vivant who skis like an Olympian — takes me higher up the mountain, where the surprisingly steep pitches are smothered in deep snow. I feel like a kid as I dance through thigh-high powder before slaking my hunger with naan and sausages in a nearby cabin.

"I wasn't sure what to expect, but I was pleasantly surprised by Mont Grand-Fonds," British Columbia resident Mark Mackay tells me later. "The runs were short but packed with fun features to test your skill; the snow

was way beyond expectations, with perfect fluffy powder to lose yourself in. The resort was welcoming with a great local vibe of passionate skiers."

After a night of rest and relaxation at Le Manoir Richelieu, we venture farther north to Mont-Édouard, which has only three lifts and only a few miles of groomed trails. It also boasts a brand-new backcountry area that allows skiers to skin up and slide down pristine pillows of snow.

Having never tried climbing skins before, I'm pleasantly surprised by how easy it is to slip them over my skis and how well they grip the snow — and a bit unpleasantly surprised by how difficult the climbing is. I'm sweating through my layers as I tackle the uphill switchbacks, and occasionally find myself toppling over sideways on the tight turns. The payoff, however, is more powder: Once I reach the top, I strip off the skins, clamp my heels into the bindings, and float among the trees, even giddier than the day before.

A third ski area, Le Valinouët, also benefits from the microclimate surrounding the Fjord-du-Saguenay, formed 950 million years ago as a glacier cut through the bedrock.

Snow is abundant, as is a genuine friendliness among local skiers who

AT HOME WITH THE COLD

Even if a trek north isn't possible this season, there are some easy ways to embrace winter closer to home.

- **Gear up.** The proper winter attire makes chilling in the cold more enjoyable.
- **Find a trail.** Go running, snowshoeing, or cross-country skiing at a regional park.
- **Hit the ice.** Lace up your skates for some figure eights or a game of hockey.
- **Take the plunge.** Warm up after your outdoor activities by stepping into a sauna or dipping into a whirlpool. Check local health clubs and gyms, spas, and holistic-health centers for availability.
- **Wine and dine.** Enjoy a meal and a hot beverage with friends.
- **See stars.** Top off your day by taking an evening walk and enjoying some stargazing.

Head Out

share the secrets of their playground. We find ourselves carving long, giant-slalom turns on freshly groomed corduroy snow, too exhilarated to really notice that the temperature is about 20 below.

Traditions With a Twist

Little do I know, gleefully brushing frozen droplets from my eyelashes at Le Valinouët, how warm I will soon be. Our après-ski session involves a short drive to L'Eternel Spa, a Scandinavian-style retreat that introduces guests to the rituals of rotating through hot and cold stages to maximize wellness and relaxation. In bathing suits and robes, we listen to the attendant suggest we spend 10 minutes getting *chaud* in the sauna, then getting *froid* in an icy pool for 15 seconds, and then stretching out for 10 minutes before a soak in the spa *chaud* for another 10 minutes.

Full disclosure: I skip the first three parts and head straight for the outdoor hot tub, a fantasy land of neon lights glowing through the layers of snowfall.

"I've been to more than a dozen Nordic-style spas in Québec, from the largest to the most beautifully decorated," explains Ottawa native Bruce Sach. "And if I could have one installed in my backyard, this would be it. Perfectly designed, subtle, simple, and extremely hot. The wet spa was just steps from the freezing-cold dipping pool, and the dry sauna in all its subtle beauty was next door in the same building as one of the principal relaxation areas, which had a roaring fire and swings."

It's dark now, the first stars pinpricking the night sky. More constellations will come, and I'm eager to see them from a unique viewing spot — a skylight in my own personal yurt at Imago Village. Only a few hundred yards from L'Eternel Spa, it's yet another happy surprise. I'd



expected flimsy walls, a rickety bed, and chilly wooden floors. Instead, I find thick insulation, furnishings right out of an issue of *Dwell*, and a kitchenette. Each of the five yurts provides a luxurious glamping experience in the Valin Mountains.

Imago Village also includes a simple bar that serves its guests as well as local snowmobilers. There's a convivial atmosphere in the early evening, as the *cinq à sept* happy hour winds to a close. My traveling companions and I share fondue, and say *bonne nuit* as we retreat to our yurts. Alas, there isn't more stargazing tonight as the skylight is completely covered with snow. No matter — I'm too tired to even climb up to my bed in the loft.

The next morning I drive to Québec City to catch a flight home. But there's one more thing I want to try: the cheese curds found in poutine, Québec's famous dish of French fries and curds topped with gravy. I stop at a *dépanneur*, a convenience shop, to pick up a packet and pop a handful into my mouth. I'm delighted one more time by the sound and the sensation of winter in Canada: *squeak, squeak, squeak.* ♦

A QUÉBÉCOIS QUEST

Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu

www.fairmont.com

Lodging begins at \$349/night.

Le Saint-Sulpice Hôtel

www.lesaintsulpice.com

Lodging begins at \$285/night.

Imago Village

www.imagovillage.com

Lodging begins at \$150/night.

L'Eternel Spa

www.leternelspa.com

Prices vary by treatment; massages begin at \$75.

Mont-Édouard

www.montedouard.com

Adult day tickets are \$45.

Mont Grand-Fonds

www.montgrandfonds.com

Rates vary by activity.

Mont Royal

www.lemontroyal.qc.ca

Rates vary by activity.

Le Valinouët

www.valinouet.qc.ca

Rates vary by activity.

