

TravelLife

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DISCOVERIES
SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN, QUEBEC

Snow Much Fun!

BY TARA NOLAN

You can't help but love winter when you visit the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region of Quebec



Snow ghosts at Parc National des Monts-Valin

Arctic wolves at Aventuraid

THE CHAIN LINK FENCE GATE CLANGS SHUT BEHIND ME AND I REALIZE I'M HOLDING MY BREATH. I'M IN A LITTLE "ANTECHAMBER" OF SORTS. ANOTHER GATE WILL LEAD ME INTO AN ENCLOSURE WHERE SEVERAL ARCTIC WOLVES ARE EITHER ROAMING AROUND THE PERIMETER THROUGH THE SNOW OR AGGRESSIVELY SNARLING AND NIPPING AT EACH OTHER (SOME OF THE FEMALES HAPPEN TO BE IN HEAT).

I've never been much of a dog person, so wolves require a whole other level of bravery. But this encounter at **Aventuraid** (aventuraid.qc.ca) in Girardville seems like such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I'm determined to participate. Owner Gilles Granal has given us instructions on what to do. He also emphasized earlier that he reserves the right to refuse any guest entry if he feels they could be in danger. He's already gone in to do a test run of sorts, feeling out the mood of the wolves today. After having spent countless hours among them, he's able to determine how he thinks they'll react around guests.

The gate opens and I file in slowly with my back to the fence. I need to allow the wolves to

come to me. I take a deep breath and pull myself together—I feel like I should be calm and collected and file in with about four other guests.

Delightful and exhilarating would be how I'd describe the experience—and disbelief at the fact that I'm *hanging out with wolves*. Once they've calmed down around their new visitors, the wolves put on a domestic air by nudging our legs looking for ear rubs and rolling over in the snow, practically begging us to rub their bellies.

A long time ago, I decided if I'm going to live in Ontario, I need to embrace winter. So I've brought all my hard-core winter gear—snowsuit, balaclava, double-lined gloves, long johns and other warm woollies for snowy adventures in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region of Quebec. Located over 450 kilometres north of Quebec City, this is the third largest region in the province and a magnet for outdoor enthusiasts with its three national parks, the sandy summer beaches of Lac Saint-Jean and the Saguenay Fjord, which starts at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River.

Over a home-cooked dinner, which Gilles has brought down from the main house where he lives with his wife, my little group learns about how Gilles acquired his first wolves as puppies, kind of by accident. His first small pack has grown to three packs. In one enclosure, the wolves won't go near



My A-frame cabin at Aventuraid

Gilles, but in the enclosure I was in today, that pack of wolves has imprinted to him, ready to meet the public so he can demystify the wolf to guests. Gilles considers himself a teacher and brings hours of personal research and experience of their behaviour to the table. "Giving people a good life experience is gratifying," he says. Gilles also has a kennel with dogs that are ready for dogsledding excursions.

Later on that evening, as I tuck myself in to a little A-frame cabin on the property, I'm stopped dead in my tracks by a cacophonous yet organized howl-fest. Half-buried in snow, my accommodations are nestled in the forest on the outside of one of the wolf enclosures, so they're close. In the morning, I stumble through a deep layer of snow that fell overnight. This is the type of snowfall that has become rarer in Southern Ontario and I'm absolutely loving the deep, fluffy powder.

With **Équinox Aventure** (equinoxaventure.ca), based out of Alma, I add even more warm layers with a snowmobile suit, boots and helmet. I hop on a snowmobile and go zipping along some of the 5,000 kilometres of regional and provincial trails that ring the Lac-Saint-Jean region. This is a popular winter pastime and many will take these backroad trails on multi-day excursions, planning ahead of time where they will stay.

The spirit of winter pervades the **Village sur Glace** in Roberval, where each winter, for the last 13 years, about 200 cabins are built on the ice in a bay on frozen Lac-Saint-Jean. And these aren't mere ice fishing huts. Each cabin is decorated, showing the owners' winter style. And if they have put a special sticker in a window, stating that tourists are welcome, you can give a knock and step inside to warm up. In one cozy hut, a couple of elderly gentlemen are playing checkers, steaming mugs close at hand. A little kitchenette means they can prepare small meals and hot drinks. It's like we've stepped into someone's living room.

A kilometre of hiking trails and a one-kilometre skating rink are at the heart of this little winter neighbourhood. It even has a post office—the only temporary one in Canada.

At **Parc National des Monts-Valin** (sepaq.com/pq/mva/), I've come to see the ghosts. After fuelling up at the Discovery and Visitors Centre, a snowcat (basically a truck with bulldozer-like grips for wheels) takes us up the mountain to the base of the Vallée des Fantômes where I strap on snowshoes, grab some poles and start a three-kilometre hike up the mountain. It's literally breathtaking, as my group gains 300 metres of elevation. The weather is not quite right to completely cover the trees—this is where the "ghosts" are formed. But we're still in awe of the depth of snow (we're standing on about three



A view of the Saguenay Fjord from Pourvoirie du Cap au Leste

metres of hardpack) and the treetops laden with smooth mounds of snow.

The sun sets as we near the top and a cold, wintry view far below awaits. Heading back down the mountain, but not far from the top, a warming hut beckons. Our guide, Robert Fluet, warms cookies on the woodstove, which is also warming some frozen toes.

The descent seems endless as we know a hot fire at the Antoine-Dubuc Lodge and a hot fondue dinner await. Single beds make for a camp-like experience, but the cabin itself, though visually rustic, is warm and cozy with a well-appointed, new kitchen. And though there's one spot where I can wave my phone and kind of get a signal, it's also a great place to disconnect and just enjoy the peacefulness of this retreat.

The next morning, a one-hour drive leads to the next accommodations. The **Pourvoirie du Cap au Leste** (capauleste.com/en) also features a rustic ambiance, but you can drive to this property with its private rooms in wooden chalets, a main dining room serving traditional Quebecois meals, a brand new spa, and, if you happen to be in the bar at the right time, live music. Here I'm able to relax and reflect on my snow-filled escape where, despite the freezing cold and deep deep snow, you can't help but embrace winter and all the outdoor activities this lively and slightly remote region has to offer.



Snowmobiles ready for tour at Équinox Aventure



A boat gliding through a trail cut through the ice on the Saguenay Fjord