

Embracing Montreal's frosty party scene

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VICTOR DIAZ-LAMICH

The winter festival called Montreal en Lumiere.

By [Christopher Muther](#) | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 26, 2016

MONTREAL — There is a memorable scene in “The Empire Strikes Back” when Han Solo picks up Luke Skywalker’s light saber on the icy planet of Hoth, slices open the belly of Luke’s dead tauntaun, and stuffs his friend into the gooey guts of the creature to ward off frostbite.

Stay with me, non-“Star Wars” fans. This is not a story about space movies or killing innocent snow lizards for personal warmth. I bring up this smidge of science fiction because I experienced my own tauntaun moment — minus the gooey guts — in Montreal this winter when I burrowed deep into a crowd of people dancing outside in ridiculously cold weather.

This was at Igloofest, an outdoor electronic music festival that not only embraces the city’s frigid winter, but essentially says “Is that all you’ve got, Jack Frost?” (in French, of course) while making a rude hand gesture.

Once I started dancing along with the horde, which is unbelievably challenging when wearing four layers of long underwear, I started to feel the body heat of those around me. I also began to understand the appeal of Igloofest and how it has stuck around for 10 years despite occurring in temperatures better suited for preserving a side of beef than fraternizing on the dance floor. The event takes place over four weekends in January and February.

“We gave them a reason to party and enjoy because there weren’t many outdoor events during the wintertime,” said Nicolas Cournoyer. “Over the years, people just realized that winter could be fun. Now there’s more and more events. It’s good spirit for the city. People just now embrace the winter.”

For New Englanders who are mourning the scarcity of winter 2016, there is still an opportunity to get in on Montreal’s chilly outdoor festival scene.

Montreal en Lumiere (that means “in light” in case your French is a bit rusty) is exactly what it sounds like. Most public spaces in the city are lit up every weekend (the event runs through March 5) and pulsing with denizens who are out and participating in the hundreds of events. The happenings are divided into three categories: food, free outdoor events, and concerts.



The way to best enjoy Montreal en Lumiere is to first admit that no matter how ambitious and energetic you think you are, you will not get to every event you want. After coming to that somewhat depressing revelation, it's time to sit down with the event schedule and construct a realistic plan of action.

If you're there this weekend or next (that's a subtle hint that you should go north and enjoy the last crazy days of this extravaganza) and you're a first-timer, there are a few essential activities to place on your lengthy list.



A festival favorite is the 120-yard urban slide that cuts through Place-des-Arts Esplanade. There is a zipline that goes over the main festival site so you can take in all the lights from above, and the China ferris wheel on Rue Sainte-Catherine offers a broader (if not chillier) view of the city. There are outdoor bars with both booze and Belgian waffles (although sadly not at the same location).

When you start planning your trip for next year, it's important to focus your time around Nuit Blanche, the centerpiece of Montreal en Lumiere. Nuit Blanche is an all-night affair that can break the stamina of the heartiest of partiers. In 2016, Nuit Blanche featured night swimming at a secret rooftop pool, an adult prom, bars open until 6 a.m., a 24-hour vinyl night, a black-and-white movie night, a freak show (hello bearded ladies!), a ski slope created on Rue Saint-Denis aptly called Crayski, a flashlight tour of the Redpath Museum, an erotic art exhibition, and so many food-focused fetes that you will likely add Jenny Craig to your list of contacts by the next morning.

These parties represent a shift for a metropolis that built an underground city, a labyrinth of subterranean shopping malls and passageways in the 1960s to help residents escape the cold. Those malls and tunnels are still popular paths, but they are no longer seen as the only thing to do in winter.

"We don't really promote the underground city the same way we once did," said Laurent Saulnier, vice president of programming and production at Montreal en Lumiere. "People grew tired of cocooning and TV. I think at some point along the way people started thinking 'It's OK to be outside in January,' and it snowballed from there."

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