



Travel

Quebec's Mont-Mégantic National Park is one of the best places on the planet to stargaze

By Paul Abercrombie November 3



Quebec's Mont-Mégantic Observatory is mostly used for research, and rarely open to the public. A few nights a year, anyone can peer through its large telescope for a celestial treat. (cantons-de-L'Est/Dominique Harnegnies Photothèque Vidéotheque)

Most families choose vacation spots for what they offer. You could say ours picked one for what it lacks: light. Specifically, the kind of illumination produced by umpteen electric bulbs.

Eager to really see the night sky (not just be able to pick out a few stars) with my wife and son, last summer we visited Quebec's Mont-Mégantic National Park, site of the International Dark-Sky Association's first International Dark Sky Reserve. With little ambient light, the park is one of the darkest — and best — places on the planet to stargaze.

Even before our now-teenage son Ewan could walk, he loved gawking skyward, often from a BabyBjorn carrier during predawn strolls around our neighborhood. “Moon” was among the first words he spoke. Since then, planetarium visits and TV science programs on celestial marvels had only whetted our appetites.

While there are dozens of other excellent places for stargazing, we decided that a trip north to Canada would also be a dandy excuse to get our fix of French-inflected culture and food.

So last August, in much the same way folks are venturing to the planet’s poles to experience glaciers before they are gone, we joined the growing ranks of astrotourists keen to experience night skies free from light pollution.

On the drive south from Quebec City Jean Lesage International Airport over a few hours, we lose count of the snowmobile and deer-crossing signs we pass. Ditto for the number of houses with rows of stacked firewood beside them.



With little ambient light, the park is one of the darkest — and best — places on the planet to stargaze.
(Hemis/Alamy Stock Photo)

It's midday when we arrive at Au Vaillantbourg, a bed-and-breakfast located just outside the park in the hamlet of Notre-Dame-des-Bois. We drop our bags in our century-old rooms and head out to explore. Which, given the size of this village and others we had passed on the way, takes just long enough to build up a thirst. With a bottle of Alsatian pinot gris we scored at the general store a few doors down, we retreat to the inn's big back porch. We gaze out at verdant Mont Mégantic from our hangout for the next two nights.

Sun setting and air cooling, we head downstairs and through the backyard garden to a cozy shack for a dinner of tomato and watermelon gazpachos, smoked trout quiche and salads, whose greens, like most food served here, come from the property's gardens — and chicken and turkey pens. Dazed by delicious homemade blueberry pie and maple syrup ice cream desserts, we realize we're running late and lead-foot the short drive to ASTROLab, at the base of Mont Mégantic.

Five minutes into an hour-long TED-Talk-like multimedia presentation about the cosmos, in French, I'm kicking myself for not taking the language more seriously in high school. But as educator Philippe Robert-Staehler explains in perfect English as we head outside for the second part of our program, "When you go outside to see the sky, we can all speak the same universal language of the stars."



The Popular Observatory is in the International Dark-Sky Association's first International Dark Sky Reserve. (Guillaume Poulin)

Through a trio of tripod-mounted telescopes, we take turns peeking at reddish Mars and ringed Saturn along with one of its moons, Titan.

Done with the telescopes, we notice that the sky has grown darker. And a ridiculous number of stars and planets appear as if on cue. I glance over at my wife, Gail, and Ewan. They look the same way I feel: awed.

Instructor Remi Boucher points out a curiously brassy-hued little object zipping by. A satellite, he says. It would be the first of a handful we'll see over the next two nights.

The sky darker still, the Milky Way reveals itself, a cloudlike band of lights spanning the sky. "This is our galaxy, seen from the inside," says Philippe, pointing out constellations I had only seen in books or on TV.

We lie in the cool grass, watching the cosmic light

show.

Late that night, while drifting off to sleep, I imagine I can still see it.

The next morning brings more absurdly good food, homemade yogurt with fresh raspberries and blackberries, poached eggs over maple syrup-cured ham hash and homemade spelt-bread toast with jelly made from local wild lingonberries. When innkeeper François notices that Ewan likes the edible flowers garnishing his plate, he brings more to share. We agree that they taste like mangoes.

Fortified, we spend the day exploring the area by car and hiking up nearby Mont-Saint-Joseph. We encounter a doe and her fawn crossing the road on our way back to the B&B for a snooze.

Back at the base of Mont Mégantic that evening, we join a dozen-odd other visitors for the 15-minute ride up the steep and twisting mountain road in a big orange and black school bus.

Atop the mountain, we crowd inside the spaceshiplike Popular Observatory, taking turns spying celestial wonders through a telescope the size of a large fridge.



Visitors can experience the night sky free from light pollution. (Hemis/Alamy Stock Photo)

Though most of our ponytailed guide Olivier Menard's words are lost on us, his boyish enthusiasm needs no translation. I'm confident that I've added to my meager French vocabulary the term "amas globulaire," or globular cluster, after he shows us a shimmering collection of ancient stars on the edge of our galaxy.

Like the night before, we most enjoy the sky outside. The heavens appear more vibrant tonight, the Milky Way yet more generous. From a wooden bench, we huddle in the chilly air, looking heavenward. Gail spots a shooting star. "Amazing" is a word we can't stop whispering to each other.

Back at our B&B late that night, we agree with Ewan that the best way to stargaze is while lying on your back. All that craning your neck while seated can give you a crick. Stargazer's Neck, we dub it. Or as we jokingly try to translate it into French, Mal de Megantic.

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IF YOU GO

Where to stay

Au Vaillantbourg

12 Rue Principale Ouest,

Notre-Dame-des-Bois

1-819-888-1001

auvaillantbourg.com

Cozy, century-old home located at the foot of Mont-Megantic. Most ingredients for proprietor and chef Melanie Champoux's inventive multicourse meals at this bed-and-breakfast come from her garden. Four rooms available in the main house, along with a charming cottage. Rooms start at about \$40.

What to do

Mont-Megantic National Park

189 Route du Parc,

Notre-Dame-des-Bois

1-800-665-6527

astrolab.qc.ca

The world's first International Dark Sky Reserve, the park is also home to a pair of observatories, one of which is open to the public. Besides attracting stargazers, the park draws (depending on the season) fans of hiking, skiing and snowshoeing. Lodging includes camp sites, huts and a handful of cabins. Tickets for stargazing activities run \$21 for adults, free for kids 17 and younger. Reservations recommended.

Information

notredamedesbois.qc.ca

— P.A.