

Quebec City in winter

A GLORIOUS WONDERLAND

BY AMY BERTRAND
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

QUEBEC CITY • The castle-like chateau dominates the landscape, snow-covered and majestic. The St. Lawrence River undulates under frozen ice caps, back and forth, forward and backward. The charming shops line snowy streets with hints of brick and cobblestone poking through. Quebec City in winter weaves a spectacular spell of sheer magic.

Its mix of architecture, history, art and French culture make the Canadian provincial capital feel like Europe, at half the travel time and a fraction of the cost. One of North America's oldest European settlements, Quebec City may be rooted in its French heritage, but it has clearly created its own identity.

"It's not Europe, but it sure does look like it," said our guide, Tony Gagnon, who gives tours with *Il était une Fois Kebec*. He speaks both English and French fluently, as do most people in the tourism sector in Quebec. But the native language is French. "I always say the best way to see Quebec is to eat and drink your way around."

With that in mind, I'd recommend starting your visit with a dinner at Ciel, for "sky" (Cielbistrobar.com), on the trendy Grande-Allée (clear weather is a must as are reservations on a weekend). It's not just another rotating restaurant on the upper floor of a tall building. Its menu is a successfully eclectic twist on French cuisine.

But the reason to visit the restaurant are the views, especially in winter: A 360-degree look at the river, mountains and city. The St. Lawrence River, which was important for Quebec City both commercially and historically with the military, has tides that keep the ice caps flowing all winter long. They also cause it to flow forward and backward. It's a sight to behold, especially from 28 stories up.

All around are historic buildings — Parliament, Cathedral-Basilica of Notre-Dame, the Citadelle — but it's the

area with no buildings that caught my attention: the snowy fields of the Plains of Abraham. In the summer, it's a 240-acre green space commemorating the 1759 battle between the French and British Empires in North America. It includes gardens, greenhouses and a museum that tells the story of the battle. But in the winter, especially from above, it's just fields and fields of snow. You can take a guided snowshoe tour or cross country skiing tour on its trails. Or skate on its rink. Skis, snowshoes and skates are all available for rent if you want to tour on your own. (Theplainsofabraham.ca)

Winter may seem like an odd time to travel so far north from St. Louis, and indeed I'm sure Quebec City is lovely in the other seasons, but the wonders of winter, with four feet of snow covering everything, gave it a magical, pristine feeling. Winter wonderland isn't just an expression. The average yearly snowfall is over 13 feet, and snow is usually on the ground from Thanksgiving to April.

THE CHÂTEAU

Called the "most photographed hotel in the world" by several tourist websites, the Fairmont Le Château Frontenac (fairmont.com/Frontenac/Quebec-City) sits on the Dufferin Terrace, built near the Citadelle and towering above the river. It's the most prominent feature in the Quebec skyline, and it first opened in 1893. Portions were added over the years, so it now hosts 611 upscale hotel rooms, a number of conference rooms and restaurants as well as a spa. It's undergoing a renovation that blends its charming past with modern amenities. The rooms, which start at about \$309 Canadian during the 2018 Winter Carnival, aren't large but are well-appointed, and the service is impeccable.

Outside the hotel sits an ice skating rink (bring your own skates) where kids can play hockey until the wee hours and warm up with a hot cocoa at the Au 1884 coffee shop. Get tickets there (\$3 Canadian each) for the famous toboggan next door. Grab

your sled and haul it up a fairly steep hill. An attendant helps you situate everything, but don't forget to take in the view of the gorgeous St. Lawrence River, because you won't notice it as you fly at 70 mph down the ride, landing right back at the coffee shop.

Aside from the ornate beauty inside the hotel's common areas, its location is the big draw. It is within walking distance of Parliament, the parks that host the Winter Carnival, the shops and restaurants along Rue St. Louis and Rue St. Jean and a funicular (an angled elevator built in 1879) ride to the Petit Champlain, the lower area near the river and my favorite part of the city.

As soon as your foot hits the brick streets of the Petit Champlain, you know you are in for a treat. To the right, rows of stone buildings house adorable shops (some, kitschy and touristy, some with wares by true artisans) and quaint restaurants. To the left, a pub that looks straight out of a Dickens novel, with stone walls, a cozy fireplace and a friendly bartender. Straight ahead, more shops, restaurants and ice sculptures leading to a park with cannons aimed toward the river. The streets stay decorated for Christmas throughout the winter.

Stroll down the street ahead and turn left to enter an open courtyard known as Place Royale.

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The site of the first permanent French settlement in North America, Place Royale is full of history, starting in the early 1600s. On the square you'll find Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, the oldest stone church in North America, built in 1688. According to our guide, Gagnon, it takes more than two years to book a wedding there.

Just past that, stop to admire one of the city's gorgeous murals. The 420-square-meter Fresque des Québécois mural recounts the story of Québec City and pays homage to historic figures, authors, artists and even hockey players.

THE CARNIVAL

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, Old Québec is the only walled city north of Mexico. And the area inside those walls is surprisingly walkable, even when it's 0 degrees out. But even for Canadians, the winters can get long, so Québec City

leaders decided to do something to make the end of winter a little more exciting. After being held intermittently since 1804, the Carnaval de Québec has been celebrated annually since 1955. It coincides with what may be the city's other biggest event: the Québec International Pee-Wee Hockey Tournament, the largest in the world, bringing in thousands of the world's best 12-year-old players, some of whom will some day play in the NHL.

So with thousands of visitors and locals looking for fun, why not throw a carnival? The two-week event (Jan. 26 to Feb. 11, 2018) takes place in several parks in the city, most fairly close to one another. One area contained only ice sculptures. Another had an area for dance, music concerts and drama performances. Another, a hockey shooting contest, axe throwing and more. The carnival lasts a couple of weeks and features a number of noteworthy events, such as the ice canoe race, singles night, snow sliding and pond hockey. Several nights are set aside for the famous nighttime parade, led by Bonhomme Carnival, the festival's mascot, a somewhat creepy snowman who bears a striking resemblance to the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man. For \$15 Canadian dollars, an effigy you attach to your coat gets you into nearly everything. (carnaval.qc.ca)

OUTSIDE THE WALLS

As fascinating as the city, is, it's worth it to spend a day or more in the country. We drove about 30 minutes to Villages Vacances Valcartier. The drive alone, lined with evergreens topped with snow, is breathtaking.

Valcartier is a lodge with an indoor water park, hotel rooms and two winter attractions you don't want to miss: an ice hotel and the Winter Playground, often called Winter Park.

Think of a ski resort, only the runs are not for skiing but for tubing. And instead of scary lifts, there is an awkward pulley system where you plop down on a moving inner tube and tote another along with you. I may have possibly missed the tube a few times, to the extreme laughter of my family and friends.

Nearly 30 slopes make up the park. Some are pretty basic downhill sledding. Others use round rafts of eight people that spin or fly over dips and valleys. Then there is Everest, 110 feet in the air and

reaching speeds of almost 50 mph.

Yes, you needed to bundle up. Yes, your heart will thud heavily in anticipation of even the smallest slopes, but unlike skiing, this requires no lessons, so the whole family can have a blast (there is a separate area for the littlest kids). (Valcartier.com)

Winter Park sits behind the Village Valcartier hotel. Just a ways down, also behind the hotel, sits Hotel de Glace, the world-famous ice hotel. It appears first as four separate igloos. One is a welcome hall, another is a wedding chapel, then the grand reception hall. Behind it, you'll find a labyrinth of hallways connecting 41 rooms.

It takes 50 workers about six weeks to rebuild the hotel every year, starting in December, and every year it is different. More than 30,000 tons of snow and 500 tons of ice are needed to create this 32,000-square-foot masterpiece.

Some rooms are basic: just a bed made of ice with a furry mattress on top. The suites, though, have elaborate carvings of owls, Inuit people, Santa Claus and more on their walls. There is also a hot tub and sauna area. I was considering staying here but honestly chickened out. What if I froze? What if I couldn't sleep? Where do you go to the bathroom? Turns out, each room comes with a room at the main hotel for just those sorts of issues. Rooms start at \$250 Canadian.

You can take a guided tour of the ice hotel for a fee. Be sure to duck at the ice bar for a sip of one of the mixed beverages served in a cup made of ice. (hoteldeglace-canada.com)

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

Open year-round, the spectacular Montmorency Falls Park is just a 15-minute drive from downtown Québec City. With temperatures well, well below freezing, I expected the falls to be frozen, but amid the snowy scenery, across a frozen and snow-covered lake, the falls still gushed.

At 272 feet tall, they are taller than Niagara Falls (but not as wide). Start at the visitor center, where those who can't stand the cold can sit inside and stare out picture windows at the magnificent falls. Or spend about \$12 and take a cable car up the cliff. As you exit, take a short trail to a lookout where you can get sprayed with the water or another trail that takes a suspended bridge from one side of the falls to the other. In cold weather, you can

go ice climbing next to the falls. In warmer weather, zipline across them. (sepaq.com/montmorencyfalls)

The city boasts a number of museums and other attractions to help you while away your time. The Musée de la Civilisation (mcq.org/en/) is the most popular. Its interactive exhibits tell the story of Quebec culture and history as well as some unusual topics, including one about dogs during our visit and one about brains going on now.

The Aquarium du Québec isn't the most amazing aquarium I've been to, but it may be the most unique. You start with a fantastic jellyfish and seahorse exhibit, then move on to the stingray touch tank. Next, head outdoors (yes, in the snow) for polar bears, walrus and a seal show. Yes, outdoors. Next, on to the main building, which, though slightly dated, has an array of tanks including a three-story, 350,000-liter tank of ocean animals. (sepaq.com/ct/paq)

THE FOOD

Poutine – french fries smothered in gravy and topped with cheese curds – is the most well-known Quebec specialty. If you ask Quebec City locals where to go, they'll suggest both Ashton, a fast-food chain, and Le Chic Shack, a burger joint next to Chateau Frontenac, as the places to try them. I didn't find a poutine I didn't like. At Restaurant 1640 at L'Auberge du Trésor, the upscale eatery served it with duck confit and gouda cheese curds. At the lovely and quaint Le Lapin Sauté in Petit-Champlain, they served it with tenderly cooked rabbit.

But we found more specialties we loved: BeaverTail and maple syrup taffy. A BeaverTail, or queues de castor, is a pastry covered in all sorts of sweet goodness, almost like an open-faced doughnut. We first spotted them at the Carnival, which is also the first place we sampled the taffy. Servers line up behind a flat counter of snow, on which they ladle maple syrup in a line. You wait a few minutes, then use a wooden stick to wrap the ooey goodness around it. Heaven. Messy, but divine.

And how can we forget crepes? In Old Quebec, it seems you can find a creperie around just about every corner. On one cold, snowy night after dining at an Italian restaurant, Le Parmesan, we wandered a few streets over to Le Casse-Crêpe Breton, on Rue St. Jean. We sat down at

a booth, stone walls around us, window fogged by the toasty warmth. We wanted only sweet crepes, we told the server. She returned with an enormous one filled with strawberries and chocolate, one with butter and sugar and one with the Canadian staple, maple syrup. As I sat around looking at my family, on the spur of the

moment stop, enjoying the quaint shop, I realized that our guide was truly right. The best way to see Quebec is to eat and drink your way around it.

Amy Bertrand 314-340-8284
@abertrand on Twitter
abertrand@post-dispatch.com

IF YOU GO

Getting there • No flights go directly from St. Louis to Quebec City. A cheaper option is to fly into Montreal and then drive three hours to Quebec City, but weather is an issue in winter.

What to wear • You'll need thermal underwear, wool socks, winter boots (the good kind; don't think you can get away with Uggs), a heavy coat, a hat and gloves. We were able to walk 5 to 8 miles a day without being too cold in this gear.

Exchange rate • Check your bank for exchange rates, but at press time it was about \$1.28 Canadian = \$1 U.S.

More info • quebecregion.com/en



Fled art galleries, gift shops, restaurants and holiday decorations into February along the brick streets of the Petit Champlain.

PHOTOS BY BRIAN SERMATUROK



Carriage rides seem a perfect fit for the walled city of Quebec.



The streets of the Petit Champlain are quieter in the evening, but many restaurants and bars remain open late.



The rabbit poutine from Le Lapin Saute in Quebec City.



The Toboggan Slide Au 1884 takes you on a thrilling ride.



The 420-square-meter Fresque des Québécois mural in the Place Royale.



One of the biggest events for the city is the Québec International Pee-Wee Hockey Tournament.



Winter Park offer a variety of runs you can do with your single inner tube and a few rides with boats.



One of the rooms inside the famous Hotel de Glace.



PHOTOS BY BRIAN SIRIMATUROS

The Fairmont Le Château Frontenac sits on Dufferin Terrace and has more than 600 rooms.



The view from the funicular (sort of an angled elevator), going from Dufferin Terrace at the Chateau Frontenac and heading down to the Petit Champlain.