

The wonders of winter in Quebec City



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Art galleries, gift shops, restaurants and holiday decorations into February can be found along the brick streets of the Petit Champlain in Quebec City. (Brian Sirimaturus/St. Louis Post-Dispatch/TNS)



QUEBEC CITY - The castle-like chateau dominates the landscape, snow-covered and majestic. The St. Lawrence River undulates under frozen ice caps. 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.

Winter wonderland isn't just an expression here. The average yearly snowfall is over 13 feet, and snow is usually on the ground from Thanksgiving to April.

The city's 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 etait 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."

A sky view

With that in mind, I'd recommend starting your visit with a dinner at Ciel, for "sky" (Cielbistrobar.com), on the trendy Grande-Allee (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. All around are historic buildings - Parliament, Cathedral-Basilica of Notre-Dame, the Citadelle. The St. Lawrence River 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.

Despite the important buildings, 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 winter, especially from above, it's just fields snow. You can take a guided snowshoe 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)

The winter carnival

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, Old Quebec 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 Quebec City leaders decided to do something to make winter a little more exciting. With thousands of visitors and locals looking for fun, why not throw a carnival?

The Carnaval de Quebec, which had been held intermittently since 1894, has been celebrated annually since 1955. It coincides with what might be the city's other biggest event: the Quebec International Pee-Wee Hockey Tournament, which brings in thousands of the world's best 12-year-old players, some of whom will some day play in the NHL.

The two-week carnival (Jan. 26 to Feb. 11, 2018) takes place in several parks, most fairly close to one another. One area contained only ice sculptures. Another had an area for dance, concerts and drama performances. Another, a hockey shooting contest and ax throwing. Several nights are set aside for a parade, led by Bonhomme Carnival, the festival's mascot, a somewhat creepy snowman who resembles the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man. For 15 Canadian dollars, an effigy you attach to your coat gets you into nearly everything. (carnaval.qc.ca)

The chateau

Called the "most photographed hotel in the world" by several tourist websites, the Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac (fairmont.com/Frontenac/Quebec-City) sits on the Dufferin Terrace, built in 1893 near the Citadelle and towering above the river. It's the most prominent feature in the Quebec skyline. Portions were added over the years, so it now has 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 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 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 you hit the brick streets of the Petit Champlain, you know you're in for a treat. To the right, rows of stone buildings house quaint restaurants and adorable shops (some, kitschy and touristy, some with wares by true artisans). 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 at 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.

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 Quebecois mural recounts the story of Quebec City and pays homage to historic figures, authors, artists and even hockey players.

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.

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. Rooms start at \$259 Canadian. You can take a guided tour of the ice hotel for a fee. Be sure to stop at the ice bar for a sip of one of the mixed beverages served in a cup made of ice.

(hoteldeglace-canada.com)

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. At Restaurant 1640 at L'Auberge du Tresor, the upscale eatery served it with duck confit and gouda cheese curds.

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. Messy, but divine.

And how can we forget crepes? In Old Quebec, it seems you can find a creperie on just about every corner. On one snowy night, we wandered to Le Casse-Crepe Breton, on Rue St. Jean. 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 maple syrup. As I sat around looking at my family, on this spur of the moment stop, I realized that our guide was right. The best way to see Quebec is to eat and drink your way around it.