



A stay in Quebec City's ice hotel is an exhilarating experience

by Cortney Fries



I know it sounds crazy, but the Ice Hotel in Quebec City, Canada is worth every minute of a winter visit. Many may balk at the idea of going north to even more frigid temperatures, but I assure you it will invigorate all your senses, enchant your entire family and make you appreciate winter (and it's milder version in Chicago) even more.

Inspired by the Icehotel in Sweden, [Hotel de Glace](#) (French for "Ice Hotel") is a 45-room structure made entirely out of snow and ice that is designed to a different engaging theme each year. Canadian artists decorate the walls with ice sculptures and incredible murals, which come alive under the glow of colored lights. This year's theme is the circus. Mesmerizing renditions of jugglers, bears, elephants and entertainers literally cause visitors to gasp in astonishment as they enter each room.

Hotel de Glace is the only of its kind in North America. Situated behind the [Valcartier Hotel](#), Hotel de Glace offers tours and overnight stays. You can have a bailout room at Valcartier in case you get too cold!

With 35 snow slides of varying heights and declines, Village Vacances Valcartier, [America's largest winter playground](#), is a snow tuber's dream. There are huge snow rafts and giant circular tubes to spin down. It's the kind of place that makes you feel alive in the winter, instead of hunkered down watching movies all season. Valcartier Hotel boasts many indoor activities too -- from the Bora Park indoor water park to the restaurants, spa and arcade.

Less than a half hour away is the charming, historic treasure of Old Quebec, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the only North American city north of Mexico to remain fortified by walls. The narrow, winding cobblestone streets sparkle with snowflake lights. Chalkboard signs welcome visitors into artist shops and cafes serving French specialties. With snow sashaying down from the sky, you'll feel like you're walking into the middle of a Dickens' classic. And in the World's Snow Capital, my kids couldn't get enough tossing, rolling and climbing in the soft, buttery snow.

The cold in Quebec City can be intimidating. January and February highs are 20 degrees F at best. Our guide told us that there is no bad weather, just the wrong clothing. I tell you, I've never worn so many pairs of pants at the same time in my life. I worried my kids wouldn't appreciate this excursion, even though I thought it was a bucket list-worthy winter experience. Yet, it turned out to be one of our most incredible trips to date -- the type of vacation that astounds, begs endless questions and seals unforgettable memories of a family that dares to adventure together, even in Arctic conditions.

This was my children's first international destination. At 6 and 8 years old, they acquired their inaugural passports and attempted to learn a little French (Bonjour!). It was eye-opening for them to hear foreign words roll off the lips of little children, see menus without their familiar favorites and encounter people who fully embraced winter for all its wonders. Quebec gave my kids a taste of a unique culture close to home, and a better understanding that there is a big, diverse world out there.

We spent one evening at the lovely [Auberge Saint-Antoine hotel](#) in the heart of Old Quebec. The service was welcoming and our room well appointed, but the bathroom! There was a huge tub, rain shower and a toilet with a heated seat. Ah, does that feel good after you peel off your winter layers! Auberge Saint-Antoine even had mini robes and slippers for the kids and red teddy bears to bring home.

We rode the Funicular cable car up to Terrasse Dufferin, where there is an over-100-year old toboggan slide. We were admittedly nervous when we heard you could reach speeds up to 40 mph, but our glide down was a delightful race between mom-son team and daddy-daughter duo. [Musee de la Civilisation](#) is a fun, interactive museum with out-of-the-box kids' exhibits that, with the clever help of mirrors, allow them to do things like climb or fall from buildings.

At Hotel de Glace, the crunch of snow under your boots is often the loudest sound you hear inside the ice hotel rooms. Yet music that immediately makes you want to dance is bumping at the ice bar. Kiddie cocktails or cordials are served in ice block glasses. Lovebirds from around the world come to say their vows in the ice chapel and bubbling, steaming hot tubs assemble a Nordic Spa under the stars. It is a sight to see for all the novelty.

Did my kids sleep at the ice hotel? Children can, but mine did not because our reservation was on a night that ended up being -18 degrees. I did brave an ice bed outside in the igloo (which was 0 degrees because it's enclosed). It was an experience I'll certainly not ever forget.

Hotel de Glace supplies military-grade North Face sleeping bags to use on the ice bed mattresses. With long underwear, fleece pajamas and wool socks, I promise you my body was warm. But my face was frigid – especially my nose, which gets tricky to cover because you have to breathe and the moisture from breathing can get scarves and other materials wet and cold. My trick was to slide a neck warmer over my nose, a hat on top of my head and turn into my sleeping bag. Good night!

Because water cannot be run into the ice hotel, bathroom breaks must be taken inside the Valcartier Hotel. Mid-night bathroom escapades were my biggest worry. And I did go once that evening. The walk was brisk in the whistling air under the moon. But I was fine and able to get back to sleep quickly.

Visiting Hotel de Glace in Quebec City was an invigorating adventure. The picturesque, historic city, exhilarating snow slides and captivating artistry of the ice hotel have hypnotized me into appreciating winter more than I ever have. Even my kids highly recommend a visit.