

Canada embraces winter with zany, cold-defying festivals

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(Photo: Ottawa Tourism)

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Winter in Canada doesn't mean hibernating indoors for months on end. For Canadians it's a time to throw on layers of warm attire, get outside and embrace winter's chill. Skate along frozen rivers sipping hot cocoa, dog sled through snow-laden forests, explore whimsical ice castles. Join the celebration at these

winter festivals all across Canada.

Enchanting Ice Castles, Edmonton and Winnipeg

Imagine walking through a castle created entirely out of ice? You can explore these crystalline castles in two Canadian cities, Winnipeg and Edmonton. Each magical castle is made from over 250,000 pounds of ice. Meander through archways past towering formations filled with dangling icicles. You can even take a slippery ride on the ice slide or play king of the castle in the throne room. Try to linger till dusk when the whole castle becomes illuminated.

Winterlude Festival, Ottawa

Ottawa, Canada's capital city, knows how to put the fun in winter with Winterlude. This three-week festival (Feb. 2-19) is filled with an array of wintery activities. Head to Confederation Park's Crystal Garden for some ice carving competition magic. Watch as massive chunks of ice are transformed into works of glistening art. Glide along the Rideau Canal on the world's largest skating rink — 4.8 miles of smooth ice. If skating is not your forte, rent a sleigh, and have someone whirl you around the rink in it. You can even indulge in a sugar-fueled Beaver Tail. Invented in Ottawa, these deep-fried, sugar- and cinnamon-coated treats are a local favorite.

Sourdough Rendezvous Festival, Yukon Territory

Canada's Yukon Territory may be small in population, but it's grand in nature. Living as far north as the Yukoners do, you have to know how to roll with winter. Whitehorse's Sourdough Festival (Feb. 16-25) has been around since 1964. The event is named after the bread that was a staple of survival for the miners working in the freezing harsh winter conditions. Possibly Canada's quirkiest festival (past participants bowled a frozen turkey across ice), you can canoe over the frosty terrain, or try to cajole a bunch of huskies to take you dog sledding. You may even catch the northern lights dancing in the sky.

Quebec Winter Carnival

Quebec City, known for its history and European flare, has been home to Carnaval de Québec since 1955. This popular event (Jan. 26 - Feb. 11) is known for its famous mascot Bonhomme, a gregarious 7-foot snowman wearing a red sash. He even has his own Ice Palace, where this year you will find graffiti works of art. If you are looking for something wintery and sweet, head to the sugar shack, which serves up maple taffy, dipped in fresh white snow (Quebec is the world's top producer of maple syrup). For the brave at heart, take a ride on the 300-foot slide made from solid ice. If it's beauty you are after, massive intricate ice sculptures can be found all over the city.

Silver Skate Festival, Edmonton

Skate into winter at the Silver Skate Festival in Edmonton's River Valley (Feb. 9-19). Have you ever tried pedaling through snow? Watch how the pros navigate the terrain on fat bikes — you can give it a go on a demo bike. Take in the Dutch-rooted Kortebaans speed race. Skaters face off and sprint along the ice in pairs. Keeping to tradition, the winner gets a ham. Be sure to traverse the folk trail in the early evening for the lantern walk; you can make your own for \$2. Perhaps the most famous event of all is the Tower of Flames, built of hay and wood. These incredibly designed fire sculptures each tell a story and light up the sky on five different nights.

Festival du Voyageur, Winnipeg

Festival du Voyageur, Western Canada's biggest winter festival, transforms Winnipeg's French Quarter into one big party (Feb. 16-25). Step back in time at Fort Gibraltar. Built in 1809, this historical spot played an integral role in Canada's fur trading history. Winnipeg's Voyageur Park comes alive in tradition, with a beard growing contest, jugglers carrying fire, sleigh rides and kitchen parties where you can sing, dance and stomp your feet while the fiddle plays.

Montréal en Lumière

Montreal is home to one of the largest winter festivals in the world, Montréal en Lumière. From Feb. 22 to March 4, this Canadian eclectic city literally lights up. For the adventurous spirit, hop on the huge lait urban slide (milk slide). It's over 100 yards long and runs through the city center. You can even go ziplining through the air, with illuminated works of art and snow below you. Don't miss a ride on Montreal's newest attraction — the Observation Wheel in the city's Old Port. Have your camera handy to snap photos of the panoramic views while seated toasty-warm in the heated gondolas.