

JOURNEYS

It's Back to Nature at Rustic Spas in Quebec

By ELAINE GLUSAC

A SOFT summer rain stippled the surface of the lake. As I towed off my racer-back Speedo after a chilly swim, I spotted a muskrat busy building a nest beneath the willows. As campsites go, this clearing 30 miles northeast of Quebec City in the foothills of the Laurentian Mountains offered tranquility. Except it wasn't a backcountry destination — it was a spa with a wild streak.

Zonespa, the site of that gentle rain shower, is among the many Canadian spas that take the Scandinavian sauna ritual as inspiration but expand on it to include aquatic therapies like warm whirlpools, bracing cascades and piping steam baths, placing them all in the midst of the north woods. Tapping Canada's natural resources, Nordic spas use rivers, ponds and lakes as additional therapy pools. The rustic theme extends to services: none offer manicures, and massages tend to be of the straightforward Swedish variety.

But within this organic theme lies variation, as I discovered last summer on a four-day stay exploring the lakes and rivers of Quebec, the province most closely associated with what are known as Nordic spas. Four spas that opened since 2005 lie just 20 to 60 miles from Quebec City and close to national parks as well, creating a convenient circuit for those seeking to commune with nature on the trails and recover from that communion off-trail.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINNE MUSCHI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

My first stop along this sybaritic trail was Siberia Station Spa, a getaway just 17 miles from the Quebec City airport, near the resort area of Lake Beauport. Like other outdoor spas in the area, Siberia Station offered immersion in nature, with a series of Jacuzzis over several terraces on the steeply sloped bank of the Yellow River. Unlike many of them, it had features that could convince a honeymooner to forgo the Catskills for Canada. Those Jacuzzis were designed for two, and couples waited their turn. Some did it cuddling in wide, rainbow-striped hammocks strung between the pines, in a capsule-shaped warming cabin with a flat-screen TV flashing serene

images before an outdoor fire.

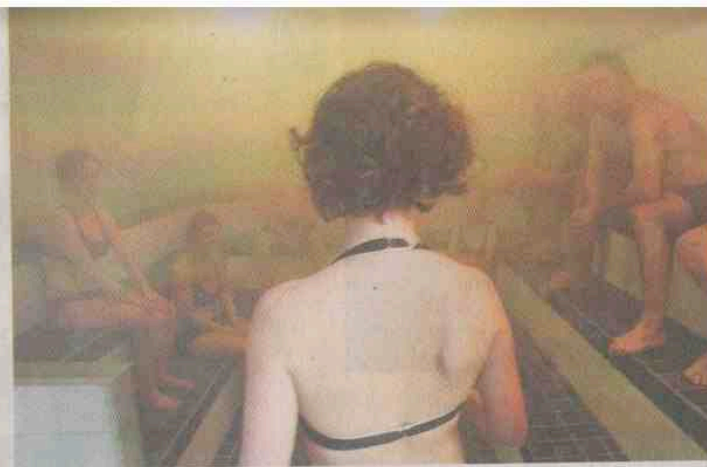
As directed by signs in French, I began exploring the facilities in the strongly eucalyptus-scented steam room, followed by an icy shower under a fake waterfall and a tranquil swing in a hammock serenaded by a red-winged blackbird's trill. The recommended steps — hot, cold, rest, repeat — were bracing, but after a few rounds, having my senses stunned wasn't just pleasurable, it was numbing in a way that became addictive.

Indulging in serial spas isn't often financially realistic. But Nordic spas are relatively inexpensive; access generally runs from 25 to 37 Canadian dollars

with massages extra. Affording it and needing it are two different things, of course. The next morning, I made up for my indolence with an invigorating hike through moose country in Jacques-Cartier National Park, a half-hour's drive north of Lake Beauport.

A few short miles south of the park, the Jacques-Cartier River passes Le Nordique, a spa that evokes summer camp, including using the river as a cold plunge. Dotted in daisies and lupine with sunny, stone-filled terraces and artificial waterfalls, the hillside property felt friendlier to singles and platonic pairs than did Sibe-

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17 miles from the Quebec City airport, can take advantage of a series of Jacuzzis over several terraces on the steeply sloped bank of the Yellow River. LEFT A steam room at Le Nordique, a Nordic spa that evokes summer camp with its screen-sided tents that serve as treatment rooms.

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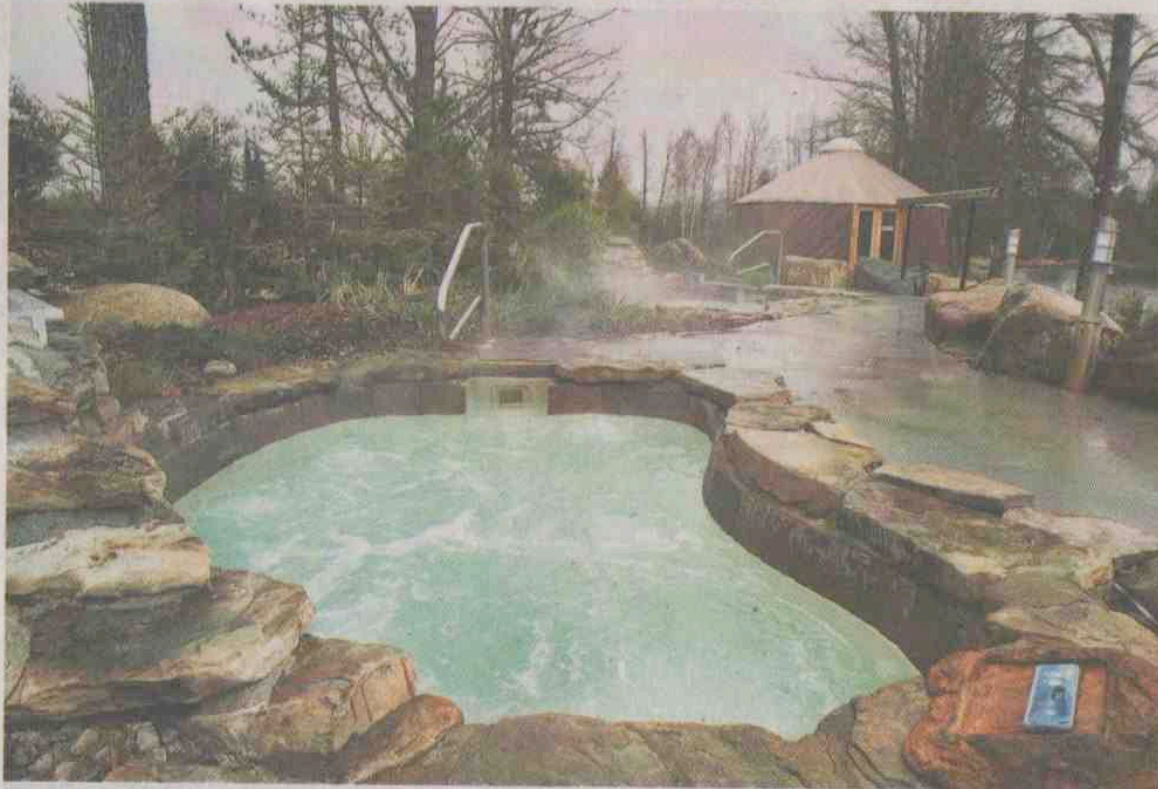
ria Station.

A mother and daughter emerging from the river assured me the cold dip was "très bien!" After I took my own frigid, nearly heart-stopping plunge, I realized that they had meant it "takes your breath away but is exhilarating to survive." In the nearby sauna, a hot blast of air had a similarly jarring effect as I took a bench opposite another guest reading a novel by a window that naturally lighted the spacious wood interior.

Le Nordique most successfully channels scouting in its riverside row of wood-platform, screen-sided tents that

The recommended steps: hot, cold, rest, repeat.

serve as seasonal treatment rooms, where I reported for a Swedish massage. A soundtrack of tweeting, whistling and chirping birds accompanied the treatment as my therapist kneaded my backpack-forged knots.



Bites

MUMBAI

Two One Two Bar and Grill

Over the last few years, the Mumbai dining scene has been bombarded with hip openings competing for attention from a group of increasingly well-heeled residents. While the ambience at these restaurants might be buzzing, the food doesn't necessarily impress. The upscale Italian boîte Two One Two Bar and Grill, which opened just over a year ago, is different: although the glamour set has already descended here, the draw is decidedly on the menu.

For starters, Two One Two stands out among Mumbai's restaurants for including an ingredient rarely found on Indian menus: beef. Since the cow is sacred in Hinduism and thus forbidden to consume, diners looking for real steak — as opposed to one drawn from local water buffalo, as is the common practice — are usually left feeling unfulfilled. Here, grilled steak is a highlight, and it's possible to order at least five kinds, including a ribeye and a more than one-pound Angus T-bone — the latter will run you 3,900 rupees or about \$85. (Wagyu, also pricey, is occasionally available.)

The meat comes from an import company run out of New Delhi, and Ketan Kadam, one of the restaurant's owners, said it is among the most popular orders. "The customers getting

I repeated the routine the next day, exercising in the morning by paddling and trail running at Station Touristique Duchesnay, a province-managed tourist resort about 25 miles northwest of Quebec City.

Then, with sufficiently spent muscles, I showed up at one of the park's chief amenities, Tyst Tradgard. This four-year-old Nordic spa housed in a series of tidy clapboard cottages on the shore of Lake St.-Joseph offers a more private and pampering spa experience

Zonespa includes aquatic therapies like warm whirlpools, bracing cascades and piping steam baths.

than the others, slotting guests individual time in its outdoor pools, plunges and saunas.

After meeting me in the locker room, an attendant guided me outdoors to my own private hydrotherapy garden. She returned periodically during the hour before my massage to pace my journey from Jacuzzi to sauna, regulating the time I spent at each and freeing me to study a longwing butterfly buzzing the

poolside flowers, two woodpeckers tapping a maple overhead and a snail enjoying the cold mist of our shared artificial waterfall.

"Being in nature and beauty, breathing fresh air is all part of the therapy," said Geneviève Monette, owner of Tyst Tradgard, which means "quiet garden" in Swedish.

For my final steeping, I drove east of Quebec City to Zonespa, just a few

miles beyond the ski area of Mont-Sainte-Anne, where I did a token hike before it began to rain. But a little drizzle isn't enough to spoil the Nordic spa experience. "We are open in all weather," said the attendant checking me in to the contemporary, window-wrapped spa that offers the most ambitious treatment program of its class, and indeed felt, at least indoors, like a sophisticated urban spa. Still, water remained the focus, complete with a wooden dock on a private lake serving swimmers and wildlife watchers.

The spa might be weatherproof. Not so, apparently, spa-goers; there were only five the entire rainy morning I spent there, alternating among the indoor steam room and sauna, and the outdoor whirlpools, cold cascade and chilly, chin-deep lake water. The soft but steady rain convinced me that I didn't need plumbing to appreciate water's thermal effects, and I spent my recommended time-outs sitting on the dock, watching trout surface, ducklings parade, swallows skimming the lake and one very diligent muskrat — a lot like camp, but far cleaner. ■

the steaks are usually in their 20s or 30s who have enjoyed them when they have either lived or traveled abroad," he said.

But the executive chef, Alex Bignotti, who is originally from Milan, doesn't just focus on beef. He executes vegetarian dishes, like a goat cheese and wild mushroom strudel, with equal panache. And the dishes shine because of the high quality ingredients. "We really focused on using the best of the best, no matter the cost," Mr. Kadam said, "because we feel like that's the key to our long-term success."

Creamy mozzarella, served as an appetizer with pesto, for example, is made in the nearby city of Pune, home to a sizable Italian community. And while many international eateries in the city disguise poor quality seafood under heavy sauces, the options here, like simply grilled local king prawns finished with a Tuscan olive oil, are largely left unadulterated, allowing their natural taste to shine.

Two One Two Bar and Grill, 12-A, Ground Floor, Hornby Vellard Estate, Sanghi Road, Worli; (91-22) 2490-1994. An average meal for two, without drinks (or the expensive beef dishes) is about 4,400 rupees, or \$97 at 45 rupees to the dollar. SHIVANI VORA

WHERE TO SOAK

Le Nordique (747, Jacques-Cartier Nord, Stoneham-Tewkesbury; 418-848-7727; lenordique.com), from 32 Canadian dollars, about the same in U.S. dollars, for unlimited hydrotherapy; 99 dollars including 60-minute massage.

Siberia Station Spa (339, boulevard du Lac, Lac-Beauport; 418-841-1325; siberiastationspa.com), 37 dollars for unlimited hydrotherapy; 99 dollars with one-hour massage.

Tyst Tradgard (35, chemin de la Détente, Ste.-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-

Cartier; 418-875-1645; tysttradgard.com), from 25 dollars for an hour of hydrotherapy; from 91 dollars extra with a massage.

Zonespa (186, rang St-Julien, St-Feréol-les-Neiges; 418-826-1772; zonespa.com), 37 dollars for three hours of hydrotherapy; with 60-minute massage from 99 dollars.

WHERE TO STAY

Manoir St-Castin (99, chemin Tour-du-Lac, Lac-Beauport; 418-841-4000; hotelsvillegia.com) rooms from 99 dol-

lars. Slightly down at the heels, this 104-room resort nonetheless offers a good restaurant and proximity to Lake Beauport and Jacques-Cartier National Park to the north.

Auberge Duchesnay (140, Montée de l'Auberge, Ste.-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier; 418-875-2122; sepaq.com) rooms from 77 dollars, including breakfast. Forty-eight modern rooms overlook Lake Sainte-Joseph with free access to on-property hiking, biking and boating.