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Celebrating Winter

By **Rainer Jenss**, March 15, 2011 12:00 PM | [Comments \(0\)](#)

A year ago, **Rainer Jenss** traveled around the world with his wife and two sons and [blogged about his experience here on Intelligent Travel](#). He writes to us about his family's latest adventure-- embracing the cold.

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Cultural, Authentic & Sustainable: This is your brain on travel. We showcase the essence of place, what's unique and original, and what locals cherish most about where they live. And we highlight places, practices, and people that are on the front lines of sustainable travel—travel that preserves places' essential uniqueness for future generations. [more...](#)

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After enduring several months of snow and bitter cold temperatures, it was really tempting to head south from our New

York metro home for the week of our children's winter break. Instead, we chose to buck conventional thinking and travel further north: a 500-mile drive straight up I-87 to Quebec to be exact.

We were last in Quebec City as a family in the summer of 2008, on a weekend that happened to fall during the city's 400th anniversary celebration. Because the boys have a fond memory of that visit, the idea of returning there even with the thermometer reading a good 60-80 degrees colder was not a hard sell. So we packed our bags with plenty of cold weather gear, took off bright and early, and checked in at the [Four Points Sheraton in Charlesbourg](#) eight hours later. Located about 15 minutes north of the heart of Vieux Quebec up Autoroute 73N, this family-friendly property was convenient for most of the activities we'd be doing outside the Old City.

But we didn't pick this hotel because of its location. It actually serves as the home base for an overnight stay at the famous Ice Hotel, which we planned to do for one night during our stay. Situated just around the corner in the Parc des Moulins, the [Hôtel de Glace](#) is something I've always been curious about, and given the fact that our family has slept in almost every type of accommodation imaginable, we couldn't resist adding it to our list of unusual sleeping experiences.

As we discovered over the next three days, the construction of the Ice Hotel is just one example of how Canadians celebrate and embrace the winter season. Unlike most of us in the Northeast who shudder every time snow is in the forecast and eagerly count down the days until the cold weather breaks, our neighbors to the north seem to revel in it. Unfortunately for us, we arrived just a few days after their annual two-week [Winter Carnival](#), which includes plenty of attractions such as skiing, snow rafting, ice sculptures, snow sled-slides, outdoor shows, and lots of partying. Nevertheless, there were still plenty of options for creating our own winter adventures.

Our first activity was supposed to be a day of snowboarding at nearby [Mont-Sainte-Anne](#), but when we learned about a winter amusement park only 20 minutes from our hotel, we scrapped the original plan for something we couldn't really find back home. The [Valcartier Village Vacances](#) is billed as the largest winter playground in North America, and upon arrival, the boys were thrilled we passed on skiing. It was a good thing we still brought along the snow pants, because we'd need them. Instead of going down the slopes on skis or snowboards, inflated rubber tubes of various designs were the agents for thrills on these trails.

Open until 10 pm every night, the Valcartier Vacation Village is an enormous water adventure park in the summer. Once winter arrives, the water slides are replaced by 42 "trails", which like traditional ski slopes, are marked with a green, blue, black or double black diamond rating based on their degree of difficulty. Unlike skiing, however, there's no real skill involved here other than holding on tight. What changes are the levels of intensity. Several of the runs are steep, a few have banked turns, and some have both, including the high-speed section called the Himalaya. Also featured is the Everest-- a 110 foot-high slide that accelerates you to about 50 mph-- along with the ever-popular "snow rafting", the Corkscrew, and the Tornado, a giant inner tube that swirls up to eight people down their longest hills.



As you might suspect, not all the rides are appropriate for every child. I would have been shocked if my 11-year-old actually volunteered to take the plunge down the Everest even though there are no real risks or age restrictions. Not to worry, there are certainly enough activities to keep kids of all ages entertained, including a half-mile ice skating path around the park, sleigh rides, and an ice karting track (think go-karts on ice).

After spending much more time at the park than I had expected, I regretted having to inform the boys that it was time to leave. We were spending the night at the Ice Hotel, and we needed to get back to take the tour of the facilities and get an orientation on what we needed to know to sleep there. After spending the day on the ice and snow, I was quite

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curious to see how spending the night in the same conditions would treat us. I'll report on how we managed in my next post, so stay tuned.

Follow Rainer on Twitter at [@JenssTravel](#).

Photos: Above, Rainer Jenss; Below, courtesy of Valcartier Village Vacances

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