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TRAVEL

View from the top



Quebec's Mont Tremblant ski resort exudes European charm

By Susan Glaser

MONT TREMBLANT, Quebec—I pointed my skis toward the sign that read *Piste Facile*—easy slope. It was my first run of the season and my first time at a ski resort where English isn't the predominant language. So I vowed to take it easy, both on and off the slopes. I skied a bit, then shopped. I checked out the resort's new casino, then indulged in some terrific French food. Finally, I spent an afternoon at the spa. My conclusion: Mont Tremblant, about 60 miles north of Montreal, is an easy place to love.

I'm not alone in that opinion. For 12 years in a row, the readers of 560 magazines have voted Mont Tremblant the best resort in eastern North America, consistently topping bigger name destinations like Snow, Stratton and Killington, Vt. After spending three nights here in December, it's easy to understand why. Mont Tremblant offers all the charms of a European ski vacation with none of the hassles. It's (relatively) easy to get to, it offers terrific on-mountain fun as well as excellent off-slope activities, and nearly everyone speaks English. Granted, the altitude in Quebec's Laurentian Mountains—Mont Tremblant's top elevation stretches to just under 2,900 feet—isn't in the same league with the French Alps (see, for the matter, with the peaks of the Western United States and Canada). But for an intermediate skier like me, who finds the hills of Western New York challenging enough, the 55 slopes of Mont Tremblant are plenty intimidating.

And what it lacks in altitude, it more than makes up in attitude. In the quaint, snow-covered pedestrian village at the base of the mountain, surrounded by the melodious sounds of crowds speaking French, I felt as if I'd returned from Ohio and the United States, just a two-hour drive south, as if I might have had I crossed the Atlantic. **A RESORT CLASSIC GETS SPRUCED UP** Mont Tremblant, opens since 1933, is considered North America's second-oldest ski resort (Sun Valley, Idaho, preceded it by a few years). Philadelphia millionaire Joe Ryan, who spent his teen years exploring the Canadian backcountry, fell in love with the view from the top of Mont Tremblant and let out on a plan to share it with others. A resort was born. Mont Tremblant has changed hands several times over the decades, enduring both years of neglect and periods of growth. In 1991, it was purchased by Canadian development

company Intrawest, which also owns resorts in Snohomish, W.Va., and Steamboat Springs, Colo., as well as a minority share in Western Canada's Whistler-Blackcomb. Over the past 20 years, the company has invested millions in its Quebec resort, adding thousands of housing units and redeveloping the mountain's base to resemble a brightly colored, European Alpine village. Elements of Intra's resort, however, still remain, particularly in a section of the village known as *Vieux Tremblant* (Old Tremblant), where a smattering of 70-year-old cottages have been converted to intimate restaurants and clubs. Among them: *La Savoie*, a fondue restaurant, which was our first stop when checking into our hotel. My husband and I opted against the traditional pots of melted cheese and indulged in something even more decadent: raclette. The Swiss mountain dish starts with a half-wheel of cheese mounted in front of a tabletop electric heat lamp. The sizzling cheese is spread atop plates of boiled potatoes, gherkins, pearl



Tremblant, a pedestrian village, shines at night at the base of Mont Tremblant, a Quebec ski resort that exudes European charm.

onions and dried meat. It's the kind of meal you keep eating long after you're full. A uniquely Canadian treat followed: At the base of the village, *Cabane à Sucre de la Montagne* (sugar shack on the mountain) serves piping-hot maple syrup ladled over ice. The ice chips turn the syrup into gooey taffy, which is served on a wooden Popsicle stick. Fortunately, I had a calorie-burning activity planned for the next day. **SATURDAY MORNING ON THE SLOPES** Unfortunately, Mother Nature hadn't approved my plans. I traveled to Mont Tremblant on the second weekend it was open (the first weekend in December.) And while the snow gods had spruced the Western United States with the white stuff by late November, Eastern Canada still was looking pretty green. Temperatures were low enough for Mont Tremblant to pump out a decent base of snow. The problem: Only a small percentage of the resort's 55 slopes and trails were open. Even worse: The resort was frantically trying to open up more terrain for a charity event to be held the following weekend. So I skied for a few hours in the morning, but the conditions were less than ideal. Snow-making



In the Hudson Valley, two grand mansions make one great hotel. Tarrytown House Estate and Conference Center. Here, the King Mansion section of the facility.

Thanks to Mary's vision, mansions remain an eyeful

By Zofia Smarols

What would Mary think? This is what I wonder as I follow the two women up the sweeping grand staircase of the Biddle Mansion at the Tarrytown House Estate and Conference Center in Tarrytown, N.Y. The pair, in their impeccable business suits, are clearly here for a conference, checking out the meeting rooms on the second

level glass windows. And standing in what I figure was the master bedroom, with its exhilarating view of the gleaming Hudson River beyond the treetops, remembering the fancy but sterile carpeting that covers the floor. And even more, the PowerPoint projection screens at the far end of the roomful of padded chairs. Oh dear, Mary, what would you think?

To every cruise route there is a season

By Ellen Oringer

MTC TRAVEL SERVICES

Last month, a cruise ship from Antarctica was caught in the violent waters of the Drake Passage, which tossed the ship around like a toy in a bathtub. A few days later, a cruise liner in the Mediterranean off Alexandria, Egypt, was hit by giant waves that tilted the ship. "Does this mean cruising is unsafe?" No. It means you should be careful in choosing when to cruise. "When people think of the Mediterranean, they think of it as the Caribbean of Europe. But it snows." In past years, the Mediterranean cruise season lasted from April to October. Then it was March to December. Now, ships such as Royal Caribbean's Independence of the Seas are cruising even in January and February, when ports such as Southampton, England, Dubrovnik, Croatia or Venice can hit 30 degrees. Ports in winter can be quiet and



The cruise ship *Celia II* struggles in the southern Drake Passage. Located off the coast of South America, the Drake Passage, is considered by experts to be the trickiest stretch of water in the world, even during high season.

The cruise lines won't exactly advertise it, but here are my guidelines for the best and worst months to cruise, weather-wise. **Caribbean:** Season is year-round. Best is December to April. Worst is August to October, hurricane season. I have sailed during hurricane season with no

New England: Season runs April to October. Best is July to October. Worst is April to May. **Trans-Atlantic:** Season runs March to November with most repositioning cruises in spring and fall. Best is June to August. Worst is March or November. One ship, the *Queen Mary 2*, is

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floor of the 1800s manor, discussing the facilities, locating the elevator.

Me, I'm strictly a voyeur (and a hotel guest, too, so it's allowed). I'm roaming the house after breakfast, ogling the art and photos in the warmly paneled drawing room, scanning the books and magazines in the sunny library, peering into an elegant dining room with

Mary -- that would be Mary Duke Biddle, an heiress of the Duke tobacco fortune out of North Carolina, who was the last private owner (1921-69) of this imposing, sandstone granite house. For the last year of her life, she owned the stately white-columned King Mausoleum just a few yards up the hill, too. Once upon a time, through

crowds blessedly thin. But bad weather can affect a ship's ability to stick to its itinerary.

Still, as long as travelers know the risks, they can get good deals. In fact, some travelers actually like to cruise off season, such as going from New York to the Bahamas in January, or traveling across the North Atlantic in March, Spencer-Brown says.

"There is a reason why you are seeing a \$500 deal for a 12-day cruise," she says. "There's a downside. It's a trade-off"

problems.

Mediterranean: Season runs April to October, but now lines are cranking year-round. Best is June or September (August is most crowded). Worst is December to February. Watch out for English departures in winter.

Northern Europe: Season runs May to September. Best is June through August. Worst is very early May.

Alaska: Season runs May to September. Best is July and August. Worst is May or September -- winter is lurking

built specifically to cross the Atlantic, Spencer-Brown says. "We've seen some really exciting waves, shall we say, on the Atlantic," she says.

Antarctica: Season runs November to March. Best is mid-December to February. Worst is November or March. Antarctica is the one trip in which you must expect dicey weather even in high season. Ships have to cross the unpredictable Drake Passage, off the coast of South America, the trickiest stretch of water in the world.

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