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Ski and spa enthusiasts get their fix

BY SARAH STAPLES, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 20, 2010

By the numbers, Quebec's 1.6 million active skiers and snowboarders make this the third most important ski region in North America, behind Colorado and California. It also boasts the world's biggest concentration of hills lit for night skiing. But there's plenty for non-skiers to do this ski season as well, and at this time of year, country inns and resorts in the area start rolling out tempting deals for winter-themed getaways -off the slopes.

"Lots of effort is going into getting people to know they can do so much more than just skiing in wintertime in Quebec," explains Alexis Boyer-Lafontaine, spokesman for the Association des stations de ski du Quebec.

"It's one of our concerns [as a tourism industry] at this point."

Last year, Quebecers and mostly U.S. visitors made a combined 6.5 million visits to 80 ski hills dotted across the province, especially in the three top ski regions: the Laurentians, the Eastern Townships, and the area around Quebec City.

Non-ski activities -from snowshoeing to skating on lakes or groomed tracks, spa getaways or dog-sledding -have been gaining in popularity among winter enthusiasts for years, says Boyer-Lafontaine. And ski resorts themselves, along with other upscale retreats and lakeside inns, have begun offering them.

From Manoir Hovey, a Relais & Chateau inn about an hour outside Montreal, on Lake Massawippi in the Eastern Townships, skiers are within striking range of four hills: Mont Orford, Ski Bromont, Mont Sutton and Owl's Head.

Spokeswoman Emeline Martin says couples and families are also spending hours exploring a three-kilometre cross-country trail that begins directly across the road from the resort; or to Mont Orford's two area golf courses, which stay open during the winter as popular snowshoeing destinations; or for ice skating to an open-air rink in North Hatley, three kilometres away, and nearby Magog, which has an ice-skating trail.

Weather permitting, Manoir Hovey will clear a section of its lake frontage for skate-in/skate-out fun this winter, as it has done in the past.

Spa enthusiasts can take treatments at the inn, or venture out into the cold to Magog's Nordic Station Spa, where the bravest jump from the sauna directly into the Castle Brook River.

Late fall until early winter is actually "low season" for places like Manoir Hovey, which, although located close to ski hills, aren't actual ski resorts nor do they offer ski-in/ski-out convenience. These chic retreats make for excellent winter getaways and are currently offering copious deals and discounts. Manoir Hovey, for example, has a "Three for Two" night special until mid-February that includes breakfast and dinner daily, starting at \$290 per person, double occupancy, for the entire stay.

American Thanksgiving, which this year falls on Thursday, November 25, is another bonus for Canadians who want the experience of a winter weekend in the country, at discounted prices. Inns and spas just across the border often promote special packages and rate discounts around the crucial U.S. holiday. For example, Lake Placid Lodge on Lake Placid, New York, is organizing activities from November 22 until the end of the month, such as guided hikes with a local naturalist, ice skating, a hawk and owl demonstration, and a full-course turkey feast.

Dining is its own pleasurable experience at country inns like these. Hovey's chef, for example, pairs locally sourced ingredients with a Wine Spectator-approved list of nearly 3,000 bottles, and much of its cellar comes from the Eastern Townships' up-and-coming wine trail.

Lake Placid Lodge will cap its Thanksgiving special promotion this year with a farm-to-table "Holiday Family Feast" showcasing menu items grown in the area.

"People are here to relax," says Martin. "Skiing is not all they come for."

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Even if other activities are becoming available in ski country, the mountains are still the star attraction, says Boyer-Lafontaine. Ski tourists interested in discovering more of Quebec's hills can buy a \$40 Ski Passe-Partout from the Association des stations de ski du Quebec: it's a magnetic-swipe card affording five rebates per ski area (some 260 freebies and discounts in total), for items such as cheaper lift tickets and meals. The province offers a similar ski Passe Provinciale.

"Even though you have great spas and can really enjoy them, first and foremost there's a ski hill," he says. "We're a culture with a rich ski heritage, and that's really the magic of the season here in Quebec."

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WINTER FUN, SPA AND HIDEAWAY GUIDE Some of our favourite places to stay if you do -or don't -hit the slopes.

EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

Manoir Hovey - www.manoirhovey.com Ski: Mount Orford (30 min. or less), Owl's Head (one hour), Sutton (one hour 15 min.), Bromont (50 min.). Don't ski: Skate on a custom trail, try the nearby Nordic spa, dine lavishly and locally.

Spa Eastman - www.spa-eastman.com Ski: Mount Orford (15 min.)

Don't ski: Get your hair done, have a naturopathic health evaluation, exfoliate, scrub, detox.

Auberge & Spa West Brome - www.awb.ca Ski: Sutton (10 min.)

Don't ski: Sip and sup in the locavore restaurant at this resort on 200 acres, with a basement wine cellar and space next door for wine tasting.

UPSTATE NEW YORK Lake Placid Lodge - www.lakeplacidlodge.com Ski: Whiteface (20 min.)

Don't ski: The Relais & Chateau stay is organizing Thanksgiving activities including a naturalist-guided hike, ice skating, hawk and owl demonstrations for the kids.

The Whiteface Lodge - www.thewhitefacelodge.com Ski: Whiteface (20 min.)

Don't ski: The AAA four-diamond hotel has a small spa, an onsite movie theatre and private ice rink, and an indoor/ outdoor heated pool.


VERMONT

Woodstock Inn & Resort - www.woodstockinn.com Ski: Killington (25 min.), or Woodstock's own small ski hill, called Suicide Six.

Don't ski: An upscale inn popular with Manhattanites, it boasts a new LEED certified spa, indoor pool, tennis club, and Billings Farm. Offering Thanksgiving dinner.

Topnotch Resort and Spa - www.topnotchresort.com Ski: Mount Mansfield's Stowe Mountain Resort (10 min.) Don't ski: AAA four-diamond, 120-acre wooded estate in Stowe, 2.5 hours from Montreal, has a spa and fitness centre, horseback riding.

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