

TRAVEL

Last updated at 4:05 PM on 16/01/10

Warm up to winter 🌨️

Some of Quebec's best kept ski secrets

MARGO PFEIFF

CanWest News Service

While Western Canada gets most of the hype, Quebec offers outstanding skiing and snowshoeing from the Laurentians to the Gaspé.

I hear the moose munching before I spot him through a tangle of trees, knobby-knee deep in powder, his antlers dusted with snow drifting from branches he's browsing. He snorts steamy puffs into the winter air. It reminds me to start breathing again.

I've just skied down a long slope of virgin powder marred only by the occasional jackrabbit footprints, zigzagging around trees, floating free of gravity. When the moose sniffs the air and trots off, I hoist my backcountry skis over my shoulder and realize it's gravity payback time. I scramble to keep up with uber-guide Jean-Francois Dube as we stomp uphill. It's good motivation to know that what awaits me back at our log lodge is a spread of smoked trout dressed up with ginger granita and roast duck adorned with morels. Then I'll finish up the day with a soak in an outdoor whirlpool beneath snow-capped peaks and tonight's full moon.

The Rockies? Kootenays? Coast Mountains? Nope. This is far-out Quebec. Take a peek at a snowfall map of the province and you'll see the remote Chic Choc (pronounced shick-shock) Mountains – the forgotten northernmost tip of the Appalachians – stand out like a red lollipop on the Gaspé Peninsula, that big tongue of Quebec sticking out into the St. Lawrence River. It's remote, wild and untouched, with the best powder in Canada east of the Rockies, a hefty annual average dump of eight metres.

While high-amp skiing in Western Canada gets most of the attention, Quebecers quietly go about playing in snow since they spend so much of their time blanketed beneath it. And many of the best skiing venues are little-known to out-of-province downhill skiers, snowboarders, backcountry enthusiasts and snowshoe-trekkers.



Gaspé's Chic Choc Mountains are wild and untouched. Margo Pfeiff/CanWest News Service



The remote Chic Choc Mountain Lodge offers all-inclusive three- to seven-day packages. Costs start at \$700 per person.

Margo Pfeiff/CanWest News Service

Chic Choc Mountain Lodge is a classic example: most of its clients are area Quebecers. It's an intimate, very well run 18-room, upscale country/rustic inn smack in the middle of Matane Wildlife Reserve. Run by the provincial parks authority – SEPAQ – it opened in 2005 as the only full-service backcountry ski operation in Quebec and getting there involves a fun 90-minute, rumbling Snow-Cat ride from the nearest road at the village of Cap Chat on the St. Lawrence South Shore.

The Gaspé Peninsula has long been the domain of hardcore backcountry trekkers, but the lodge and its avalanche-trained guides have opened this spectacular landscape not only to experts, but also to timid powder-puppies like myself who prefer to take it easy on ultrawide meta-skis – something akin to backcountry skis with training wheels – or on snowshoe tramps through silent forests where you're outnumbered two to one by moose.

Or slow it right down and sink into a deep couch in the common room beside the wood-burning fireplace and the honour bar and meditate on a view of the snow-covered middle of nowhere. But it's not necessary to head to Outback Quebec to enjoy snow.

There are dozens of options within minutes of both Montreal and Quebec City. Every December I slip my cross-country skis into my car where they stay until April.

Within 20 minutes of my downtown Montreal apartment I do my daily aerobics on groomed trails through birch forest in parks such as Cap St. Jacques and Bois de Liesse. Sometimes I tackle the hills of nearby Mont Royal Park, which is lit up at night, or follow the path beside the frozen Lachine Canal close to downtown Montreal, or head to the 35 hilly kilometres of cross-country trails of Mont Saint Bruno just over the Champlain Bridge on Montreal's South Shore.

In Montreal, there are two schools of skiers – those who prefer the Laurentian Mountains north of the city and those who flock to the Eastern Townships, whose winter domain is to the southeast. Sometimes the better snow makes the choice easier.

The Eastern Townships is dotted with quaint villages of fieldstone houses with church spires towering over frozen ponds and snowy streets lined with pubs, restaurants and boutiques. Mont Bromont, less than an hour southeast of Montreal, has the largest lit skiable terrain in North America with 66 night-skiing trails.

The village of Bromont is at the base and not far off is picture-perfect Knowlton, where restaurants such as the Auberge Knowlton serve up the local specialty, Quebec's celebrated Lac Brome duck.

It's also a good place to sample luscious ice ciders, Quebec's answer to icewine made from crushed frozen apples.

Mont Sutton is famed for its glade skiing on 54 trails that interconnect with regular downhill runs.

This year, the Sutton Museum is being transformed into the Sutton Ski Museum season to celebrate its 50th anniversary of operations. Further east is Mont Orford, with its cluster of yurts on the summit with woodstoves where you can sip hot chocolate, eat and warm up. Orford also has an extensive cross-country/ skate-skiing/ snowshoeing park where 13 trails meander through 50 kilometres of forest. I like to finish up my Orford day in the nearby town of Magog for a raclette dinner in front of a fireplace in one of the town's restaurants or, for a special treat, at the Relais-and-Chateaux Manoir Hovey in North Hatley.

North of Montreal in the Laurentians, Saint-Sauveur is the first of a string of alpine ski villages and it's also lit for night-skiing. Only 40 minutes from Montreal, the area boasts a lively nightlife scene among the old wood and stone houses and general stores that have been revamped into boutiques and bistros serving maple-wood-fired brick-oven pizza or Belgian-style mussels

and fries.

Nearby, the former 1920s rail line, the P'tit Train du Nord (the "little train of the north") goes from Saint-Jerome, just north of Montreal, 230 kilometres to Mont-Laurier in the north.



Snowshoeing in the Chic Choc Mountains, the province's best-kept ski secret.

Margo Pfeiff/CanWest News Service

It's a popular bike path in summer that morphs in winter into a cross-country ski route winding with a mere three-per-cent grade through villages. You can arrange via Laurentian Tourism for your luggage to be delivered to a trailside B&B, then ski with just a day pack, stopping along the way for lunch in one of the renovated old train stations.

Just off the P'tit Train route near St. Jovite, 90 minutes from Montreal, is Quebec's most high-profile downhill resort, voted No. 1 in Eastern North America by Ski Magazine 10 years running. IntraWest-owned Mont Tremblant looks like a mini-Whistler pedestrian village that's in year-round apres-ski mode. Soar to the 900-metre-high peak by gondola for 360-degree views of the surrounding mountains, then finish off at the Microbrasserie La Diable for one of its specialty brews such as wheat beer flavoured with coriander, ginger and orange. Then warm up with a Finnish sauna and a Norwegian steam bath at the Nordic-style Spa la Scandinave tucked into the banks of the Riviere du Diable.

Outdoors-crazy Quebec City has some of my favourite skiing of every flavour – from downhill to spectacular snowshoeing and back-country. With killer views across the St. Lawrence River, Quebec's ultimate multi-day cabin-to-cabin hut trek is along 105 kilometres of powder on the Traversee de Charlevoix that follows a forested ridge above the river. Go for a day ski along one section or have your shuttled luggage await you at day's end when you tuck into your sleeping bag at a rustic log cabin or lodge en route; tackling the entire traverse takes six days.

Mont Sainte-Anne, host of many World Cup events, is an impressive network of runs, open for night skiing and within 30 minutes of the provincial capital. So you can schuss by day and dine by night in the bistros among the cobblestoned streets of Old Quebec.

At the mountain's base is Parc Mont Sainte-Anne, the biggest cross-country ski centre in Canada, with 208 kilometres of trails. Bring a Thermos and lunch so you can take a break in a log cabin in the woods en route.

But Quebec's best-kept secret ski secret - and my favourite ski destination in the province - is Le Massif, about 70 kilometres east of Quebec City in the Charlevoix region.

It's come a long way since the early '90s when we hopped into the resort's legendary yellow school buses after each run for the bumpy ride to the top. What hasn't changed is Quebec's top powder that makes this the best western skiing in the east, as well as the highest vertical drop in Eastern Canada. The 45 glades and trails plunge down the mountain face and it feels dizzyingly as if you're skiing straight into the ice-dotted St. Lawrence River. These days it's also home to the Quebec Ski Team.

Le Massif won't stay little-known for long. Purchased in 2002 by one of Cirque du Soleil's founders, Daniel Gauthier, it is slated to undergo a Cirque-sized development by 2011 to become an innovative resort called Le Massif de Charlevoix. A third peak of runs will be added, a nearby farm will be revamped into a chic eco-hotel in the nearby artsy town of Baie-Saint-Paul complete with a greenhouse, circus workshops and public market. And Gauthier's dream includes reviving an old rail line to shuttle skiers on a 30-minute hybrid railcar trip from Baie-Saint-Paul to Le Massif.

Apres ski? Charlevoix is renowned for its gastronomy. I find the perfect way to end a ski day is at the casual Le Saint-Pub in Baie-Saint-Paul, a microbrewery with a beer lineup inspired by the Belgian abbeys and a menu that puts a Quebec twist on pub food. Then, a soak in a Jacuzzi, the perfect antidote for sore muscles.

Margo Pfeiff enjoyed skiing near Montreal for 20 years, but recently moved to Knowlton in the Eastern Townships, partly to be closer to skiing at Sutton and Bromont.



Where to stay:

Chic Choc Mountain Lodge: From Ottawa, it's about an 11-hour drive to Cap Chat (or you can take a two-hour flight from Montreal or travel on Via Rail's "Le Chaleur" - see www.viarail.com). From Cap Chat, you'll be taken to the lodge by Snow Cat. Three-, four- and seven-day packages start at \$700 per person with all meals, equipment and guided activities included. The

winter season started Dec. 26 and goes to April. See www.sepaq.com/ct/amc/ or call 1-800-665-6527.

Manoir Hovey: An elegant historic lodge on a lake. Rates start at \$135 per person including breakfast and gourmet dinner. See www.manoirhovey.com or call 1-800-661-2421 or 1-819-842-2421.

Mont Sainte-Anne: Mountainside classic condo style accommodation starts at \$159 a night. See www.mont-sainte-anne.com or 1-800-463-1568.

Le Massif: Condos and chalets minutes from the mountain base start at \$159 a night for up to six people. See www.lemassif.com.

Where to eat:

Le Saint-Pub, Baie-Saint-Paul: See www.microbrasserie.com or call 1-418-240-2332.

More info:

Tourism Quebec: www.bonjourquebec.com

Laurentian Tourism: www.laurentians.com 1-800-561-6673 or 1-450-224-7007

Mont Tremblant: www.tremblant.ca

Scandinave Spa, Mont Tremblant: www.scandinavetremblant.com or 1-800-LaScandinave

Eastern Townships Tourism: www.eastertownships.org

La Traversee de Charlevoix: www.traverseedecharlevoix.qc.ca

16/01/10



Past travel :

January 2010	December 2009	November 2009	October 2009	September 2009	August 2009
July 2009	June 2009	May 2009	April 2009	March 2009	