The ultimate guide to enjoying the Quebec Winter Carnival

BY TAMARA ELLIOTT · FEBRUARY 9, 2016

A seven foot tall snowman. Massive ice sculptures. A drink that will knock your socks off, insane events like ice canoeing, and a lively nighttime parade. Those are just a few of the things visitors can expect at Quebec City’s Winter Carnival (Carnaval de Quebec) which is one of the world’s most famous winter festivals.

For over a century, the historic city has been welcoming revellers to join the party which goes from the end of January to mid-February. And while there’s a long list of events to keep everyone entertained, it’s safe to say that the highlight for most is still an encounter with Bonhomme, that jolly ambassador who’s even more revered than Santa in the eyes of some youngsters. So how does one make the most of their festival experience? Here’s the ultimate guide to enjoying the Quebec Winter Carnival.
Best activities at the Winter Carnival

Carnaval has a dizzying amount of activities for all ages, and most of them are included with admission. Ever wanted to be a **human bowling ball**? You can try it at Carnaval, by getting into a zorb and trying to stay on your feet as the giant plastic ball spins down the snow toward larger-than-life inflatable pins.

If that’s a bit too intense, head over to the **human foosball** setup, where you can strap yourself to a pole as you and your teammates try to score the most goals—no hands allowed!
For a truly Canadian experience there’s a dog sledding track, as well as sleigh rides where guests are bundled up under cozy blankets and paraded around the Plains of Abraham.

In true festival fashion, there’s also a giant ferris wheel that offers fantastic birds-eye views of the grounds, along with another ride that’s not for the faint of heart: the 27-metre high Super Shot.
Perhaps one of the best things about the Winter Carnival is how family friendly it is, and there’s a huge play area aimed at keeping little ones happy. From maneuvering giant puppets and wall climbing to ziplines, petting zoos and sled runs, kids can easily spend hours running around leaving mom and dad to enjoy their Caribous in peace!

**What to eat at the Winter Carnival**

What the heck is a Caribou, you ask? Uh, pretty much the greatest drink ever for anyone north of the 49th parallel. **Caribou** is a mixed drink very similar to mulled wine, usually made with red wine, brandy, anise, cinnamon sticks, cloves and maple syrup. Served hot or cold, the result is a
bevy that’s guaranteed to get your insides tingling and ward off the winter cold.

Another festival favourite is **maple taffy**, which is cooked maple syrup drizzled over snow. After about 30 seconds it begins to harden, which is the perfect time to roll it up on a wooden stick, essentially making a sweet maple lollipop.

If that still doesn’t satisfy your sweet tooth, pick up some **Beaver Tails**, which are a traditional pastry treat sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon.
Fun events at the Winter Carnival

While most Winter Carnival festivities are situated in front of the Parliament building, a number of events take place in other areas around Quebec City in an effort to include all communities. One of them is the **Charlesbourg Night Parade**, a spirited procession that includes decked-out floats, dancing, singing, and of course an appearance by Bonhomme.

If you think rowing is hard work, try doing it through frozen ice chunks. That’s exactly what hundreds of hardy souls do during the annual **ice canoe race** on the St. Lawrence River. Sometimes lasting up to three hours, the race sees boats with five rowers hit multiple spots along the course while battling ever-moving massive ice flows.
To get past them, rowers are often forced to stick their feet into the frigid water, and essentially skate along the ice in an attempt to get the canoe back into the water. After witnessing this contest, the rowing machine in the gym doesn’t seem so bad after all!

Back at the Carnaval grounds, the **International Snow Sculpture Competition** is always a crowd favourite. Pitting competitors from around the world against each other in a bid for snow carving superiority, the tradition sees sculptors work around the clock to transform a huge pile of snow into the masterpiece of their choosing—and the public is even allowed to vote for who should be crowned the champion.

No visit to the Winter Carnival would be complete without visiting **Bonhomme’s Ice Palace**. Featuring a different theme each year, the frozen castle includes exhibits tracing Carnaval’s history, as well as an up-close look at the snowman’s crash pad.
The Ice Palace is spectacular at night when it’s lit up with bright LED lights, and the area around it transforms into a nightclub of sorts. DJs spin serious beats as revellers dance beside the palace, fuelled by alcohol served from nearby huts. Spoiler alert: Bonhomme is kind of a bad host and there’s no guarantee that he’ll show up to his own house party, but it’s worth keeping an eye out for him just in case.

**What to wear at the Winter Carnival**

There’s no way to sugar coat it—Quebec City can be bloody freezing during winter. While temperatures can fluctuate, some years have seen the mercury drop to around -20 celsius—so cold that even a couple glasses of Caribou won’t ward it off!

![Happy volunteers at the Winter Carnival.](image)

With that in mind, visitors should layer up. Start with a breathable base layer (not cotton), then add a cozy sweater, parka, mitts, toque (that’s a hat, for you non-Canadians) and warm winter boots with good grip. Snowpants are also recommended, and it’s a good idea to bring along packs of **Little Hotties** hand and toe warmers.
Finally, don’t forget the ultimate Carnaval accessory: the arrow sash. Traditionally tied around the waist with the knot on the left side, sashes can be purchased in shops around Quebec City for about $20. Bonhomme will be proud!

PRACTICALITIES:

Price: Guests aged 8 and over are required to buy and wear a Bonhomme-themed Effigy, which costs around $10 ahead of time or $15 at the door. Carnival packages are also available for around $40, which includes things like an Effigy, toque, glass of Caribou and a stick of taffy.

Where to stay: The festival is located just outside the walls surrounding the historic centre, which means it’s an easy walk from any hotel in Vieux-Quebec. However you can’t beat the Hilton Quebec when it comes to location, as the hotel is right across the street from the grounds and many rooms offer great views of the Ice Palace.

Top tip: To really get into the spirit of things, head to one of the on-site bars and purchase a Caribou. But not just any Caribou—a huge hollow stick shaped like a candy cane filled to the brim with Caribou, that you can walk around with!
Globe Guide visited the Winter Carnival in partnership with Quebec Tourism. As always, hosts have no editorial influence over articles.