

## Enjoy winter fun in Quebec province

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A view of Old Quebec at the foot of its fortifying ramparts.

The province of Quebec is the largest one in Canada by area and spends several months of the year under snow and icy conditions.

Rather than hunker down at home, the infectious spirit of the French-speaking population chooses to celebrate all that its environment has to offer, delighting in winter activities and festivals galore. Montreal is the largest city in the province and second largest in Canada and celebrated their 375th anniversary this year. Quebec City is the second largest and is also the capital, and it just marked 400 years of existence.

**Montreal**

Arriving in Montreal on a blustery cold February evening, I was met by a nice driver from **Montreal Limousine** who shared information about the city as we drove through it. He delivered me to the breathtaking, neoclassical **Place d'Armes Hotel and Suites** in Old Montreal. The whole staff, including the restaurant waitstaff, was gracious and welcoming. As with the many other people I encountered throughout Quebec Province, it is obvious that they love where they live and are eager to share this joie de vivre with visitors. The suite I stayed in was the most luxurious one I have ever seen (complete with a faux fireplace), and a short time after arriving, the concierge called to check if the room was suitable and if I needed anything. A most wonderful stay! For all that there is to know about Montreal, visit [tourisme-montreal.org](http://tourisme-montreal.org).

*What to do*



*Stained glass windows in the famed Notre-Dame Basilica*

*depict the history of Montreal.*

The best place to start your visit to Montreal is at the observatory at **Au Sommet Place Ville Marie**. It opened in June 2016 and provides a sweeping 360-degree view of the city. In the exposition area are 11 different themes about Montreal, and each theme contains five interactive tablets. You can choose your interests and build a self-guided tour to suit your needs. It was here that I learned Cirque du Soleil is from Montreal, as it is part of the Performing Arts theme. I also learned that Montreal hosted the 1967 World Expo, the grounds of which can be seen from the observatory, as well as the 1976 Summer Olympics. I spent an afternoon wandering “**The Underground City,**” 20 miles of pedestrian walkways below Montreal. Approximately half a million people traverse here daily and the mall-like setting includes more than 2,000 shops and restaurants as well as access to hotels, museums, theaters and universities. Public transportation is a big thing in Montreal with taxis, buses, trains, subways and bicycles for rent, and many opt not to own a vehicle at all. Another environmentally friendly aspect of the city is that citizens are required to separate their refuse into three categories placed outside their doorways: garbage, recycling and compost.



*Enjoy a signature cocktail at the Orange Rouge in Montreal's Chinatown.*

**Mount Royal** is the pinnacle of pride for the city. Montreal was founded in 1642 by 16 families and was named after the mountain, which is home year round to a number of activities. I snowshoed to the top with a young, enthusiastic guide who willingly accommodated my somewhat slow pace. She knew everything about the mount and the park and the view when we finally reached the lodge was truly breathtaking. Seeing scores of schoolchildren skating and snowshoeing will always be a delightful memory.

That afternoon, we explored all parts of Montreal with expert **Thom Seivewright**, who was the best! Extremely knowledgeable about the city, he hit some of the highlights in the limited time we had with him, starting with the world-famous, awe-inspiring **Notre-Dame Basilica** just steps from my hotel. It is the church Celine Dion married in and later said goodbye to her husband, Rene, upon his passing. We also visited the site of **Igloofest** on the waterfront, checking out the improvised igloos, each a unique work of art, and the gigantic slide nearby. Thom even took us to his favorite coffee house – **Crew Café**, housed in a repurposed bank – to grab a hot chocolate so that we could warm up after trudging about in the snow.

In the evening we attended **SAT Fest 2017** at the Society of Arts and Technology, an industrial building that is stark with clean lines. Comfortably ensconced in giant beanbags in the Satosphere, we stared up at the domed ceiling at a series of short, immersive films. This was truly a unique experience; some of the digital shorts were a bit unnerving while others were inspiring and even mouth-dropping. A lot of talent at this festival.

*Where to eat*



*An ice sculpture is one of many at the Carnaval de Quebec.*

Montreal is one of the most diverse cities in the world, apparent in the names of both businesses and restaurants. Many dining options offer an appetizer, entree and dessert to make ordering easy. Every restaurant I dined in had impeccable service and awesome food. I noticed that not many restaurants have the distraction of a TV blaring in the background, unless it's a sports bar. Another nicety is that your credit card is processed right at the table, speeding up the payment process. As far as the diversity ... For starters, the Hotel Place d'Armes has a couple of different restaurants, including **Kyo Bar Japonais**, where sushi and sake are plentiful. Nearby **Verses** has modern French dining. We visited **TAPAS, 24**, an offshoot of the original Barcelona, Spain restaurant, at lunchtime and it was very lively with business people. Another bustling lunch place was **Restaurant Ha**, a Vietnamese-inspired eatery nestled near the bottom of Mount Royal. Dinner at **Bistrot La Fabrique** (The Factory) featured farm-to-market ingredients. Homemade pickles, grilled bread, local wines, Israeli couscous, green bean salad, and beef tartar were served family style and it was nice having the owner, Stephanie Labelle, wait on us and tell us a little bit of her story.

#### *Where to drink*

Before the film festival, we had drinks and appetizers at **Orange Rouge** located in Montreal's Chinatown. It was an early hour and we had the basement room largely to ourselves, along with personalized service. We shared Asian-inspired bites while sipping signature cocktails such as Orange Rouge and Chinatown Manhattan. To finish out our adventure in the city, we made a late-night visit to **Agrikol**, a bar and restaurant owned by the members of **Arcade Fire**, one of my favorite bands. I really didn't know what to expect. I was thinking it would be a big place with a stage but instead found an intimate, cozy, two-story bar decorated with Haitian items meaningful to the band. It was hopping. We also went to their new place next door that was bigger but there was no place to sit; very popular for locals and tourists alike.



*Bonhomme greets the crowd at the Carnaval de*

*Quebec's night-time parade.*

### **Quebec City**

The next morning, we took a shuttle to Quebec City to attend their winter carnival and meet Bonhomme, their effigy who is more popular in these parts than Santa Claus. I know my mouth was hanging open at the height of the snow but the people who live there are used to it and adapt for it, such as using what looks like mini carports over doorways to gain entry to their homes. To help navigate Quebec, the city provides a variety of options, including a phone app. I had a nice room at the Hilton Quebec, the official Winter Carnival hotel, with access to the executive lounge on the top floor. I was on the 21st floor so had a sweeping view of Old Quebec and the carnival. Visit [quebecregion.com](http://quebecregion.com) to learn more about this historic city.

#### *What to do*

After lunching at the hotel, we dressed warmly in multiple layers with handwarmers and footwarmers tucked in and spent the afternoon enjoying **Carnaval de Quebec**. It was fun going through Bonhomme's Ice Castle and seeing graffiti artists in action. Kids and adults alike played in the ice and snow, embracing the spirit of the event. I felt like a kid again tobogganing down the giant slide near the St. Lawrence riverfront, and I got to hug Bonhomme. Our tour guides were fantastic, especially Steve, in character as a lumberjack. Also taking place were canoe races across the partially frozen river, the Jamboree Freestyle Ski and Snowboard World Cup, skating, hockey ... any winter sport you could think of was happening.

The night-time parade was a lot of fun, too, with my first taste of Caribou (a spiced wine-alcohol cocktail exclusive to the Quebec winter) that was freely passed around. The crowd and those in the parade were all lively and enthusiastic and made it personal by slapping hands and posing for pictures as they passed by. The children especially enjoyed it. We finished off the night by attending Quebec's version of **Igloofest**, with DJs situated high above the crowd and people staying warm by jumping up and down to the electronic dance music in the heart of Old Quebec.

We started the morning early by visiting **Montmorency Falls**, which is best viewed from Parc de la Chute-Montmorency. The waterfall is 276 feet tall, 98 feet taller than Niagara Falls. In

winter the spray at the bottom freezes into a “sugar loaf,” another intriguing Quebec City attraction. We observed a number of people gearing up to climb the ice of the falls, much like climbing a glacier. In the summer it’s a nature lover’s paradise, with ziplines, hiking trails, camping and more.

Touring **Old Quebec** on a quiet Sunday morning was quite a different experience than the hustle and bustle of the day before. A lot of shops weren’t even open yet, but I got a distinct feel for the antiquity of the place as we walked through the old, narrow streets and appreciated the historical architecture. It’s surrounded by ramparts which are the only remaining fortified city walls in North America north of Mexico and was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1985. Of everything I experienced in Canada, Old Quebec will remain the most memorable because it transports visitors to the Europe of centuries ago.



*One can stay overnight in Santa's workshop in the*

*Ice Hotel.*

Then it was off to **Village Vacances Valcartier** out in the country. This fairly new, four-season, indoor and outdoor playground and resort is the largest in eastern Canada and seems a really fun place to stay, especially if you can't handle a full night in the **Hotel de Glace (The Ice Hotel)** onsite. It was interesting to see whole families in their swimsuits enjoying the heated indoor waterpark and then gazing outside at people tubing down the snow-covered hills. With amenities such as a video game room and seven bars and restaurants, there is something for everyone here, and the vibe in the summer must be just as fun! We had such a great time tubing down the hills.

**The Ice Hotel** is an amazing experience that very few in life will ever get to see. Built of compressed snow like an igloo, the maze-like structure contains unique rooms containing a “bed” and furnishings carved out of ice. Artistry was apparent everywhere in designs throughout, even working chandeliers! The hotel included a couple of bar areas where patrons can enjoy a beer or cocktail served in carved ice tumblers that are then recycled. People can choose to brave a night in the hotel by warming their bodies in hot tubs and then bundling up in a sleeping bag. Some who have stayed there said that more than anything, it was the complete lack of sound that struck them the most.

*Where to eat*



*Graffiti is viewed as a welcomed art form in some parts of Montreal.*

The **3 Brasseurs Microbrewery and Restaurant** was a fun place to eat just up the road from the parade route. Ours was a large group but the waitstaff was attentive and did their best to accommodate us. Members of our party enjoyed craft beer and menu items such as braised lamb shank and grilled salmon before venturing out to the night cold to watch the parade. We had lunch one day at **Allegro** in the Hilton and the next day at Village Vacances Valcartier at **Resto Safari**. It was good, not as fancy as some of the other restaurants I ate at, but had very generous portions and was a good place to warm up in before heading out to play in the snow. Our final dinner was at **L'Aviatic Club**, located in the Quebec train station, adorned with airplane memorabilia and hosting a live pianist. It was intimate and cozy, the food was delicious and plated beautifully, and the chef/owner himself asked us if we enjoyed the food as we headed out.

It was the personality of all I encountered that truly made this trip special. The architecture of Quebec province is beautiful, the food is delicious and presented as art, and the history is fascinating, but by far it is the people I met who made this the trip of a lifetime.



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