
Ski Adventures in Vermont and Quebec

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(Source:Stowe Mountain Resort/Landwehrle Studio)

Polar air blanketed the northern and Midwestern states in an unrelenting frigidity (-20 F. in bright sunlight). The radio announced "flesh-freezing weather." Strapped to my skis, I went gliding past a snowy ravine, and a line from Wallace Stevens' poem, "The Snow Man" came to me: "One must have a mind of winter to regard the frost and the boughs of the pine-tree crusted with snow." Layered deep inside my hooded goose down coat, my mind and body were one with winter.

Many look to escape the cold this time of year. Not me. I rush headlong to embrace it. Each winter I seek new ski trails in new locations, or re-visit places that invigorate me. When I spend time frolicking outside in the cold, it's restorative. And when these wintry challenges get too exhausting, there are warm hearths and kindred spirits to discover and, once inside, the cheerful greetings make it all worth it.

Mt Tremblant, Quebec



Mt. Tremblant: Rugged Beauty

This year I ventured to Mt. Tremblant, Quebec, took a wintry hiatus 90 miles southeast in Montreal, basking in the warm glow of French Canadian hospitality, and then returned home, via a ski detour in Stowe, Vermont.

When I first visited Mt. Tremblant years ago, there were few tourist facilities. Rustic motels (read: lime-green walls, tattered furniture, florescent light and canned food) hugged Lac Tremblant. There were downhill ski areas but the cross-country skiing and snowshoeing were limited.

All has changed. Two highways (Routes 15 and 117) take ski aficionados directly to the area; highway 15 (autoroute) becomes Route 117 past St-Agathe. Flights via Porter Airlines and Continental arrive at Mt. Tremblant airport from Montreal, Toronto and Newark. There's more to do in Tremblant than at many comparable ski resorts.

Development in the Tremblant region is aggressive. New construction for a casino is underway. Yet small details, like signs to direct you to area destinations, are confusing. A word of advice: call ahead for directions (819-681-3000) and plan to arrive during daylight hours. Once you park your car in the heated garage, you'll never need it again: everything is in the pedestrian village, including dozens of shops, small restaurants (Les Artistes, 819-681-4727, is recommended), as well as bistros, bars, hot tubs, and a skating rink. And while there are dozens of downhill trails to choose from, I chose the quiet cross-country trail that begins at the village and connects to groomed trail system and ski center less than a mile away.

I ventured out for an early ski, and returned to the village 6-hours later, having completed a 10-mile tour. If it sounds formidable (and a bit crazy), factor in plenty of rest stops along the way for beverages and snacks and a visit to two heated salles de fartage (waxing huts) for thawing. One section of the trail hugs the magnificent Riviere du Diable (Devil's River) where, even in the extreme cold, the waters cascaded over the icy banks, black and turbulent against the white snowdrifts. There is a bridge that spans the Riviere du Diable, and the view downriver is breathtaking.

Accommodations at Tremblant Village are delightful. I stayed in Ermitage du Lac, a condominium that also includes a hot tub and exercise room down the hall. In the morning, sleepy skiers from Canada and the States gather around the espresso

machine that churns out lattes by the dozens. You can book online at www.tremblant.ca.

Montreal en Hiver (Montreal in Winter)

Leonard Cohen once said that Montreal is "on the very threshold of greatness." Surely the crowds that flock to the city in summer for the jazz festival at Place des Arts downtown (this summer will be its 30th anniversary) already know this statement to be true. But the city is just as vibrant in the winter, when it shrugs off the cold with Festival Montreal en Lumiere ([Montreal Lumination Festival](#)), now in its 10th year. This mélange of activities runs from February 19 through March 1 and features fine cuisine, a special focus on the wines (and chefs) from France and Quebec, and dozens of other indoor and outdoor activities. An added plus: you get to practice your French: Oui, mon cher, c'est vrai: Montreal est tres magnifique.

Montreal's vibrant [Gay Village](#) proudly includes over 300 businesses and includes bars, boutiques, bathhouses, bookstores and bistros. My friend Pierre tells me the Village is unique in that both gay and straight mingle - notably at the dance clubs -- without incident. "My niece and her boyfriend hang out in the Village," Pierre says, "and meet their friends here. They dance until the wee hours of the morning." Yet, like all cities, it always pays to be hyper-aware of one's surroundings: Ste. Catherine Street, which cuts through the heart of the village, has a rough and tumble history; isolated incidents of bashing have been reported.

I checked into the Opus Hotel (1-866-744-6346) located at 10 Sherbrooke Street (a stone's throw from the gay village), and was welcomed into a comfortable, refined atmosphere of warmth and congeniality. The rooms are painted in soft, subdued colors, and are spacious and quiet. The Koko restaurant, complete with large reproductions of Aubrey Beardsley's prints, is located on Opus' first landing. During the day, the restaurant serves breakfast and light from the private terrace floods the room. Even in the bitter cold (water mains in downtown Montreal were bursting from the frigid temperatures, forcing the closure of several busy streets), one can still walk anywhere.

My favorite destinations: shopping at the underground stores on Ste. Catherine St., taking in the gastronomic delights at Marche Jean-Talon (dozens of stores under one roof specializing in locally grown and farm raised vegetables, meats and cheeses), and visiting Vieux Montreal (Old Montreal), a twenty-minute stroll down Ste. Laurent or Ste. Urbain streets.

I dined at two wonderful restaurants in Old Montreal, Restaurant Toque (514-499-2084) on Place Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Bonaparte (514-844-4368), located on the first landing of a cozy inn on Rue St. Francois-Xavier, next to the venerable Centaur Theatre.

Toque's tasting menu introduced me to the unique cuisine of Quebec, which includes fish, meats and game. Each tasting was served by a knowledgeable and attentive wait staff. My table was located beside a glass wall where one could view dozens of wines attached to a metal racks that held them aloft. My favorite: the oysters from Prince Edward Island, served with lip-smacking vinaigrette, prompting me to imagine having my way with dozens more. The restaurant is located next to a small park and sits in the shadow of the Convention Center with its multi-colored windows casting rainbows on the snow. It's a destination to savor.

Bonaparte, in the heart of the old city, is a cozy warren of rooms, some more private than others. Leisurely dinner here can go on for hours, and there is never any notion that anyone is in a hurry. I was seated in the main dining room beside a gas-jet fireplace upon whose mantle rests a statue of Napoleon Bonaparte himself. I was inspired to raise my snifter of Courvoisier at the end of the sumptuous meal to pay homage to the late Emperor. The wait staff left no detail unnoticed; service was prompt, unobtrusive, and friendly. Deserts - particularly the "symphonie des desert" - included a to-die-for chocolate soufflé that rose out of its dish with heavenly peaks of caramelized froth and cocoa. Every so often I turned to look out the windows at the quiet street that has served as the backdrop for so many movies, including the recently released "Benjamin Button." At Bonaparte, I took a journey back in time, and all from the comfort of an elegant fireside table.

Stowe, Vermont



Michael's on the Hill, Stowe Mountain Lodge

Driving back via I-89, I took exit 10 and, only a few minutes off the interstate on the two-lane route 100, I arrived on time for a scrumptious meal at Michael's On the Hill (802-244-7476) in Waterbury, Vermont. Chef Michael Kloeti is a master at his craft. While a pianist tinkled the ivories, tasty delights were served with quiet panache: a tasty Maine crab cake with celery root remoulade, and underneath the cake itself a smattering of pomegranate seeds that explode on the palette like sweet pop rocks; sautéed gnocchi with roasted pumpkin, sage, and black truffle that was as delicate as air; and an entrée of braised Maine lobster served on a bed of "forbidden" black rice risotto. There is much more to tell, but suffice it to say the wait staff is knowledgeable about food, wine and how to surprise you with tastings sent to your table by the chef himself, which makes Michael's a highly recommended destination when journeying northward.

A short drive from Michael's is the Stowe Mountain Lodge (888-478-6938), located on route 108 (Stowe Mountain Road). Take the second exit past the ski area, as it leads directly to the hotel's valet parking (signs indicating this service have not yet been posted). I visited the Lodge, which hugs Spruce Peak and looks over Mt. Mansfield, last year when it was under construction, and the area was already popular with local skiers. Then, it resembled a town from the wild west, with workers scurrying to finish the job. From the looks of it, they have succeeded admirably.

What a difference a year makes: the Lodge is finished and resplendent (a new wing

is under construction due to high demand). Inside, fireplaces are glowing; the ceilings are high and soft light spills down on comfortable nooks designed for quiet conversation; the hustle bustle of the place never seems loud or intrusive. Make reservations at the sparkling new restaurant, Solstice (802-760-4735) which boasts local Vermont and New England fare that is prepared exquisitely. I dined on sea scallops seared to perfection and served on a bed of pilaf with almonds, cranberries and cipollini onions.

The next morning, I made my way sleepily to the Spa at Stowe Mountain Lodge (866-632-8679) where I surrendered to the attentive hands of a masseuse who worked on tenderizing the bruises I had incurred while skiing in Mt. Tremblant. Those responsible for designing the spa deserve a hearty cheer: every detail has been considered to make the experience completely relaxing. Services run the gamut, and the facilities are first-rate. There is also an outdoor pool with two adjoining hot tubs with bubbling water steaming in the wintry air; an upstairs lounge with a view of snowy Mt. Mansfield; and peaceful treatment rooms that are bastions of solitude and comfort.

And then, of course, there's more skiing and snowshoeing than one has time for, including cross-country centers at the base of Mt. Mansfield that lead along a river and into the woods for a climb to a cabin where hot soup is served for those hearty enough to make the journey. I did make the journey, endured several hours of climbing, finally arriving to a rustic room filled with men and women aglow with good health. Discount mid-week ski packages are available by calling 1-800-gostowe.

There is much more: the sudden snow squall with a fierce wind that enveloped me in a white-out for twenty minutes, only to leave the area just as quickly, fresh snow on pine tree boughs and a river gurgling below me on a pedestrian bridge in the woods; a quick downhill run at the Toll Road, the snow softened by the warmer weather (finally, a day above zero!) and no crowds to speak of; and the bright blue sky overhead, full of promise, beckoning me onward, to push myself into the "mind of winter" knowing that I will be welcomed in comfort at the end of the day.

It's the extremes of winter - the sheer exhilaration of it -- that conspire to make your wintry mind aware, awake and excited by all you will survey.

For more on Stowe skiing, visit www.stowe.com.

Photo courtesy of Stowe Mountain Resort / Landwehrle Studio

Robert Israel writes about theater, arts, culture and travel.